



## FOCUS VERSE

### Matthew 6:12

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

## LESSON TEXT

### Matthew 18:23–35

23 Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.

24 And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents.

25 But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.

26 The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

27 Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

28 But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow servants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest.

29 And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

30 And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.

31 So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done.

32 Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me:

33 Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?

34 And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.

35 So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.



## FOCUS THOUGHT

The willingness to forgive is the evidence that individuals truly understand the nature of their own forgiveness.



# CULTURE CONNECTION

## Yearning to Breathe Free

**A**lmost every generation of North Americans has struggled to accept some minority: aborigines, Africans, Irish, Chinese, Japanese, Jews, Hmong, Somolians, and others, most recently Syrian refugees. Just as each of these ethnic or racial groups suffered rejection, every individual has been hurt by someone in life. The quality of one's life does not depend on what happened in yesteryear but on how one chooses to see the present. Healing from emotional bruises comes with forgiveness, not revenge.

Most humans have a hard time burying the past. Clearly, crimes and hateful acts have been committed against the ancestors of many, if not all, of us. American descendants of the Irish could cling to memories of the

hateful and insulting treatment their ancestors received. Some Native Americans have voiced that their land should return to the original owners. However, one could ask who the "original owners" might have been. From whom did the Cherokee or Sioux wrest control of the land? Who had it before them and from whom did they take it? When one realizes how difficult it is to unravel and fix the past, one discovers the importance of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not giving up on fights we cannot win but cleansing ourselves from "infections" that would bring us down. Joyful people are not those who have settled the score for the past but those who choose to love others and hold no one emotionally hostage.

### OUTLINE

- I. THE REALITY OF LIVING IN A FALLEN WORLD**
  - A. Injustices Will Come
  - B. We Have an Inherent Desire for Justice
- II. PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT**
- III. THE COST OF UNFORGIVENESS**
  - A. Absalom Was Unwilling to Forgive Amnon
  - B. We Remain Controlled by Whoever Wronged Us
- IV. THE FREEDOM OF FORGIVENESS**

### CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

When John Wesley was a military chaplain, one officer told him, "I never forgive." Wesley reportedly said, "Then I hope, sir, that you never sin." The Lord does not forgive those who do not forgive. Jesus said, "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father

forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14–15). The willingness to forgive is the evidence that individuals truly understand the nature of their own forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a discipline. Forgiveness is what believers decide to do before someone wrongs them. The heavy lifting that makes forgiveness work is a heart of humility. Those who are humble do not live with overly sensitive feelings. They do not seek to retaliate or punish those who lash out at them.

The ignition point for unforgiveness is anger. Pride maintains a hurt and continues to hold feelings or facts against someone. Humility and love are the undoing of bitterness. The detonator for forgiveness is a humble heart. Love gives the repentant person a fresh start and chooses not to let the past control the present.

### SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

When the Lord protected Cain, He promised that "whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold" (Genesis 4:15). Later, a descendant of Cain took this idea to a twisted and lower level. Lamech

bragged to his two wives that he would avenge himself even more than God had done for his ancestor Cain. Lamech bragged of killing a man in retaliation for physical harm inflicted upon him, saying that if Cain was to be avenged seven times, he (Lamech) would be avenged seventy-seven times.

Like Lamech, many today are drunk on their own ability to repay evil. The exhilaration of anger, hate, and knowing they are right is hard to let go. Believers experience a greater force, however: forgiveness. It takes stronger character not to hold anything against someone than to stew in one's own juices of loathing.

Peter thought it would be enough to forgive someone the same number of times God would bring vengeance on one who killed Cain: seven times. But Jesus said, "I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22). Lamech wanted to repay evil seventy-seven times for one wrong. Just as much, we should forgive others for an offense.

## **I. THE REALITY OF LIVING IN A FALLEN WORLD**

Mary Gordon told of hitting a pressure point one day when family members pushed her too far with their demands. The constant honking of the horn and yell from the vehicle demanding that she take them swimming caused her to snap. Running outside, she started screaming at them, jumped on the hood of the car, and pounded on the windshield. As rage took over, she said it was as if she became a huge "carrion crow. My legs became hard stalks, my eyes were sharp and vicious. I developed a murderous beak. Greasy black feathers took the place of arms. I flapped and flapped. I blotted out the sun's light with my flapping." Family members got her down from the hood of the car, but still it took her awhile to recover from her fit. Her children were terrified of what they saw in her in that moment of raw vindictiveness (*Online Christianity Today*, "Why We Love This Deadly Sin," Barbara Brown Taylor, February 9, 1998). Unforgiveness has a way of distorting a person until they cannot even recognize themselves.

Some people have dwelt in unforgiveness so long that releasing resentment leaves them looking and feeling like someone else

entirely. It is almost as if unforgiveness re-wires the brain. For example, adult children may not want to forgive a parent because they might not know how to function without having someone to blame for things. Just as much as people regret losing a good friend, they also regret losing an enemy. Enemies have the handy effect of making a person look good. Friends know that person is better than the enemy; if the person reconciles with the enemy, friends might see the person as being on the wrong side.

## **A. Injustices Will Come**

We are guaranteed an opportunity to forgive. Jesus promised us that offenses will come, but we should not be the ones who cause them. People will disappoint us with failures or outright hostility. Loved ones may walk out of our lives; business partners may take advantage of us; a church member may betray us. This gives us opportunity not only to love our neighbors but also to forgive and love our enemies.

When we forgive an enemy, it changes that individual's identity in our lives. Strangely, it can be as hard to lose an enemy as it is to lose a friend, especially if we take our identity not from whom we are like but from whom we are not like. Defining ourselves over against people we are not like, or oppositionalism, is not the best way to see ourselves. It can make the task of forgiveness even harder.

## **B. We Have an Inherent Desire for Justice**

Even children know when wrong has been done: a child took too much, a bully pushed a child down, or a toy was taken without permission. This is a God-given sense humans should have. If we see someone being taken advantage of, we should feel righteous indignation. At the same time, we should not react wrongly to the wrongs we see.

Imagine the aftereffect of an employee pushing his way into the CEO's office and sitting down in the man's overstuffed swivel chair. Propping his feet up on the desk, the intruder begins acting as the CEO and giving orders. When the executive discovers this rude behavior, the employee will be severely reprimanded or terminated from the firm.

However, people do this to the CEO of the universe every day.

When we take vengeance into our own hands, we are trying to do God's job for Him. He says, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay" (Romans 12:19). Unforgiveness, retaliation, and vindictiveness are acts of humans usurping God's authority. If we are going to let those who do us wrong face the full consequences of their behavior, we have to let the Lord execute vengeance for us. Therefore, if our enemy hungers, we are to feed him; if he is thirsty, we are to give him a drink (Romans 12:20).

## II. PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

Jesus taught Peter how to forgive by telling a story (Matthew 18:23–35). In this parable, a servant owed the king millions of dollars, the modern equivalent of ten thousand talents. This is a picture of how deeply we have offended God with our sin. When the king demanded repayment, the servant clearly did not have enough, so the king began itemizing what the servant's punishments would be. The servant fell before his master, praising him and begging him to be patient until the servant could repay everything he owed. This depicts a child of God turning from a life of rebellion to a life of submission to the Master. The king could not resist such humility. In compassion, the king forgave the servant's debt and let him go free.

Feeling happy about himself, the forgiven servant skipped away from the scene. Imagine the relief: he had gone from knowing he would be in debt the rest of his life to being free to dream and invest again. This represents the huge load lifted off our shoulders when the Lord forgave us of our sins. God's forgiveness is so refreshing that new converts often feel lighter and experience joy for the first time.

Then the servant ran into another servant who owed him a few thousand dollars, the equivalent of one hundred denarii. The forgiven servant grabbed the other man by his throat and demanded repayment. This would be like a Christian enjoying the freedom from sin the Lord had bestowed but then holding a grudge, rather than forgiving, when someone wrongs him or her.

Even though the servant begged for forgiveness, the forgiven man would not relent from his demands or show any patience toward the man. Instead, the free man threw his debtor into prison until he could pay his debt. Too many people in the church hold things against people they should have forgiven long ago. These are deep debts—real hurts—that do not go away easily. Was a Christian woman raped by a so-called believer years ago? Did a businessman do a fellow believer wrong in a business deal? Did a so-called Christian lie about another Christian who found out about it from someone else? In these situations and others like them, it is time for the person who was wronged to let it go. It is time to forgive.

When the king found out about the hostility the forgiven man had toward his other servant, he called him on the carpet. "You wicked servant! I forgave all of your huge debt because you wanted me to! Shouldn't you have had compassion on my other servant just as I had pity on you?" In his wrath, the king sent the unforgiving servant to suffer torment until the man had paid everything in full.

Jesus concluded the story like this: "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses" (Matthew 18:35). What sins has the Lord forgiven us for that He will hold against us again if we do not forgive our brothers and sisters?

## III. THE COST OF UNFORGIVENESS

### A. Absalom Was Unwilling to Forgive Amnon

Absalom was furious about his half-brother Amnon raping their sister. No one could blame him. What made him angrier was that his father did nothing about it. Absalom could not get the thought of Amnon's sin out of his head. It made him angry that his sister now hid her face from everyone—she did not want to see anyone who knew what had happened to her. Amnon, however, continued life happily and freely, with maybe a minor twinge of guilt every now and then.

Absalom decided on a plan. He threw a big party for his brothers and made sure Amnon was going to be there. Absalom had his servants trained and ready. In the height of the

celebration, they killed the unsuspecting Amnon at Absalom's command.

Panic ensued among the other brothers. David was heartbroken to see what was happening among his children. Other than Amnon suffering murder, the worst victim of Absalom's unforgiveness was Absalom himself. His hateful actions made him a social outcast. Soon his heart hardened against his own father. He met an untimely and unnecessary death in a battle against his father's warriors.

Unforgiveness kills relationships and is a potent force of self-destruction. Clearly, wrongs such as what Amnon committed are hard to forgive. However, the alternative presented by Absalom is far worse. A person has to learn that forgiveness is not saying, "What you did was OK." It is saying, "In spite of the wrong you did, I will love you anyway."

## **B. We Remain Controlled by Whoever Wronged Us**

In a folk tale, Uncle Remus tells the story of Br'er Rabbit and a tar-baby decoy. The rabbit's anger caused him to strike the tar decoy and become stuck to it. The rabbit's anger escalated, and he struck it again. Soon all of his appendages were stuck to the tar baby, and he could not get free from the sticky constraints of that creature. Resentment is like the tar baby in which we become so enmeshed that we cannot get free. The people we hate own us emotionally. The people we resent control our actions because we live in avoidance of them and the things they stand for.

People often become like the ones they hate. Whether negative or positive, focus is what shapes us. A girl might grow to hate her mother. Even though she despises the woman, she will take on her mother's characteristics. A young man might grow up despising his drunken father. His hatred, however, causes the person he dislikes to own him. Soon he becomes a drunkard, not realizing he is following the same path as his father. Forgiveness is how we move on rather than being owned by those who have hurt us.

## **IV. THE FREEDOM OF FORGIVENESS**

Picture a man stealing a believer's new SUV. After a few years, someone contacts the believer and says he has won that man to the

Lord. The believer has wanted to see the criminal punished for all these years, but now he has been filled with the Holy Ghost and is living for God. Furthermore, this man is moving to the town where the believer lives and will be attending his church. The vehicle is long gone; the man has no money to repay. In the meantime, this man has been a great helper to the person who won the believer to the Lord. Will the believer hold the past against the individual who stole his SUV?

Such a scenario was what Paul dealt with in the Book of Philemon, but the situation was more personal. The story of Paul entreating Philemon to forgive Onesimus presents interesting dynamics in mediation, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The lessons gleaned from the Book of Philemon instruct people on any side of a conflict or personal grievance.

First, Paul could have mentioned his credentials, announcing himself as an apostle as he did in most of his letters. Instead, the apostle announced himself as a prisoner. In verse 7, Paul addressed Philemon as "brother." Reconciliation is not achieved by throwing one's weight around or demanding anything. Reconciling people to each other comes about by humility. A humble approach defangs bitterness.

Next, Paul complimented Philemon, pointing out the spiritual qualities of his friend (verses 5–7). Then the leader addressed the situation at hand. Paul pointed out that he could boldly command Philemon in Christ to do what he wanted him to do. Instead, he appealed to Philemon out of love, asking for a favor both as a prisoner for Jesus and as an elderly man (verses 8–9).

Bringing up the name of the offender likely stirred great emotion in the recipient of this letter. Paul softened the blow by preceding the name of Onesimus with "my son." This personal attachment of himself to the offender was as strong a move as if one stepped up and put his arm around a friend who was being stared down by a potential attacker. In effect, Paul said, "What you do to him, you do to me." Furthermore, Paul explained that this "son" was "begotten in my bonds" (verse 10), meaning Paul had won him to the Lord even as a prisoner. This made Onesimus a fellow believer with Philemon.

Onesimus had not stolen an SUV. He had stolen himself. He was an indentured servant—often referred to as a slave. While most westerners detest the idea of slavery, and rightfully so, the system was not always as flawed as the infamous examples from American history. In fact, many in the first century were grateful to be slaves because that was the welcome option rather than being killed when one country invaded another. Many also became slaves as a way of paying off debt. In some ways, such people could be viewed as contract workers. They could save up their money and buy their own freedom—in effect, pay off their own contract. For whatever reason, Onesimus had run off, robbing Philemon of the investment he had in the man as a worker.

Paul was not writing in defense of slavery. Contemporary readers might want to see him rail against the evils of slavery and demand laws to prevent such behavior. But Paul had a better tactic for social change. His method was humility and his anti-slavery campaign was love.

The name *Onesimus* means “useful, profitable.” Onesimus, however, had proved to be an unprofitable servant. But when he turned to the same Master as Paul and Philemon, he became a profitable person (verse 11). Onesimus was useful to Paul while in prison. This new believer became the hands and feet Paul could not use while imprisoned.

Paul told Philemon he was sending Onesimus back to him and asked Philemon to receive him, calling Onesimus “my own heart” (verse 12, NKJV). Instead of using his spiritual authority to persuade Philemon, Paul used a stronger force—love. Philemon loved Paul, and Paul loved Onesimus. Although Philemon may have had cause to hate this runaway slave, the way Paul put things, Philemon could not hate the lesser man without also directing such vehemence to his spiritual superior, Paul.

One might ask why Paul would send a fugitive back to face possible punishment. Even in Roman civilization, a person could beat a slave or even kill him. More was at stake here than just pouting or sulking by the wronged person. The situation involved more than bruised feelings. Real material loss had

occurred, and Onesimus’s well-being could have been in danger.

Paul was sending the man back because of principle. Although it would have been more beneficial to Paul to keep the fugitive with him, Paul could not continue to let the redeemed man serve him without Philemon’s consent.

Perhaps like the Old Testament character Joseph, could God be working what Onesimus did with evil intentions for a good cause? Joseph told his brothers not to be angry with themselves because their evil actions proved to be God’s opportunity to save the whole clan of Jacob from starvation (Genesis 45:5–7). Would Philemon say the same to Onesimus? Have we come to the point we can say as much to those who cursed us, lied against us, divorced us, sued us, abused us, or abandoned us? These are not easy words to say until we have learned to see things from God’s perspective.

Paul wanted Philemon to see Onesimus through God’s eyes. Perhaps God had orchestrated all of this so that Philemon could get his long-lost slave back forever (verse 15). This time, he would not be welcoming him back as a slave. Paul said Onesimus would no longer be a slave but someone infinitely more valuable—a brother. Now Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus all stood on the same ground (verse 16). Paul was meaningful to Philemon as a brother in the Lord. Philemon was meaningful to Paul as a brother in the Lord. Onesimus was meaningful to Paul as a brother in the Lord. Would Philemon find Onesimus meaningful as a brother in the Lord?

In humility, Paul urged Philemon to receive the runaway as if he were receiving the apostle himself (verse 17). Perhaps Onesimus stole more than just himself. Perhaps he stole money or household goods. What of that? How would Philemon be repaid? By Paul. The prisoner said, “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account” (verse 18). To make sure this pledge to cover the man’s debt was not doubted, Paul signed with his own hand that he would repay (verse 19). At the same time, he pointed out how much Philemon already owed him—his own self. Philemon would be lost and without hope in this world if Paul had not found him and shared the saving gospel with him. Clearly,

Philemon owed Paul far more than he could exact from Onesimus.

In closing, Paul pointed out the joy that comes from forgiveness—it refreshes the hearts of all those involved. Having gotten rather intense at points in this letter, Paul reconfirmed his confidence in Philemon as a man of God who would go above and beyond what Paul suggested. He ended this request with a hopeful word that he would be able to come visit soon.

The fact that this letter is in the Bible is testimony that it was well received by Philemon and both men were well-known Christians in the first century. Philemon set Onesimus free by his forgiveness, but he also set himself free. Harboring hurts and resentment year after year is like spiritual poison. Margaret Stunt is quoted as saying, “Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies.”

Unforgiveness keeps hostages in prison. However, more than just prisoners are at a prison; so is the warden. By forgiving someone else, you set yourself free too. Forgiveness creates a double freedom. Had Philemon not forgiven, he would have become the emotional slave of Onesimus—every thought of the man would have controlled his feelings, decisions, and perspectives. By forgiving, Philemon set two slaves free. Historical writings mention an Onesimus who was bishop at Ephesus. This may have been the same man. What a marvelous testimony to the power of a reconciled relationship to see a man go from being a slave to a man to being a slave of Jesus Christ—reaching and reconciling many others to the Lord.

## INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

We are to be forgiving people. Once we learn the discipline of forgiveness, we will see it is not just something we do after someone apologizes. It is what we do even if the person never tries to make things right. We forgive for our own health’s sake, if for nothing else. We set others free from their past so we can be free to lay hold of something better. A humble heart has already decided to forgive before the wrong happens.

Anger and resentment can feel powerful, but they are useless energy because they only create more hostility. Rather than an uncontrolled atom bomb of aggression, we can harness a positive energy force through forgiveness. This changes us for good and changes others around us positively as well. Sometimes it is scary to think of being done with an age-old fight. We have so shaped our identities by who we dislike that we feel insecure defining our lives only by our own personal qualities. However, once we take this step, we will find life so free and meaningful.

When we come to the Lord for forgiveness, we find our eternal accounts marked “Paid in full.” Once an account is paid, no court or collection agency can make the account holder chargeable again. When we forgive, we forever set our enemies free and no longer dwell on the “debt” we had once held against them.

To forgive, one must approach the offender humbly. Anger empowers people and makes them feel as if they tower over others. However, humility gives offenders the choice to change their ways. In addition, humility strengthens us, not them. Humility puts us in a stable position of not being a victim.

## REFLECTIONS

- How are you showing forgiveness toward your fellow humans the way the Lord has shown it to you?
- What are some things you had to work through until you could forgive?
- Share a time when you saw someone help reconcile two people who were at odds with one another.
- How have you learned to forgive quickly in light of how the Lord forgives you?