

# Forgiveness: A LifeBridge Study



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## Introduction to the LifeBridge Study Series

“But God...even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ.” Through the Cross of Christ God bridged the uncrossable gap that existed between Himself and humankind. Through God’s grace all that choose to walk across that bridge are accepted. There is however a second bridge in the Christian walk. What we have received from God we are expected to give to others. As Jesus said - “Freely you received, freely give.”

The purpose of the LifeBridge Study Series is to explore the riches God's blessings and how we can give them to others. Each study booklet in the series is designed to maintain a balance between instruction and discussion. While they can be used for individual study the intent is for group study such as family time, Sunday School, or in a small group. Our prayer is that you will see and receive the richness of God’s blessings and open your heart to share those blessings with those around you.

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## Forgiveness: Lesson 1

*“Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”*

In 1911 a baptism took place. Earlier in his life the baptismal candidate said, "I belong to no Church unless you say that I belong to the one great Church of the world. If you like, you can say it is the devil's Church that I belong to." The candidate's life was visibly full of pride, deceit, hatred, bitterness, and murder. His nickname proclaimed his devilish reputation. The 1911 baptismal candidate was Devil Anse Hatfield, leader of the Hatfield side of the infamous Hatfield & McCoy feud. Yet, Devil Anse received Christ's complete forgiveness.

The cornerstone of forgiveness is the utter power and authority of Jesus Christ to forgive. Jesus himself declared and demonstrated this authority. In your Bible read Luke 5:17-26.

The key verses are vs 20 and 23-24. In verse 20 Jesus makes a simple declaration, *“Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”* Of course this did not sit well with the religious leaders. In their understanding sins could only be forgiven by God and only after an elaborate ceremony involving a blood sacrifice. But Jesus, looking toward His own sacrificial death, forgave this man's sins. Jesus then demonstrated his authority to forgive through his power to heal. In response to the religious leaders unspoken questions Jesus said, *“Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins have been forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? ‘But, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,’—He said to the paralytic—‘I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home.’* The passage goes on to report that the man got up and went home, glorifying God as he went.

Jesus forgives. He is willing and able to forgive you. There is something, however, about the human experience that desires to judge. To say that such and such sins are “unforgivable”. Often they are the sins of others, sometimes they are our own sin. When we

declare something to be “unforgivable” we are sinning by pridefully trying to trump the power and will of God. In essence we are saying that we are more powerful, wiser, and more righteous than God. However, Jesus’ power to forgive is infinite, even over the sin of unforgiveness. There is no sin of thought, word, or deed, via either action or inaction, that Jesus’ blood cannot completely and utterly forgive.

When Devil Anse Hatfield submitted himself to Christ he was completely forgiven. He had committed murder, hatred, pride, deceit, manipulation, blasphemy, and only God knows what else. Yet Devil Anse Hatfield received God’s total and complete forgiveness. Isaiah wrote, *“Come now, and let us reason together,” Says the Lord, “Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.”* (Isaiah 1:18) The same can be true for you. No matter what you have done in your past, Jesus has the power and authority to forgive you. Jesus paid for your sin on the cross, all that is left is for you to receive His forgiveness.

**Key Lesson Point:** Jesus has the power, authority, and willingness to forgive all of our sins through His sacrificial death on the cross.

Describe what it means to be forgiven?

Did the paralytic do or say anything that made him worthy of being forgiven? Does anyone ever deserve forgiveness or have the right to demand forgiveness?

Which is harder to say, your sins are forgiven or be healed - why?

What gives Jesus the authority to forgive?

\*Is there any sin that Jesus cannot forgive?

Describe a time when someone forgave you, how did it make you feel?

Is there anything in your past that you consider “unforgivable?”

What have you learned in this lesson and how will you apply it?

\*Leader’s note: With the exception of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit there is nothing that Jesus will not forgive if a person is honestly confessing sin and is willing to receive His forgiveness. To say that something is “unforgivable” is to limit the power and authority of Jesus Christ.

## **Forgiveness: Lesson 2**

*“He who is forgiven little, loves little.”*

There is a moment in Charles Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol” after Marley’s ghost appears that Scrooge notices his chains. Marley explains, “I wear the chain I forged in life...I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it.” Marley then considers Scrooge, “Or would you know...the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was full as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas eves ago. You have labored on it, since. It is a ponderous chain!” At Marley’s proclamation Scrooge looks at himself expecting to see 300 feet of chain - but he is blind to it. We too can be like Marley or Scrooge, either having knowledge of the depth of our sin or be blind to it.

The Scripture passage for this lesson has two individuals that have an encounter with Jesus. One is fully aware of the depth of their sin, the other, like Scrooge, is blind to their condition. Read Luke 7:36-50.

The woman in the passage is described as “a sinner”. Because of the pharisee’s remarks it is assumed that she was a prostitute. She is like Marley, fully aware of the weight of the sin that she bears. We do not know what motivated her to wash and anoint Jesus’ feet. We are not told what miracle she witnessed or lesson she overheard or what previous encounter she had with Christ. However, her approach was not one of demand or right but of worship. Being deeply moved she bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, and anointed them with perfume.

While the woman approached Jesus as a servant, the pharisee approached Him as a master. The actions and attitudes of the pharisee scream pride. He pridefully, although silently, judged and rebuked Jesus. He failed to show even the smallest of hospitalities to his guest. It was his party. Jesus was just an attraction to proclaim his



own self-importance.

The woman saw her sin and knew the weight that had been removed by the forgiveness of Jesus. The pharisee was blind to his sin. The result was that the woman loved much, and the pharisee loved little.

The application of this passage is not in measuring of how “bad” you were in comparison with others. Whether you grew up on the streets or grew up in the church, the weight of sin is the same. The sin of pride is just as ugly as the sin of prostitution. James wrote, *“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.”* (James 2:10) The reason the pharisee loved little is not because he sinned little, but because he had been forgiven little because he had confessed little. The application of this passage is two-fold. The first application is to consider the weight of sin that Christ has forgiven each one of us. The second is to ask God to remove any self-deception we may have concerning our sin, especially those that we have not yet confessed and received Christ’s forgiveness. Remember: *“He who is forgiven little, loves little.”*

**Key Lesson Point:** As we acknowledge the depth of our sin we come to a greater realization of the debt that Jesus released us from and will love Him all the more.

In what ways are Jesus' divinity displayed in this passage?

Was the woman's sin greater, less than, or equal to the Pharisee's sin?

Why did the Pharisee love little? Why did the woman love much?

How is their love (or lack of it) demonstrated in the passage?

What did the woman's worship of Jesus cost her? What should that tell us about our worship?

Considering our own lives:

We all have some degree of self-deception concerning our own sin. Have you felt the weight of your own sin? Are you willing for God to reveal your sin to you?

Are you ready to receive God's forgiveness for your sins?

The pattern of forgiveness is confession, repentance, and forgiveness: agreeing with God that we have committed specific sin, expressing our desire to turn from that sin and be forgiven, receive God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ (1 John 1:9), and forgiving ourselves.

It is fruitless to compare our prior sinful lives to others. It is, however, fruitful to recognize the weight of sin that we have been freed from. Take time to consider the weight of sin that Christ has forgiven you of and worship Him in response.

Describe the feeling you experienced during your time of reflection and worship.

What have you learned during this lesson and how will you apply it?

### **Forgiveness: Lesson 3**

*“For if you forgive others for their transgressions,  
your heavenly Father will also forgive you”*

Hollywood loves to reuse storylines. One such story is “Brewster’s Millions”. Based on a novel written in 1901 it has been adapted to film seven times by Hollywood. The premise is a simple one. A person learns of an inheritance. In order to receive the inheritance they must first completely spend a smaller sum without telling anyone what they are doing or retaining any assets in a designated timeframe. The purpose of the strange requirement is to teach the would be millionaire how to properly handle the greater inheritance. Forgiveness is somewhat like “Brewster’s Millions”; there is an expectation that we will forgive others in the same way that we have been forgiven by God.

Jesus underlined the importance of forgiveness when he taught The Lord’s Prayer. In your Bible read Matthew 6:9-15. Jesus’ model prayer is a fantastic outline of all ways we can express ourselves to God. Of the several lines, all of them important, Jesus only underlined the one on forgiveness.

The prayer itself asks, *“forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”* By using the word “debt” and “debtors” Jesus is helping us to understand that sin creates a debt, something that is owed to the one offended. This is not a strange concept. Revenge and retaliation is all about fulfilling the debt of offense by harming the offender. In older times it was called “extracting our pound of flesh”. When a convicted prisoner has completed their sentence they are said to have “paid their debt to society”. Jesus, however, links our forgiveness by God with our forgiveness of others.

After the prayer Jesus explains the lines on forgiveness. *“For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive*

*you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”* It is important to note that Jesus is not saying that we are buying God’s forgiveness by forgiving others. Forgiveness of our sin debt before God is only redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, our ability to receive and cherish God’s forgiveness is tied to our ability to forgive others. This will be developed more fully in a later lesson. What is necessary for us to realize in this lesson is the importance Jesus placed on forgiveness. He could have underlined worship, God’s sovereignty, God as our sustainer, or God’s protecting hand. Instead he underlined forgiveness; both the forgiveness we receive from God and the forgiveness we are expected to grant to others. The remaining lessons in this series will focus on the importance of forgiving others.

**Key Lesson Point:** Jesus’ desire is that we understand the importance of being forgiven and forgiving others.

Why do you think Jesus emphasized forgiveness in the Lord’s prayer?

What is God's promise if we fail to forgive others?

Jesus uses "debt" to describe the consequence of sin and offense. In your own words how is the consequence of sin like a debt?

Describe a time when you loaned someone something and they failed to return it or pay it back. How did that make you feel? What did you do about it? What were the consequences of your action?

How is it possible that God can forgive our sin debt against him?

Describe or imagine paying off a large debt such as a mortgage or credit card. How did or would that make you feel? How would you feel if someone unexpectedly paid it for you?

When you are in debt to someone the person holding the debt is said to be “holding the paper” as in the loan or mortgage papers. Who are you “holding the paper” on? Whose offense are you holding on to? Why is it hard to forgive them? Why must you forgive them?

There are times when we may not feel like forgiving someone or feel that it is impossible for us. In those situations where the debt just seems too large it is helpful to express that we are willing to forgive completely. “As an act of my will I forgive \_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_.”

What have you learned in this lesson and how will you apply it?

## **Forgiveness: Lesson 4**

*“Up to seventy times seven”*

Today when folks talk about something going viral they mean the latest craze on the internet. In the late 1940s and early 1950s viral outbreaks of polio was something to avoid. Polio is a virus that is easily transmittable and can cause permanent mild to severe disability and possibly death. According to the Centers for Disease Control, “in the late 1940s to the early 1950s, polio crippled an average of more than 35,000 people in the United States each year”. The CDC also notes, “Parents were frightened to let their children go outside, especially in summer when the virus seemed to peak. Travel and commerce between affected cities were sometimes restricted.” My dad was a child during that time and recalls that they could not go to the State Fair one year because of an outbreak. In the late 1950’s inoculations were developed that dramatically reduced the polio outbreaks to the point where in 1979 the United States was declared to be polio-free.

Unforgiveness is like polio in that it can be easily transmitted and can lead to the crippling condition of bitterness. Also like polio there is an “innoculation” that can prevent these symptoms - love. *“Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.”* (1 Peter 4:8) Peter’s phrase “love covering a multitude of sins” could also be called being unoffendable. When we love one another we are not easily offended by their words and actions. However, Peter did not always have this view - Read Matthew 18:21-22.

Peter’s question assumes that there is an end to forgiveness. To paraphrase - “when can I quit forgiving because this person is really bothering me”. In a way Peter is being gracious. One commentary points out, “the consensus was that a brother might be forgiven a repeated sin three times; on the fourth, there is no



forgiveness. Peter, thinking himself big-hearted, volunteers ‘seven times’”. Jesus however declared that forgiveness must be given 70 times 7. While Jesus’ formula leads to 490 times, in a practical sense Jesus’ meaning is unlimited forgiveness. Jesus does not expect us to run around with a tally sheet so that when a person offends us for the 491th time we can hold it against them. In fact we are told in 1 Corinthians 13:5 that love does not take into account or keep a record of wrongs. Instead, a practical paraphrase of Jesus’ answer to Peter is - “don’t count, just forgive.”

Allowing love and forgiveness to cover the sins and offenses of others prevents the crippling effects of bitterness. Bitterness is a repellent that destroys relationships and stems from the sin of pride. No one likes to be around a bitter person. However, practicing love and forgiveness creates an unoffendable heart. In a way we become inoculated against the ravages of one another’s offenses. When someone sins against us we do not have to search for forgiveness it is readily available. We do not even consider holding the offense against them. It does not mean ignoring sin. Rather, our desire is repentance and healing instead of revenge and retribution. It does mean the continuation of relationship instead of the distancing effect caused by holding offense and bitterness. When it comes down to it Jesus’ command to us is to always forgive each other.

**Key Lesson Point - Forgiveness is to be a constant in our relationships and creates an attitude of unoffendability.**

How many chances do you normally give someone to fail or sin against you?

Jesus instructs us to forgive each other how many times? What does that mean to you?

What covers a multitude of sins? Why do you think it works?

What foods have you tasted that were bitter and would not like to taste again?

Have you ever been around a bitter person, how did they make you feel?

What is the preventative and the remedy for bitterness?

Is there anyone that you are keeping a “record of wrongs” on? That when push comes to shove you can recount all the times they have failed or wronged you in the past? Will you shred the list?

What have you learned in this lesson and how will you apply it?

## **Forgiveness: Lesson 5** *“Forgive...from your heart”*

Squirrels often bury nuts in the ground for later use. This works well for them except sometimes they forget where they left their treasure. The results are predictable - the nuts they buried so carefully sprout and grow. Half-hearted forgiveness works the same way as the neglected treasure of squirrels.

In Matthew 18 Jesus expands on his instruction about forgiving each other. Read Matthew 18:23-35. In this parable the servant owed an amount that would be impossible for him to pay back. While estimates vary, one commentator noted that at typical day labor rates it would require fifteen years to pay back only one of the the thousand talents. In comparison the amount owed to the servant by his peer would take about three months to repay.

We, like the servant, have been forgiven an enormous debt. The debt of just one sin against an infinite God requires an eternity to repay, a truly impossible task. But, Jesus paid our debt through his sacrificial death on the cross. When we receive Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior our sin debt is wiped clean. Several centuries before the coming of Christ the prophet Isaiah wrote, *“Come now, and let us reason together,” Says the Lord, ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.’* (Isaiah 1:18) What is impossible for us is accomplished by God.

However, we may also be like the servant in Jesus’ parable and refuse to forgive the offenses of others towards us. The amount owed to the servant by his fellow slave was significant. However, it paled in comparison to the unpayable debt he had been forgiven. Even the most grievous offense done to us by another is small in comparison with the sin debt that we have been forgiven. By refusing to forgive the servant is playing god;

choosing whom he will and will not forgive. While the servant's motive is not revealed it could have been any or all of these sins; pride, revenge, judgmentalism, or idolatry. These four sins will also lead us to unforgiveness. We may feel justified in our unforgiveness but Jesus asks, "*Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?*"

Jesus goes on to make a further statement about the need and nature of forgiveness in verse 35. "*My heavenly Father will also do the same to you (turn the unforgiving person over to the torturers), if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.*" Because we have been forgiven we are required to forgive others. Forgiveness is not optional or dependent on the situation. Jesus, knowing it is easy for us to say the right words and not mean them, adds a condition. Forgiveness must not be in word only but must be from the heart; it must be genuine and complete. If not then we are like squirrels hiding nuts - presenting an appearance of forgiveness but in reality hiding a small piece of unforgiveness in our hearts. One way of hiding unforgiveness is by thinking "I'll forgive but I won't forget." In time that small nut of unforgiveness will grow and it will become obvious that we did not forgive the same way that we have been forgiven - totally, without reservation, and unconditionally.

Key Lesson Point: Jesus has forgiven our huge debt and requires us to forgive others the same way that we have been forgiven.

Consider Isaiah 1:18, 1 John 1:9, Psalm 103:12, Micah 7:19, Isaiah 43:25. Describe God's forgiveness of your sin.

How else could you describe the amount of debt the servant owed the king? In the same way describe the debt owed by fellow slave to the servant.

In the same way describe the sin debt which God has forgiven you of and the sin debt of others towards you.

Does understanding the size of your sin debt before God, and his complete forgiveness of it, make it easier to forgive others?

Why do you think that you or others have a difficult time forgiving each other?

Why do you think that pride, revenge, judgmentalism, and idolatry leads to unforgiveness? What other motives could lead to unforgiveness?

Jesus commands us to forgive each other from our heart, what do you think he means by that?

Is there someone that you would like to forgive from your heart right now?

What have you learned in this lesson and how will you apply it?

## Forgiveness: Lesson 6

*“Father, forgive them”*

The first lesson of this series introduced the power of God’s forgiveness through the example of Devil Anse Hatfield. But, what if the two patriarchs involved in the famous Hatfield & McCoy feud would have forgiven each other at the beginning? One obvious result is that their names would not be linked by their prolonged, bitter, and bloody conflict. However, we can only speculate about all of ways their lives would have been impacted by forgiving each other. What we do know how they were impacted by unforgiveness and the terrible price paid by both sides of the feud.

During these lessons we have focused on the teachings of Jesus concerning forgiveness. However, Jesus did not simply teach on forgiveness, he lived it as well. Read Luke 23:22-38.

Think about the multitude of abuses that Jesus suffered and the variety of people involved. He was abused and mocked by the Roman soldiers in the vilest of ways. He was physically tortured. He was mocked, bullied, and belittled by all those around him. His closest friends deserted him. Both Jewish and Roman governments falsely condemned him to death. The crowd that had witnessed his miracles and teachings shouted “crucify him!” Religious leader’s witnessing his torture and death cursed him; challenging him to “save himself.” In the midst of all of this abuse Jesus prayed, *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”* We may wonder at that last part. It is quite obvious that the Roman soldiers knew they were killing Jesus. Surely the religious leaders understood that they were publicly mocking him. Pilate had declared Jesus innocent and yet turned him over for crucifixion. While they were aware of the consequences of their actions they were blinded to their sin by justification and rationalization. Feeling that they were following orders, saving a nation, keeping the



peace, or removing a “troublemaker” they committed grievous sin. And Jesus forgave them!

It is important to observe that Jesus, at this painful point in time, did not wait for them to ask to be forgiven. Most would have probably rejected such an offering, but Jesus forgave them anyway. Paul wrote in Romans, “*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*” (Romans 5:8) God’s offering of forgiveness was paid while we were still sinners and God’s enemies. God took the first step. We did not earn His forgiveness. We did not ask for it. We did not even recognize our need for forgiveness. But regardless of this God provided for our forgiveness.

The lesson in Jesus’ example is that no matter how painful, grievous, abusive, or mean the word or actions of another person are we must forgive them even if they never ask for it. No, it may not be easy. Yes, the person may be guilty of the worst kinds of sin. But their sin towards you is nothing in comparison to the sin debt that you have been forgiven by God. We must forgive, even though it may never be asked for or received. By doing so we prevent the weed of bitterness from growing in our heart and provide a way for God’s love to be fully known by the offender and ourselves.

**Key Lesson Point:** We must forgive, no matter the depth of pain, the surety of guilt, or even if it will be rejected.

Place yourself at the scene of the crucifixion. Which role, Pilate, Roman soldier, Jewish leader, or runaway disciple can you see yourself in and why?

Jesus said “they don’t know what they are doing”, what do you think Jesus meant?

Did any of the above at the crucifixion deserve to be forgiven? Did they ask to be forgiven? How do you think that they reacted to Jesus’s prayer of forgiveness?

Think of the worst of your sins, those that you are most ashamed of. Do you believe that Jesus has the authority to forgive you? Do you believe that Jesus wants to forgive you? Do you believe that Jesus has forgiven you? Have you received His forgiveness? Do you forgive yourself?\*

Think of the worst thing that someone has done to you - will you forgive them and ask Jesus to forgive them?

What have you learned through these six lessons? What do you intend to do with what you have learned?

\*If we fail to forgive ourselves we are saying that Jesus' blood is not enough, that our sin is unforgivable. The promise of 1 John 1:9 is that Jesus will cleanse us from all unrighteousness. We do not have the right to hold on to something which has been cleansed by Jesus. It is like playing in the mud after a bath.