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MONTH'S ISSUE:

FORGIVENESS : AN ACT OF GRACE (EPHESIANS 4:32)

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In a heartfelt conversation with a relative, she confided her struggle to forgive two people who had hurt her deeply. She admitted to praying and asking the Lord for help, yet the struggle remained. Listening to her, I said something that might have shocked her: "You have no moral right to hold anything against anyone, much less struggle to forgive them." I then added, "Perhaps the reason you struggle to forgive is because you see yourself as too perfect, undeserving of the hurt you experienced. But if you've ever hurt anyone, especially God, and He graciously forgave you, then no matter the pain, you have no standing to withhold forgiveness from another."

This exchange led me to reflect deeply on the biblical foundation of forgiveness and its centrality to the Christian faith. Forgiveness is not just a noble act; it is a divine command and an act of grace. Let's explore this critical topic together.



BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE: THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT (MATTHEW 18:21–35)

In Matthew 18:21–22, Peter approached Jesus with a question: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” This question reflected the Jewish teaching of the time, which suggested that forgiving someone three times was sufficient. Peter likely thought he was being generous by suggesting seven times. However, Jesus surprised him by saying, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”

With this statement, Jesus shattered the idea of limiting forgiveness and introduced the boundless nature of grace. Forgiveness, He taught, is not something that can be quantified or restricted—it must be offered repeatedly, just as God continually forgives us.

To drive home this lesson, Jesus shared the parable of the unforgiving servant.

A king wanted to settle accounts with his servants. One servant owed the king ten thousand talents—an astronomical, unpayable debt that would be equivalent to billions of dollars in today’s terms. The servant, unable to repay, pleaded with the king: “Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all” (Matthew 18:26). Moved with compassion, the king forgave the entire debt—a monumental act of mercy.

However, the same servant, fresh from receiving this grace, encountered a fellow servant who owed him a hundred denarii—a much smaller sum, roughly equivalent to a few months’ wages. Instead of extending the mercy he had received, he grabbed the fellow servant by the throat and demanded payment. Despite the second servant’s plea for patience, the forgiven servant refused to forgive the smaller debt and had him thrown into prison.

When the king heard of this, he was outraged. He summoned the unforgiving servant and said, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?” (Matthew 18:32–33). In his anger, the king delivered the servant to the torturers until he repaid the debt in full.

Jesus concluded the parable with a stern warning: “So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (Matthew 18:35).

This parable vividly illustrates the gravity of unforgiveness. The servant’s refusal to extend the mercy he had received shows a lack of gratitude, humility, and understanding of the grace of God.

UNFORGIVENESS : A SPIRITUAL PRISON

Unforgiveness is a silent yet powerful force that imprisons the soul, keeping us bound to the pain of past offenses. Spiritually, it acts as a barrier between us and the abundant life that God desires for us. The parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35 offers a vivid illustration of this truth. Despite being forgiven an unpayable debt, the servant's refusal to forgive a much smaller debt resulted in his imprisonment. This outcome reflects a profound spiritual reality: unforgiveness doesn't just affect our relationships with others; it also locks us into a prison of bitterness, resentment, and spiritual stagnation.

At its core, unforgiveness disrupts our relationship with God. Jesus' words in Matthew 6:14-15 are clear: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." When we harbour unforgiveness, we effectively block ourselves from receiving God's forgiveness. This doesn't mean that God withholds His mercy out of vindictiveness; rather, it signifies that an unforgiving heart is incapable of fully receiving grace. Forgiveness is a two-way street: as we extend it to others, we open our hearts to the transformative power of God's forgiveness. Refusing to forgive creates a spiritual bottleneck, preventing us from experiencing the depth of His mercy and healing.

Unforgiveness also manifests as a heavy emotional and psychological burden. It traps us in cycles of anger and bitterness, forcing us to replay the offense repeatedly in our minds. This constant focus on past hurts not only disrupts our inner peace but also hinders our ability to move forward. Instead of finding closure, we remain chained to the pain, allowing it to dictate our thoughts, emotions, and actions. Proverbs 14:30 poignantly states, "A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot." Unforgiveness robs us of tranquillity, poisoning our spirits and affecting even our physical well-being. Many people unknowingly carry the weight of depression, anxiety, or chronic stress because of unresolved bitterness, which acts as an anchor to their spiritual and emotional health.

Furthermore, unforgiveness often fosters a sense of pride and self-righteousness. By clinging to the offense, we place ourselves in a position of judgment over others, deciding that their actions are too grievous to deserve mercy. This attitude contradicts the example of Christ, who forgave even those who nailed Him to the cross, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). When we refuse to forgive, we fail to acknowledge our own need for forgiveness and forget the immense debt that God has already erased for us. This lack of humility blinds us to our imperfections, making it easy to justify withholding grace from others while continuing to rely on God's grace for ourselves.

Spiritually, unforgiveness is akin to handing ourselves over to torturers, just as the unforgiving servant in the parable was delivered to the jailers. These "torturers" may not be physical, but they come in the form of spiritual unrest, lack of joy, and an inability to experience the fullness of God's peace. Hebrews 12:15 warns, "See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." Bitterness, born out of unforgiveness, is like a root that grows unchecked, eventually defiling not only the individual but also those around them. It seeps into our relationships, affecting how we treat others and creating an atmosphere of discord rather than harmony.

Additionally, unforgiveness hinders spiritual growth. When we cling to offenses, our focus shifts away from God and His purposes for our lives. Instead of walking in freedom and obedience, we remain stuck in a place of spiritual immaturity, unable to fully embrace God's calling. Ephesians 4:31-32 urges us to "get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." This passage highlights the transformative power of forgiveness, which not only releases us from the prison of anger but also aligns us with God's nature, enabling us to grow in love and compassion.

Ultimately, unforgiveness is a refusal to trust God with justice and healing. When we hold onto grudges, we often justify it by believing that the offender doesn't deserve forgiveness or that forgiving them minimizes the harm they caused. However, this perspective fails to recognize God's sovereignty and His role as the ultimate judge. Romans 12:19 reminds us, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." Forgiveness is not about excusing or condoning wrongdoing; it's about entrusting the situation to God, who is perfectly just and merciful. By letting go, we release ourselves from the burden of trying to exact justice and allow God to work in ways that bring true restoration.

As we reflect on the spiritual implications of unforgiveness, it becomes clear that holding onto offenses is a choice to remain imprisoned

WHY WE HAVE NO MORAL STANDING TO WITHHOLD FORGIVENESS

1. We Are Forgiven in Christ (Matthew 6:14–15)

As believers, we are recipients of God's infinite mercy and grace. Every one of us has fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23), committing sins that deserved eternal separation from Him. Yet, God, in His love, sacrificed His only Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the debt we could never repay. Through His death and resurrection, we are forgiven and restored to God.

Jesus makes it clear in Matthew 6:14–15: "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." This means that withholding forgiveness is not just disobedience—it puts our own forgiveness in jeopardy.

For example, think of someone who has lied about you, causing significant harm. While the hurt may run deep, consider the many times you have sinned against God through lies, disobedience, or neglecting His commands. God forgave you entirely without reservation. The same grace you have received must be extended to others, no matter how difficult it feels. Holding onto unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting someone else to suffer. Instead of hurting the other person, it imprisons and isolates us, cutting us off from God's grace.

2. People Grow and Change (1 Corinthians 13:11)

Forgiveness requires us to acknowledge an essential truth: people grow and change over time. We must resist the temptation to hold others permanently accountable for mistakes they made in the past, especially those made out of ignorance or immaturity. Paul beautifully illustrates this concept in 1 Corinthians 13:11: "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things."

This verse reminds us that growth is a natural process, and as people mature, they often reflect on their past actions with regret. Think about your own life—how many things have you said or done in the past, perhaps even as recently as a year or a month ago, that you now regret? You may not have had the opportunity to apologize to those you hurt, yet through the grace and work of the Holy Spirit, you have grown and moved beyond those inadequacies.

In the same way, we must extend that grace to others, believing that they too have grown. Romans 14:4 reinforces this idea: "Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand." This verse reminds us that growth is God's work in each person's life, and it is not our place to judge or label someone based on past actions.

Imagine this: someone stole your wallet two years ago. Would it be fair to still call them a thief today, especially if they have repented and changed? Or consider catching someone in an act of immorality. Before rushing to judgment, remember the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8:7–11. When the Pharisees brought her to Jesus, seeking her condemnation, He responded with piercing wisdom: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." Convicted, her accusers left one by one.

Jesus did not condone her actions, but He extended grace, saying, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." This response demonstrates the balance between holding people accountable and offering them the grace to grow and change.

Paul reinforces this truth in Romans 3:23–24: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." We have all been recipients of God's undeserved grace. If God, who is perfect, has justified us freely by His grace, then how much more should we extend that same grace to others?

As we approach the new year, this message becomes even more urgent. Unforgiveness and bitterness hinder not only our spiritual growth but also our relationship with God and our personal freedom. Hebrews 12:15 warns us: "Make sure that no root of bitterness grows up to cause trouble and defile many." Bitterness defiles not only us but also those around us, creating cycles of pain and discord.

Forgiveness, on the other hand, is a gift we give to ourselves. It frees us from the chains of resentment and opens the door to peace, healing, and spiritual growth. As we cross into a new season, we must let go of past hurts and embrace the freedom that forgiveness brings.

This new year, let us commit to extending grace, believing in the power of growth, and trusting God to complete His transformative work in the lives of others. Be gracious, as Christ has been gracious to you.

WHY WE HAVE NO MORAL STANDING TO WITHHOLD FORGIVENESS - CONTINUATION

3. Grace Must Be Freely Given (Romans 3:23–24)

Romans 3:23–24 reminds us: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” We are all equal recipients of God’s undeserved grace.

Take, for instance, the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:7–11). The religious leaders sought to condemn her, but Jesus said, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” One by one, her accusers left, convicted by their own guilt. Jesus then said to the woman, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”

This act of mercy demonstrates that grace is not earned but freely given. If Jesus, the sinless Son of God, extended such grace, who are we to withhold it? Imagine if God kept a record of every sin we’ve committed and refused to forgive. Could any of us stand before Him?

Grace, by its nature, must flow freely. It is not ours to hoard or withhold. When we forgive, we reflect the heart of God and participate in His redemptive work.

FORGIVENESS FROM THE HEART

Forgiveness is a profound act that goes beyond simply saying the words, “I forgive you.” True forgiveness originates from the heart and involves releasing the pain, bitterness, and resentment tied to the offense. Jesus emphasizes the importance of heartfelt forgiveness in Matthew 18:35: “So My heavenly Father also will do to each of you, if from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.” This teaching reminds us that forgiveness must not be superficial—it must transform us from the inside out.

Forgiveness from the heart means letting go of the offense entirely, refusing to allow it to linger in our thoughts, actions, or emotions. It’s a choice to release the person who hurt us, to stop seeking retribution or justice on our terms, and to trust God to handle the situation. It’s not about pretending the hurt never happened but about surrendering the pain to God and choosing not to let it define us or our relationship with the person who caused it.

Superficial forgiveness—saying we forgive but continuing to harbour bitterness or replay the offense in our minds—is incomplete. Such forgiveness keeps us in bondage, unable to experience the full healing and peace that comes with genuine release. Matthew 18:35 reminds us that God requires forgiveness that is deep, complete, and transformative.

THE FREEDOM OF FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness from the heart brings freedom—freedom from bitterness, anger, and the weight of carrying past hurts. Hebrews 12:15 warns us: “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” Bitterness defiles not only us but also those around us, spreading negativity and pain. Forgiveness uproots this bitterness and allows God’s grace to flow freely in our lives.

The act of forgiveness doesn’t just release the offender; it sets you free. Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to suffer—it harms you far more than it harms them. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is a gift you give yourself.



STEPS TO FORGIVE FROM THE HEART

Acknowledge the Pain and the Offense

Forgiveness doesn't mean ignoring or minimizing the hurt you've experienced. Acknowledge the reality of the pain, and bring it before God. Be honest about how the offense has affected you emotionally, spiritually, or even physically. Suppressed feelings can fester into bitterness, so it's important to confront the hurt with honesty.

Recognise Your Own Need for Forgiveness

Reflect on your own life and the countless times you have needed God's forgiveness. Romans 3:23 reminds us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Just as God, in His mercy, has wiped your slate clean, you are called to extend the same grace to others. Remember, forgiveness is not about whether the other person deserves it—it's about reflecting God's mercy.

Release the Offense to God

Forgiveness from the heart requires surrender. Release the offense into God's hands, trusting Him to bring healing and justice. Romans 12:19 says, "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." When you release the burden of unforgiveness to God, you free yourself from carrying the weight of the hurt.

Pray for the Offender

One of the most powerful ways to forgive is to pray for the person who hurt you. Jesus instructed us to "love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). As you pray, ask God to bless them, heal them, and transform their heart. Prayer softens your own heart and helps you see the offender through God's eyes.

Embrace Humility

Forgiveness often requires laying down our pride. Pride tells us we have the right to hold onto anger or to wait for an apology before forgiving. But Jesus calls us to humble ourselves, as a child does, and let go of the offense regardless of whether the other person acknowledges their wrongdoing.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, I come before You with a heart that desires to be free from bitterness and unforgiveness. Teach me to forgive as You have forgiven me—fully, freely, and from the heart. Help me to release every hurt, lay down my pride, and trust You with the healing process. As I step into the new year, may I carry no grudge or resentment but only Your peace and love. Thank You for Your grace that empowers me to forgive. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A CALL TO REFLECTION

Forgiveness is not always easy. It can feel like a painful act of surrender, especially when the hurt runs deep. But Jesus reminds us that the reward is worth it: freedom, healing, and a heart aligned with His will. Forgiveness is not just a gift you give to others—it is a gift you give to yourself. It releases you from the prison of bitterness and opens the door to God's peace and joy.

As we approach a new season, let us commit to forgiving from the heart. Let us lay down our pride, release our bitterness, and adopt the purity of a child's heart. Don't carry the weight of unforgiveness into the new year. Unforgiveness hinders spiritual growth, breaks relationships, and keeps us bound to the pain of the past. This new year is an opportunity to start afresh, with a heart free from grudges and resentment.

Ask yourself today:

- Is there someone I need to forgive?
- Am I holding onto bitterness or resentment?
- Have I truly forgiven from the heart, or am I still nursing the pain?

Choose forgiveness. Choose freedom. Let God's grace flow through you as you release the offense and walk in His peace. Let 2025 be a year of renewed relationships, spiritual growth, and the freedom that comes from living in obedience to God's will.

