

7 PRINCIPLES OF FORGIVENESS

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One of the key messages of Christ and New Testament scriptures is the concept of forgiveness. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus includes the necessity to forgive.¹ We are instructed by Christ that if we are to be forgiven, we must also forgive.² Jesus himself demonstrated the ability to forgive under the most agonizing of circumstances when he prayed for the forgiveness of those responsible for Him being on the cross.³

With so much of our Christian experience hanging on this concept of forgiveness, I believe it is important that we understand and embrace this idea and its implications. To help us fully grasp what it means to forgive, let's examine in some depth a parable told by Jesus that illustrates the principles employed in forgiveness and their effects. **Matthew 18:21 – 35** uses a financial debt to illustrate the principles of forgiveness and their effects.

PRINCIPLE #1 – YOU WERE OWED SOMETHING (VERSE 24)

The fact that there is a debt indicates there is something that is owed that has not been paid. It is reasonable to expect that certain commitments or obligations will be fulfilled as promised. This is easy to understand in financial terms, but also is true in other aspects of life. Children should reasonably expect to have both parents fully engaged in their lives. When that is not present, a debt is then created. A spouse should expect their mate to be faithful to their marital vows; if that covenant is broken a debt is created. The point here is that you have every right to expect certain things and when they are not provided, it creates a debt to which you are owed.

PRINCIPLE #2 – YOUR DEBTOR CANNOT PAY YOU (VERSE 25 – 26)

If you are owed a debt, the likelihood is that your debtor cannot pay you. Sure, there are occasions when the resources are available and someone chooses not to pay, but in most cases the ability to pay is not there. In some cases, the debtor may not fully comprehend the depth of their indebtedness and really believe they can make good on their prior commitments or make up for their prior mistakes and misgivings. As a child you had every right to expect your father to be engaged in your life, rather than just providing financial support. However, the likelihood is that your father did not have the means to provide you with the emotional support you deserved. You can continue to make demands of him all you want, but he cannot pay you what he does not have! He may try to make it up to you now, but it's too little too late.

PRINCIPLE #3 – FORGIVENESS IS A CHOICE... YOUR CHOICE (VERSE 27)

When someone is indebted to you, it is up to you how you choose to handle the debt. You can choose to forgive the debt, or you can choose to continue trying to collect on the debt. Remember Principle #2 however, the debt cannot be paid. If you choose not to forgive the debt, you will spend a lifetime trying to collect on something that is not available to you. Whether we choose to forgive is not up to the individual indebted to us, but it is up to us. The debtor can beg and plead for forgiveness, but it is up to us if we are going to release them of the debt.

¹ Matthew 6:12, Luke 11:4

² Matthew 6:15

³ Luke 23:34

PRINCIPLE #4 – YOU ARE FREE WHEN YOU FORGIVE

One of the biggest issues people have with forgiving others is the thought that they are letting those indebted to them off the hook. That somehow they are getting away with the wrongs they committed against you. I would challenge you to look at it somewhat differently. As long as you hold those in debt to you in bondage, you too are in bondage. Why? Because you have to be sure they stay there. You are the one angry, holding a grudge, being bitter, resentful, etc. It is true that you not forgiving will keep them in bonds, but at what price? In the end, you still do not get what was owed to you and because you will not forgive, you get to stay there in that condition; in that state of mind and being.

However, when you forgive them you free yourself. You release them of that debt and in so doing release yourself of the obligation to keep them in debt. You can now go on and live the rest of your life free.

PRINCIPLE #5 – GOD WILL MAKE UP THE DIFFERENCE

When we forgive others, we empower God to make up the difference for what we were owed and not paid. When our parents forsake us, the Lord will take us up.⁴ When others do not meet their financial obligations in our life, then God will supply all of our needs according to His riches in glory.⁵ It is the sin of others perpetrated against us that creates the debt. However, it is the work of God that washes away the effects of sin committed against us.⁶ God will be sure we have everything we need in life; emotionally, spiritually and naturally. So in the end, when we forgive we do not suffer lack, because God will make up the difference.

PRINCIPLE #6 – THE FORGIVEN MUST FORGIVE

Verses 28 – 35 address the circumstances when the forgiven turns around and refuses to forgive. This is an injustice in the eyes of God. When someone has been forgiven much, surely the forgiven can forgive the little owed to him.⁷ This is a direct correlation to the forgiveness of Christ upon us for our indebtedness to Him. It was our sin that sent Him to the cross. He suffered because of no fault of His own, but because of our ungodly behavior. Yet, he willingly and openly forgave us. What a great debt we owed, that Christ forgave. Surely we can in turn forgive those who have wronged us.

PRINCIPLE #7 – WHAT DO YOU EXPECT OF GOD

In closing, there is a simple way to think about the concept of forgiveness. To be a Christian is to be like Christ; to think and behave as Christ did or would have under similar circumstances. Whatever questions you have about forgiveness, think of how you would want Christ to think, say or do if it were you. I'll forgive, but I'm not going to forget...is that how you want Christ to think about you? I'll forgive them, but I don't want to have anything to do with them any more...is that how you want Christ to treat you? His grace is sufficient for you and yes, you can do all things through Christ who will strengthen you!

⁴ Psalms 27:10

⁵ Philippians 4:19

⁶ Acts 2:38

⁷ 10,000 Talents is the equivalent of 150,000 years' wages, 100 pence equivalent of 16 ½ weeks wages