

Session Four

Climbing Higher

THE ASCENDING LIFE

God's Golden Stairway to Glory

PRINCIPLES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

THE PRINCIPLE OF FORGIVENESS

Matthew 6:12, 14-15; 18:21-35



Introduction. –

The principle of forgiveness means that, in order to grow spiritually, to climb higher on God's Golden Stairway to Glory, we must receive God's forgiveness continually, forgive others immediately and receive forgiveness from others graciously.

The ascending Christian receives forgiveness from God *continually*.

Accepting God's forgiveness for our sins is basic to being saved from our sins. In Luke 18:13-14 we read: ¹³ *But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'* ¹⁴ *I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.* Forgiveness comes to those who feel their need of it, repent and request it.

Paul says in Eph. 1:7: ⁷ *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.* This forgiveness comes through faith in Jesus who, through His death, took the penalty for our sins upon Himself as the perfect Lamb of God. That forgiveness also provides redemption for us from our slavery to sin so that we are free in Christ to be ourselves and whatever God pleases to make us.

A redeemed and pardoned prisoner must accept his proffered freedom. It is hard to imagine that a prisoner who has been pardoned would not agree to leave his prison, but there are reasons why he might not want to leave. As long as he is in prison, he is fed and clothed at no cost to himself. In some prisons he may be provided with entertainment. He may have to work, but at least he can learn a skill which he might practice in the future. On the other hand, if he does not claim his freedom, he is confined within the limits of the prison and is not free to go and come or to order his own life. He must choose whether to go or stay. If he is lazy and satisfied, he might prefer to stay. Once pardoned he is free to leave, but he must accept that freedom in order to enjoy it.

Since we have all sinned (Rom. 3:23) and are therefore slaves to sin (Rom. 6:16), we must acknowledge that fact and trust in the sacrificial death of Jesus to free us from that slavery (Rom. 6:23). But that freedom must be accepted along with the responsibilities and privileges that go with it. God offers to forgive us of all our sins (I John 1:9) but in order to enjoy the privileges that He offers to us as forgiven sinners, we must accept His offer and walk with Him through this world in thankfulness and appreciation for what He has done in setting us free!

In our last session we spoke about the necessity for continual confession of anything which hinders our growth into the likeness of Jesus and of our need to be ready continually to repent of those things and to receive forgiveness from the Lord. We did not have time to give any details about accepting God's forgiveness, but just as we need to live continually by Mark 1:15 (*Repent and believe the Gospel.*) so we also need to live by I John 1:9: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us of our sins and to purify us from all unrighteousness.* James 5:16 says, *Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and*

effective.

Once we have confessed and repented of our sins and/or shortcomings we only need to accept God's offer of forgiveness by faith. We believe that God does not lie and that He will not go back on His Word; therefore, if He says that He is *faithful and just to forgive our sins* we must believe Him whether we feel any different or not. Forgiveness only benefits us if we truly believe that we have been forgiven, accept it as a fact and move ahead with freedom, not burdened by guilt.

The ascending Christian forgives others quickly. Matthew 5:25-26 says, ²⁵ *Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.* The message of this passage is that we must make friends of those who might want to become our enemies so that we will never be tempted to hate them or to become angry with them and maybe even to plan to murder them. Forgiving others is much better than trying to get revenge on them!

After giving His apostles the model prayer, which includes the words *Forgive us our debts (or sins) as we forgive those indebted to (or have sinned against) us* (Matt. 6:12), Jesus immediately adds ¹⁴ *For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.* ¹⁵ *But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

Accepting forgiveness from God makes it much easier for us to forgive others. Just as *We love because He first loved us* (1 John 4:19), so likewise we forgive because he first forgave us. Eph. 4:32 says, ³² *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.* A person who is not a born-again believer in Jesus may forgive others, but most do not understand all that is involved in the experience of true forgiveness.

For us to forgive others does NOT require **anything** from them. They do not have to confess or ask for forgiveness for us to forgive them. They do have to ask and receive our forgiveness for it to do them any good, but it does us good simply to forgive others out of our love for them and our desire to please God by forgiving them as He forgave us.

Harboring unforgiveness causes resentment which may lead to bitterness, anger and hatred which are all caustic -- they eat away the spiritual life in our hearts. They make us hard. They make us consider ways to get revenge. They lead to violence in speech and action. They kill the power of God in us. They destroy our peace. They make our smiles disappear and our faces frown. To be unforgiving is to be unloving.

BUT, you may say, how can I forgive someone who has wronged me so terribly? YOU CAN, by the power of God's Holy Spirit and by realizing **how much God has forgiven you** just because He loves you (Eph. 4:32). Consider the experience of Corrie ten Boom who was terribly persecuted and shamed and humiliated by her German captors during WW II. Years later, while on a speaking tour, she met the very man who had been her tormentor and persecutor in the German prison camp. He offered her his hand, explaining that he had become a believer in Jesus and expressing his sadness at having treated her so badly. She was tempted to refuse to shake his hand, but the Lord gave her the strength to forgive him and to take his hand as one who was himself a rescued sinner by the grace of God.

Sometimes it is more difficult for someone to forgive himself/herself than to forgive others. Occasionally someone who has been through a terrible tragedy for which they feel responsible may have confessed their failure to God and, if necessary, to others and have been forgiven by all concerned. But sometimes such a person has a terrible time forgiving himself/ herself. This is difficult, but if God says in His Word that HE has forgiven you, who are you to refuse to forgive yourself?

Forgiveness requires suffering. There is always a cross in it. True forgiveness requires that we accept in ourselves the results of someone else's sin/mistake just as Jesus accepted the penalty of our sin in Himself on Calvary. This is what makes forgiving different from either rejection or condoning. Rejection says to a drug-addicted son or daughter, "Get out of my life; I don't ever want to see you again." Such rejection does the son or daughter no good at all and may cause irreparable damage to their inner self. Condoning says to the same son or daughter, "Oh, come on in and go to your room. We'll talk about it later." Such an attitude again does nothing for the child. Forgiving says to the same son or daughter, "I see you are in trouble and are suffering. Please come in and let's talk about it. I will help you get through this no matter what it costs me."

Perhaps our biggest problem with forgiving others is that our pride doesn't want us to forgive others unless they come begging for it so that we can feel superior to them. This, of course, means that, in that case, we can never get rid of the corrosiveness of unforgiveness in ourselves until the other person makes the first move. We are therefore letting them control our lives. We must take control of our own lives and make our own decisions to free ourselves of the inner corrosiveness of unforgiveness whatever it may cost us. It is **not worth** what it costs to hold on to our pride and to fail to forgive. Forgiving means that we release the person who has offended us to whatever punishment God places on him or her and make no attempt to assess it ourselves. The bitterness of unforgiveness causes tension and anger and many other bad attitudes which can easily harm our health. But true forgiveness takes the process one step further and seeks reconciliation with the

person who either offended us or was offended by us.

The ascending Christian receives forgiveness from others graciously. Christians are never so perfect that they do not need forgiveness. Especially in our homes, in our families, we need to confess our shortcomings (our short tempers!?) and anything else which disrupts family harmony. We need to confess it immediately and ask for pardon or forgiveness. Children whose parents confess to them and to each other easily are much more likely to be able to confess to others when they are adults.

The main obstacle to receiving forgiveness from others is our pride. This kind of pride has destroyed many marriages, many business relationships, many family relationships. Proverbs tells us that *Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall* (16:18). It also goes before broken relationships and broken hearts. Receiving forgiveness graciously without trying to justify ourselves or to rationalize our behavior is difficult but extremely NECESSARY if we are to grow into the likeness of Jesus.

The purpose of forgiveness is: to remove guilt, perceived as debt, and to restore relationships.

Forgiveness removes guilt. So MANY people today are carrying around a tremendous burden of guilt and don't have the faintest notion about how to deal with it or to get rid of it. Jesus has the answer: accept God's forgiveness on the basis of repentance and faith and then extend the same courtesy to others!

In the model prayer our Lord taught us to pray, *And forgive us our debts* (Luke has *sins* --11:4) *just as we forgive our debtors.* Here Jesus ties our forgiveness from God with our forgiveness of others. Our forgiveness of others is an indication that we have in truth experienced God's forgiveness ourselves; our FAILURE to forgive others is an indication that we have NOT really experienced forgiveness from God. In Matthew 18:21-35 (see also Eph. 4:32) the whole point of the story is that IF we have truly experienced God's forgiving grace, then we MUST forgive others in the same way He has forgiven us! Failure to do so will surely bring God's wrath upon us.

The most significant purpose of forgiveness is to restore relationships. As long as there is unforgiveness on either side there cannot be a good relationship between two people whether they are just friends or business colleagues or sweethearts or family members. Forgiveness clears the atmosphere and restores broken relationships. If there is no restoration of relationships, then forgiveness is incomplete.

Conclusion: IF we are truly "ascending Christians," then we MUST LEARN to accept forgiveness from God continually, grant forgiveness to others immediately and receive forgiveness from others graciously. This way we will keep all of our relationships, both with God and with others, in good repair at all times. What a blessing that is, both for us and for others! It lets God's LOVE truly shine through our lives. May God grant us grace to do it.