

From New York Times Bestselling Author

ROGER CONNORS



HEALING
the
WOUNDED
HEART

Forgiving One Another Through
the Enabling Power of Jesus Christ

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INTRODUCTION

The Miraculous Healing Power of Forgiving Others

THE COMMAND TO FORGIVE ALL MEN ENCOMPASSES ONE OF THE MOST profound and Christlike actions we can take. At the heart of that command stands the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Its purpose is to bring us back into the presence of God, but that return is only possible because Christ makes forgiveness of sin available.

Without the forgiveness He offers through repentance, we could not be justified, cleansed, sanctified, or reconciled to God. Forgiveness of sin is thus the great enabling gift of the Atonement, opening the door to every other redemptive blessing. One of the central purposes of the Savior's mission on earth was to make that forgiveness possible by satisfying the demands of justice and extending mercy to all who would come unto Him.

Forgiving others is an outgrowth of that divine work.

While only Jesus Christ can forgive sin, He commands His disciples to forgive one another. This commandment, while essential to discipleship, is often among the most difficult things we are asked to do. Yet each of us must learn this healing principle, as opportunities to forgive arise repeatedly throughout our lives. And in a world that seems increasingly marked by anger, resentment, and revenge, this Christlike attribute grows not only in relevance, but in moral urgency.

This book is written for those earnestly seeking to understand what the Lord is asking of us and how He invites us to obey that command. We will examine the teachings of Church leaders, insights from research and mental health professionals, and the lived experiences of everyday people striving to apply the Lord's commandment to forgive others.

Throughout these pages, doctrinal fidelity has been a guiding priority. This book has been thoroughly researched and sourced, with carefully selected references for those wishing to delve more deeply into the scriptural teachings, the words of Church leaders, and insights from other experts. The doctrinal material draws primarily from general conference messages, particularly from the past twenty-five years, and from materials published on the Church's official website. Where personal insights are offered, they are clearly identified and intentionally kept distinct from doctrine and official teachings.

Relevant data and research from the mental health field are also included. Much has been studied and written on forgiveness in recent decades, and these findings are shared to further inform the discussion and offer additional insights and practical helps along the way.

The purpose of this work is to explore the miraculous power of offering forgiveness. That power brings healing, peace of mind, and spiritual renewal to those who find a way to forgive. We begin by examining the Lord's command to forgive, defining what forgiveness is (and what it is not), and discussing why only Jesus Christ has the power to forgive sin, and why we are glad this is the case.

At the center of this study are the three R's of brotherly forgiveness: Restitution, Reconciliation, and Repentance; principles that lead to peace of mind and deep healing of the soul for *both* those who forgive and those who have caused harm.

We then examine the poison of revenge and the trap of unforgiveness, consider what the field of mental health has taught about forgiving others, and address what to do when forgiving yourself or others feels impossible.

For those who have been deeply hurt or victimized criminally, civilly, physically, sexually, emotionally, or financially—in any way where you feel someone else has done you significant harm—please know this: these pages offer a way *of thinking through* and *working through* forgiveness that honors both truth and healing.

This is not an invitation to dismiss the depth of your pain, to minimize what occurred, or to excuse wrongdoing. Rather, it is an invitation to begin a sacred and personal process of allowing the Savior to lift from your heart the burden that someone else's choices placed upon it.

You *will not* be asked to condone evil, pretend that justice doesn't matter, or rush ahead of your readiness. You *will* be invited to consider how the power of Jesus Christ can bring peace, perspective, and even redemption out of the darkest injustices.

If your wounds run deep, I ask only that you stay open to the idea that healing is possible, that Christ's love is sufficient, and that offering forgiveness, in His way and timing, can become the means by which you are finally free.

As you move through these pages, you will encounter increasingly thoughtful and important questions designed to help assess your personal journey toward forgiveness and open the way to deeper healing.

In the end, the blessing of following the Lord's command to forgive others is deeply personal: wounded hearts are healed, liberating freedom is restored to the soul, and our path to the celestial kingdom remains unencumbered.

Let's begin our journey.



PART I

THE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVING OTHERS

CHAPTER 1

Of You It Is Required to Forgive All Men

MY FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH THE SAVIOR'S PROFOUND TEACHINGS DURING HIS mortal ministry came as a teenager when I read the *red-letter* edition of the New Testament that sat on our family's shelf. Until then, I hadn't shown much interest in spiritual matters, though my parents regularly dropped me off at church on Sundays.

As a young acolyte in the Lutheran church, my duties involved assisting the pastor during worship services. For a teenager, it was a nerve-racking experience to perform these duties for three minutes in full view of the congregation. I often worried about carrying the offering plates, which were full of heavy coins, and handing them to the priest without tripping. I also worried about lighting the many candles on the altar at the beginning of the service.

The acolytes from the earlier service often played pranks on the acolytes who would follow them in later services. They would do this by snuffing out the candles at the end of their service in a way that buried the wick in the wax, making it nearly impossible to relight. I'd often find myself struggling to melt the wax just enough to get the flame started while the priest and congregation looked on, growing visibly impatient. Such were my early church experiences.

Toward the end of my teenage years, something changed. Questions began to press on me: What are we doing on this earth? What happens when we die?

How did the earth get here, anyway? Curious, and encouraged by my Mormon neighborhood friends, I began reading the New Testament, focusing on the passages that were printed in red—giving emphasis to the actual words that Christ, himself, taught (the Book of Mormon would shortly follow).

What happened next was, to me, unforgettable.

For the second time in my life, I felt what I now recognize as the Spirit of God. The feeling was warm and comforting, unmistakable. I wasn't much of a reader back then. I remember pounding out *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* but couldn't lay claim to many more literary conquests than that (maybe *Call of the Wild*, too). But now I was riveted. The words carried weight. They were foreign, even radical, challenging everything I saw playing out in the world around me:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:

But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.¹

After delivering this revolutionary teaching on a higher law about how we should respond to those who hurt, offend, or abuse us (mind-blowing for those living under the law of Moses!), Jesus then explained, for the first time during His ministry, that we should also forgive them.

This teaching begins when He teaches us how to pray: “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”² Then, *as soon as* the prayer is done, what are His next words? A reinforcement of the doctrine of forgiveness He just introduced. He taught:

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.³

This is the only part of the prayer that Jesus immediately revisits. Clearly, He wanted to single this doctrine out as important. With this doctrinal debut of “forgiving others,” Jesus established it as a core qualification for receiving God’s mercy. Every disciple of the Master must come to terms with this doctrine and learn how to apply it.

In essence, He was saying: “Did you hear this doctrine? It’s so important, I included it in the pattern for daily prayer, and I immediately reemphasize it again, here, so you wouldn’t miss it. It’s an eternal principle that all creation must abide by; if you don’t forgive others, then you will not be forgiven of your sins by the Father.”

The Savior’s approach used repetition to underscore the importance of the principle.⁴ The Savior of the world (the embodiment of divine truth, and the only perfect Exemplar) offers a clear understanding of the Father’s expectation for us as His children. We are to emulate the example of the Savior to walk, sure-footed, down the covenant path back to Him.

Limitless Forgiveness

Jesus Christ did not merely teach forgiveness, He lived it. Even in the final moments of His mortal life, as He hung on the cross in His agony, He prayed: “Forgive them; for they know not what they do.”⁵ Later, His apostles taught the same doctrine that must have been seared into their souls by the memory of the Savior’s ultimate lesson in charity and mercy while on the cross. Paul wrote, “Even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.”⁶ To the Ephesians, he repeated the teaching: “Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”⁷

His teachings emphasized that forgiveness is to be offered without conditions. Withholding forgiveness is *not* our right. Viewing forgiveness as optional is a false belief, a theme we will return to throughout this book. For now, we are laying the groundwork for correct doctrine: forgiveness is a commandment, not a choice. Of course, you must *choose* to forgive, but there is really no alternative if you seek exaltation and eternal life.

Simply put, the right to withhold forgiveness is not within the moral authority God grants His disciples.

C. S. Lewis, the Oxford scholar and former atheist whose conversion to Christianity at thirty-two reshaped his life, warned that forgiving others is not optional: “No part of His teaching is clearer, and there are no exceptions to it. He doesn’t say that we are to forgive other people’s sins provided they are not too frightful, or provided there are extenuating circumstances, or anything of that sort. We are to forgive them all, however spiteful, however mean, however often they are repeated. If we don’t, we shall be forgiven none of our own.”⁸

An important note to share at this point: If you read the introduction, then you know that this book recognizes how difficult the journey of forgiveness can be, especially for those who have been deeply injured by others. If you have suffered serious harm and are not yet ready to even *think* about forgiving, please know that I, as the author, understand. I am genuinely glad you are reading. The doctrine, principles, stories, and practical guidance you’ll find here are offered to help you, in time, become more open to receiving the strengthening power of Jesus Christ—to move toward a better place and experience the healing, peace, and enabling power He lovingly offers.

With that in mind, I would invite you to think about a situation in which you are struggling to forgive someone. It could be something very minor, in the grand scheme of things; or it might be something quite significant. Either way, it could be quite helpful to have this personal “case study” in mind as you read this book and apply the principles to your own circumstances. Goethe once said, “Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do.”² In each chapter, ask the question, “*How does this apply to my situation?*” As you do, be patient with yourself. Forgiveness is often less an event than a journey—a process of turning your heart toward Christ, sometimes again and again, until His peace replaces your pain.

Turning back to our discussion, consider this instruction from the Lord to the Prophet Joseph:

My disciples, in days of old, sought occasion against one another and forgave not one another in their hearts; and for this evil they were afflicted and sorely chastened . . . I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men.¹⁰

We also see the conversation between Jesus and Peter on the topic:

Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?

Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.¹¹

Peter’s question was reasonable: he probably thought he was being generous by offering to forgive as many as seven times—surely, no one could expect more than that! This is doubly significant given that rabbinic teaching generally capped forgiveness at only *three* times.¹² But Jesus’s response raised the bar infinitely higher—not just numerically, but doctrinally. By saying seventy times seven, He implied that the forgiveness of others required of us by God is *limitless forgiveness*.

The Jewish Encyclopedia states that numbers had symbolic meanings in Hebrew culture.¹³ The number seven represented completeness or perfection.¹⁴ Multiplying this sacred number dramatically magnified the lesson—it was as though Jesus was saying, “To ‘be perfect, even as I,’¹⁵ you must always forgive.”

There are many false beliefs about forgiveness in our culture today. Consider the following false beliefs and their doctrinally correct counterpart. Have you ever held any of these viewpoints?

False Belief	True Belief
Forgiveness is optional—it’s something I can do if I’m ready.	Forgiveness is a commandment, not a divine suggestion.
God understands why I haven’t forgiven—the hurt runs too deep.	God requires me to forgive everyone, regardless of the offense.
Forgiveness is something the offender earns—it depends on their repentance.	I am commanded to forgive unconditionally; their repentance is between them and God.
I’ll eventually forgive; I’m not ready to forgive.	Delaying forgiveness can be disobedience; the commandment implies we should forgive as soon as we can.
Forgiveness is a feeling that may or may not come; I can’t manufacture it.	Forgiveness is a Christlike decision to obey God’s will, especially when it’s hard.

It is important to understand that *all* beliefs have consequences. When we correct false beliefs and adopt eternal truths, we empower ourselves to act in alignment with God’s will. Our beliefs shape our emotions, thoughts, feelings, relationships, and happiness.¹⁶ False beliefs are not harmless: they cloud

judgment, fuel emotional pain, distort our view of God and others, and block the healing power of truth.

Step one, then, is to adopt the correct unchanging eternal truths about forgiving others that Christ consistently taught.

The Mortal Experience

Elder Kevin R. Duncan taught that “there is not a soul alive who will not, at one time or another, be the victim to someone else’s careless actions, hurtful conduct, or even sinful behavior. That is one thing we all have in common.”¹⁷ Our mortal journey provides abundant opportunities to practice forgiving others, rendering the topic universally relevant.

It starts early. Research shows that young children begin to understand fairness, experience hurt feelings and recognize when someone has “wronged them” between the ages of three to five.¹⁸ By early childhood (ages six to twelve), they develop stronger emotional memories and may begin to hold grudges.¹⁹ Even at an early age, the principle of forgiving others applies.

Family estrangement is common across cultures worldwide. It’s not unusual for family members to stop speaking to each other. We even see this playing out publicly with Prince Harry’s estrangement from the Royal Family and his father King Charles.²⁰ Estrangement from *any* family member (not just parent) appears to be more common than many assume. The organization Together Estranged reported the findings of Karl Pillemer, a sociologist at Cornell University who published the book, *Fault Lines*, who revealed that “over one-quarter of Americans—27 percent—reported being estranged from a family member - which extrapolates to 67 million people. Around 10 percent were estranged from a parent or child which extrapolates to 25 million people. (And), 85% reported being estranged for a year or more and fully half of respondents had not had contact with that family member for four years or more.”²¹

Another study of young adults reported that 1 in 4 had gone “no-contact,” and 43.5% had experienced estrangement from their family at some point.²² Another cohort-study found adult children were about four times more likely to be estranged from their father (≈26%) than their mother (≈6%) . . .”²³

Over time, nearly every household experiences some form of violation or loss. Studies based on US victimization rates from 1975 to 1984 estimated that in a span of twenty years, almost 75% of households would suffer a burglary, and nearly 90% would experience larceny.²⁴ About 20% would have a vehicle stolen, and many would encounter multiple incidents of theft during their lifetime. These findings underscore that the experience of being wronged (through loss, theft, or intrusion) is not a rare misfortune but a common aspect of human life.

Beyond property crimes, personal offenses are also nearly universal. A landmark study showed that nearly everyone (100%) would become the victim of a personal theft at least once, with about 87% suffering such losses three or more times. Likewise, approximately 75% of people would experience an assault (whether completed or attempted) and nearly 40% would be victimized more than once.²⁵ These acts of aggression were not limited by race or background, affecting people from all walks of life. While this research is now several decades old, more recent national victimization data continues to support the same underlying reality. Each year, millions of Americans experience violent crime, and although the annual percentage may seem small, the risk repeats and accumulates over time. When viewed across a lifetime—and especially when including far more common property crimes—crime is not a rare occurrence affecting only a few, but a common human experience that touches the lives of most individuals.²⁶

The message is clear: even amid progress, injustice and violation remain woven into the fabric of mortal life. Thus, the need to forgive is not a theoretical virtue but an inevitable reality of human experience.

Divorce is another common source of hurt and offense. One-half of all marriages will end in divorce and 60% of all second marriages end in divorce.²⁷ About half of US children experience parental divorce,²⁸ and about 43% are raised without their fathers.

Add to all this a culture of giving and taking offense. More than six in ten adults think people are too easily offended, a consistent trend in national polling over recent years.²⁹ A substantial share (50%) also views offensive speech as a major societal issue.

The takeaway: no one will make it through this life without being legitimately offended or victimized in some way. This is the human condition

in a fallen world. Thus, the principle and practice of forgiveness is central to our discipleship and our ability to walk the covenant path. We all need to forgive others, likely a lot more often than we would ever hope. As a result, the Savior's teachings on this doctrine must do more than inform our actions; they must profoundly transform our hearts.

Here's a quick self-test to assess if you're carrying a burden that could be shed.

Am I Carrying a Burden? A Forgiveness Self-Test

Answer each question honestly with "Yes" or "No:"

1. Do I replay a past hurt or offense in my mind over and over again?
2. Do I feel anger, resentment, or bitterness when I think about a certain person or event?
3. Have I avoided someone because of something they did, even if it happened a long time ago?
4. Do I sometimes wish the person who hurt me would suffer, apologize, or be punished?
5. Do I feel emotionally "stuck" or weighed down by unresolved conflict or betrayal?

If you answered "Yes" to one or more questions, then you are probably not alone and you most likely need to lean-in and further develop the Christlike attribute of a forgiving nature. If you do, you will please the Savior by courageously acting now to address it.

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf stated: "Each of us is under a divinely spoken obligation to reach out with pardon and mercy and to forgive one another. There is a great need for this Christlike attribute in our families, in our marriages, in our wards and stakes, in our communities, and in our nations. We will receive the joy of forgiveness in our own lives when we are willing to extend that joy freely to others. Lip service is not enough."³⁰

Satan's Doctrine of Unforgiveness (as Satan Might Define It)

While Church leaders teach the Savior’s doctrine of forgiveness, Satan promotes his counterfeit doctrine of “unforgiveness.” I engaged Chat GPT to explore what Satan’s doctrine might look like. Here is the exchange:

Me: If Satan had a doctrine of unforgiveness, how would it be defined and described?

Chat GPT said: Hold on to every offense. Never let go. The pain proves you were right. To forgive is to surrender power—so never forgive. Let hatred fester. Let grudges grow. Feed the fire of pride, resentment, and revenge. You owe them nothing. You owe yourself vindication.

My reply: I like the definition you provided, but I think it needs to be a little more subtle, a little craftier. Satan combines truth with error. Can you make it more deceptive?

ChatGPT responded: Absolutely. You’re right—Satan is rarely blunt; he’s the master of subtlety, half-truths, and twisted logic. His most dangerous doctrines often *sound* reasonable or even self-protective, but they slowly corrode the soul.

Here is a more deceptive, craftier version of what Satan’s Doctrine of Unforgiveness might sound like—just persuasive enough to feel justified, but poisoned at its core:

The Doctrine of Unforgiveness (as Satan Might Subtly Teach It)

You’ve been deeply hurt. Forgiving too quickly would only dismiss your pain—and that’s not fair to you. Healing takes time . . . and sometimes, forgiveness can wait. It’s not *your* job to let others off the hook. It’s safer to protect your heart. Besides, they haven’t even said sorry. When they do, maybe then you’ll consider forgiving—but only if they prove they deserve it.

I think ChatGPT nailed it on the second try. It’s rarely the outright denial of forgiveness that defeats most of us; rather, it is the seemingly reasonable justification for withholding it that keeps us bound. These false beliefs about forgiveness drive misguided feelings and behavior, leading to conflict and contention. We will explore what forgiveness looks like in the next chapter, but for now, suffice it to say, it’s not this!

Satan's "doctrine of unforgiveness" is designed for one purpose: to block access to the healing, liberating power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Here's how he achieves it:

- **Promoting** a grudge
- **Validating** a one-sided, often distorted view of the facts
- **Justifying** the pursuit of vengeance
- **Feeding** ego and self-righteousness
- **Fostering** guilt and despair
- **Encouraging** a lack of personal accountability
- **Sowing** division, discord, and disunity
- **Stifling** personal growth
- **Clouding** self-awareness
- **Destroying** personal peace

The result: trapping individuals in a cycle of pain that aligns with his goal of leading people into misery and spiritual bondage, quietly severing us from the healing power of Jesus Christ.³¹

The Only Unforgivable Sin

The doctrine of the Church specifies that there is *only one* unforgivable sin, known as the unpardonable sin.³² It consists of denying the Holy Ghost after receiving a sure knowledge of Jesus Christ. It is an act of deliberate and malicious rebellion against the Savior after being fully enlightened by the Spirit. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught: "What must a man do to commit the unpardonable sin? He must receive the Holy Ghost, have the heavens opened unto him, and know God, and then sin against him. After a man has sinned against the Holy Ghost, there is no repentance for him. He has got to say that the sun does not shine while he sees it; he has got to deny Jesus Christ when the heavens have been opened unto him, and to deny the plan of salvation with his eyes open to the truth of it."³³

A Seminary study guide states: "Committing the unpardonable sin requires a special knowledge of the Savior gained through a sacred experience with Him. President Spencer W. Kimball helped us understand what this means for

most members of the Church: ‘The sin against the Holy Ghost requires such knowledge that it is manifestly impossible for the rank and file to commit such a sin’ (*The Miracle of Forgiveness* [1969], 123).³⁴ This unforgiveable sin involves a deliberate, malicious rejection of Christ after receiving a perfect testimony, akin to crucifying Christ afresh.³⁵

Murder, though extremely serious, is not the unpardonable sin.³⁶ In his book, *The Lord’s Way*, Elder Dallin H. Oaks stated, “A deliberate murder is what the scriptures call ‘a sin unto death.’ (1 Jn. 5:16) It deprives the murderer of eternal life (1 Jn. 3:15) because there is ‘no forgiveness’ for this act (D&C 42:79).”³⁷ These teachings clarify that, while those guilty of murder cannot attain the celestial kingdom, they can be forgiven sufficiently to attain a lesser kingdom, but will not receive a full forgiveness.

Why is this relevant to our discussion on forgiving others? Simply put, when we refuse to forgive another person, we are attempting to treat their wrongdoing as if it belonged in the lone category of the unforgivable—something our doctrine makes clear can apply to only one sin.

Directed by the Father, the Savior offers forgiveness for *all other* wrongdoings, transgressions, iniquities, trespasses, offenses, errors, wickedness, faults, and abominations.³⁸ We should not maintain our own private list of “unforgivable,” as that authority belongs to God alone.

Of course, justice for wrongdoing will not go unanswered, a topic we will cover later in this book. But God has made it clear that all sins, except denying the Holy Ghost, can be forgiven by Him (and must be forgiven by us): “. . . but verily I say unto you, I, the Lord, forgive sins unto those who confess their sins before me and ask forgiveness, who have not sinned unto death.”³⁹

What Does It Mean to “Stand Condemned” If We Do Not Forgive?

The Prophet Joseph Smith’s own ability to forgive others was tested repeatedly in his life. One estimate, based upon research drawn from the Joseph Smith Papers, suggests that during Joseph’s lifetime he endured a remarkable number of trials and adversities, including:

- Over 69 total criminal prosecutions and civil lawsuits as a defendant

- At least five mob attacks/threats
- 18 apostasies of prominent leaders
- About twenty distinct published criticisms and lesser defec - tions
- At least twelve internal Church conflicts
- At least three major property destruction events, including forced relocations
- Roughly seven personal, financial, and doctrinal trials
- Social hostility and slander (unquantifiable but pervasive)
- At least eight personal and family trials
- At least 7-8 doctrinal disputes⁴⁰

These trials include Joseph's strained relationship with his brother William.⁴¹ He was born in 1811, six years younger than Joseph, was described as having a fiery temper and a rebellious streak that created significant friction in their relationship.⁴² Despite this, William became a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in February 1835, reflecting Joseph's trust in his younger brother; a trust that would be severely tested later that year.⁴³

In December 1835, a verbal dispute over whether a debating school should continue in their father's home in Kirtland, Ohio, escalated into violence. William physically attacked Joseph, leaving him "bruised and wounded," unable to "sit down or rise up without help." Joseph, deeply grieved, likened his brother's attack to Cain's killing of Abel, recording that he was "grieved beyond expr[e]ssion, at the wickedness of his brother, who Cain like had sought to kill him."⁴⁴ William's public criticism of Joseph and other church leaders, including verbal abuse and accusations of false doctrine, further strained their relationship and harmed the Church's reputation.⁴⁵

Despite this betrayal, William wrote a remorseful letter, expressing shame and seeking forgiveness. Joseph graciously forgave him, encouraging William to remain in the Church, even as William offered to resign from the Twelve. Joseph's handling of this relationship, documented in *Saints: The Standard of Truth*, provides a powerful example of forgiveness despite deep wounds from a trusted family member.⁴⁶

The Lord, knowing that Joseph would face many tests of his ability to forgive others, gave this 1831 revelation to the Prophet early in his leadership:

My disciples, in days of old, sought occasion against one another and forgave not one another in their hearts; and for this evil they were afflicted and sorely chastened. Wherefore, I say unto you, that ye ought to forgive one another; for he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; For there remaineth in him the greater sin. I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men.⁴⁷

It certainly seems that Joseph had more opportunities to forgive others than most. While it is impossible to compare the difficulty of our trials, surely his were overwhelming and provided countless opportunities to exercise forgiveness. Yet he knew the Lord's expectations: to fully forgive. Joseph, through hard-earned experience, developed the Christlike quality of having a *forgiving nature*. In that sense, his life offers more than an example; it provides a pattern for discipleship. This is the goal: not a single act of forgiveness, but the cultivation of a forgiving heart and character, lived daily and offered freely.

But the revelation to Joseph also included a warning: if we withhold forgiveness, then we commit the greater sin, even when we were the ones "victimized." Those who refuse to forgive stand "condemned" before the Lord. Strong words, to be sure.

So, what does it mean to stand condemned before God? And why might unforgiveness be the "greater sin?"

The *1828 Webster's Dictionary*, used during the time of the Restoration, defines *condemned* as "Pronounced to be wrong, guilty . . . or forfeited; adjudged or sentenced to punishment."⁴⁸ The phrase "standeth condemned before the Lord" carries serious doctrinal weight by suggesting we have been found guilty before God and subject to judgment, resulting in loss of spiritual blessings, peace, and possibly eternal consequences, if unresolved. This is not a casual warning, it's a declaration that unforgiveness imperils our salvation if we persist in it: our own forgiveness will be withheld, condemning us in the eyes of God's justice.

We find this same teaching in the Book of Mormon over 2000 years before Christ walked the earth. King Mosiah tasked Alma to judge the sins of the people. Alma, anxious to not judge wrongly, prayed and "poured out his whole soul to God" to know what he should do. In response, "the voice of the Lord came to him" with explicit instruction on addressing sin, repentance and

forgiveness. Included in that instruction is identical counsel to that which the Prophet Joseph received:

Yea, and as often as my people repent will I forgive them their trespasses against me. And ye shall also forgive one another your trespasses; for verily I say unto you, he that forgiveth not his neighbor's trespasses when he says that he repents, *the same hath brought himself under condemnation.*⁴⁹

By refusing to forgive, we place ourselves outside the protection of Christ's mercy, because we refuse to extend mercy. It is as though we engage in willful rebellion against one of God's clearest commands. How can we place ourselves above a God who stands ready to forgive all sins (except the unpardonable sin)? As the Lord Himself declares: "Yea, as often as my people repent will I forgive them their trespasses against me?"⁵⁰ In this sense, our refusal to forgive others becomes a denial, not of Christ's power, but of our willingness to trust fully in the efficacy of His Atonement.

In a BYU devotional talk entitled, *Faith to Forgive Grievous Harms: Accepting the Atonement as Restitution*, James R. Rasband, then Dean of the J. Reuben Clark Law School, taught: "If we refuse to forgive, there remaineth in us the greater sin. How can this be? As I hope to explain, our salvation is conditioned on forgiving others because when we refuse to forgive, what we are really saying is that we reject, or don't quite trust, the Atonement. And it is our acceptance of the Atonement that ultimately saves us."⁵¹

In his address *Why We Forgive*, Robert Warner, a professor of philosophy at Brigham Young University and a leading voice on the philosophy of self-deception and moral responsibility, offered this scriptural interpretation:

This passage makes at least three amazing statements: 1. When we refuse to forgive others, we do them wrong. We sin against them. 2. This causes us, who do the wrong, affliction. We are "sorely chastened" for it. We suffer from doing wrong to others . . . 3. The Lord counts refusal to forgive a greater sin than whatever trespass we are refusing to forgive. The first two of these three great truths can be expressed in this simple maxim: "It is not the wrong that others do to us that harms us most, but the harm we do to others."

We may find ourselves resisting these truths, especially if we have not yet fully forgiven those we believe have offended us. If I am unforgiving, I am certain the problems are the fault of others—those whom I refuse to forgive. "How false," I will argue in my heart, "to say that I am responsible for my unhappiness! And how unfair, for I just *know* that I am the victim, that I am suffering. How can I be blamed if I am the victim? How can I

forgive if I am the one who has suffered the wrong? In effect, I feel like I am being told, ‘If bad things have happened to you, it’s your fault.’ What of those who have suffered unspeakably in the Nazi death camps? What of children who undergo horrible abuse? What of any suffering at all? How could the victim be responsible?”

This argument distorts the quotation from Doctrine and Covenants 64. This scripture does not imply that we are responsible for the *events* that happen to us. It implies instead that we are responsible for how we respond to those events—how they affect us.⁵²

The message is clear: when we choose not to forgive, we place ourselves in need of repentance. This naturally raises difficult and important questions. How serious, then, is the sin of refusing to forgive? If someone were to murder a loved one and I struggle, or even fail, to forgive, am I to conclude that my refusal to forgive is a greater sin than murder itself?

These are weighty questions. While I cannot be definitive here, I do not believe that this is what the doctrine intends to teach.

It appears the Lord is teaching a sobering and unsettling truth: if we refuse to forgive, then we cannot be forgiven; not because His mercy is unavailable, but because we refuse the very condition upon which it is received. In that state, we place ourselves outside the redemptive reach of the Atonement and remain, for the time being, in a condition of non-redemption.

This explains the severity of the warning. Even one who commits murder may yet repent and, through the mercy of Jesus Christ, move toward redemption and inherit a kingdom of glory. But the person who refuses to forgive cannot do so. Persistent unforgiveness blocks repentance itself, cutting the unforgiving person off from mercy until that resistance is relinquished. In that sense, and for as long as unforgiveness endures, the unforgiving is guilty of the greater sin than the murderer, not because the offense is greater, but because they have barred themselves from the very mercy that redeems all sin.

It’s not that the offended person’s act is morally worse. It is not a “greater sin” in the sense of being more evil; rather it is greater in consequence because it severs the person from the only power that can save them. By refusing to forgive, they place themselves in a state of self-imposed exile from grace.

For the victim of murder, God will make all things right. Nothing will be lost to them because of an untimely death at the hands of another.⁵³ They are safely in the hands of Christ and the redeeming powers of His Atonement.

For the person who has been wronged, God stands fully willing to heal, restore, and make all things right. However, the redemptive and peaceful blessings of the Atonement cannot be fully received while forgiveness is withheld. When we refuse to forgive, we do not limit Christ's power, we limit our access to it.

As we will discuss later in this book, it is essential to remember that Christ has already “purchased and paid for” every wrongdoing committed against us. He has fulfilled the demands of justice through His infinite Atonement, satisfying both mercy and justice on our behalf.⁵⁴ He has made it possible for our losses to be fully restored and for complete restitution to be made through His divine power and perfect judgment.⁵⁵

James R. Rasband taught, “It is critical to understand that forgiving others is not just a practical virtue. It is a profound act of faith in the Atonement and the promise that the Savior's sacrifice repays not just our debts to others, but also the debts of others to us.”⁵⁶

Spotlight: The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35)

The Plot

A king decides to settle his accounts with his servants. One servant owes him an enormous debt—ten thousand talents—an impossibly large sum equivalent to billions of dollars today.⁵⁷ Unable to repay what he owes, the servant falls before the king and pleads for mercy. Moved with compassion, the king forgives the debt entirely.

The Dilemma

Soon afterward, that same servant encounters a fellow servant who owes him a comparatively small amount—one hundred pence, roughly equivalent to a few thousand dollars today and demands repayment.⁵⁸ When the fellow servant cannot pay, he pleads for patience. But the man who had just received extraordinary mercy refuses to extend even a fraction of that grace. Instead, he has the debtor thrown into prison.

The Climax

When the king hears of this injustice, he rebukes the unforgiving servant: “Shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?” The king revokes his mercy and delivers the servant to be punished.

The Lesson

“So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.”⁵⁹

The Takeaway

There is not only the expectation that we will forgive, but that we will heed the words of Church leaders to not delay our forgiveness.⁶⁰ Of course, we can only forgive when we are ready, but there appears to be a heavenly expectation that this should be sooner rather than later.

The Savior is Our Perfect Example of Forgiving Others

As mentioned earlier, in Jesus’s final hours, He provided the most vivid demonstration of divine mercy when He pleaded from the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”⁶¹ While “no man knows the full weight of what our Savior bore,”⁶² we do have some idea of the torturous suffering He went through. Although many were crucified in Roman times, Jesus Christ’s physical suffering was uniquely intense and deliberately extreme.

Before the Crucifixion, He endured a brutal Roman scourging with a whip embedded with metal and bone fragments that tore into His muscles and caused massive blood loss, leaving Him in shock. The trauma to His chest and back made breathing almost impossible in His final hours on the cross.⁶³

Scholars and medical experts note that this torture alone could be fatal. Combined with further beatings, the crown of thorns, and carrying the cross,

His body was pushed beyond mortal limits.⁶⁴ Compounding this was the far greater spiritual suffering in the garden and then on the cross.

President Russell M. Nelson teaches, “In the Garden of Gethsemane, our Savior took upon Himself every pain, every sin, and all of the anguish and suffering ever experienced by you and me and by everyone who has ever lived or will ever live . . . All of this suffering was intensified as He was cruelly crucified on Calvary’s cross.”⁶⁵ Clearly, throughout His life, He suffered “temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death.”⁶⁶ It appears that Jesus’s infinite Atonement required infinite suffering. Even while suffering unimaginable injustice, He chose to forgive those who had mocked, beaten, and crucified Him.

This spirit of mercy marked His entire ministry: from offering hope to a repentant thief by saying, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise,”⁶⁷ to gently restoring Peter after his denial by asking, “Lovest thou me? . . . Feed my sheep.”⁶⁸ Even after His Resurrection, Jesus appeared to His frightened and doubting disciples without rebuke, but with the assuring words, “Peace be unto you.”⁶⁹ When His closest friends failed Him by falling asleep in Gethsemane and abandoning Him during His arrest, He forgave them and recommissioned them.

Throughout His mortal ministry, the Savior showed that His mission was not to condemn but to redeem. He forgave a woman caught in adultery, declaring, “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.”⁷⁰ He taught that forgiveness must be as constant as our daily bread, building it into the Lord’s Prayer, “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”⁷¹ To the paralyzed man lowered through a roof, Jesus first said, “Son, thy sins be forgiven thee,” showing that the spiritual healing from the divine gift of forgiveness was greater than any physical healing, even though desperately needed.⁷² And when His disciples wanted to call down fire upon a rejecting Samaritan village, Jesus rebuked them, saying, “Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of Man is not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.”⁷³

In His most sweeping act after His Resurrection, He sent His disciples forth with the charge, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations . . . ,” offering the world that had rejected Him an open invitation to repent and be forgiven.⁷⁴ This was no small gesture; it was the ultimate offer of reconciliation and divine

mercy to all humanity. He teaches us that forgiveness is not merely an occasional act; it is the lifeblood of His gospel.

In the coming pages, this book will explore the doctrine of forgiveness and how to apply it amid the difficult circumstances we face throughout life. My hope is that you will feel even more empowered in your efforts to develop this crucial Christlike attribute, embrace it, and enjoy its blessings, or even help someone else who is struggling to enjoy the blessings of personal peace that come from forgiving others.

We should always remember His words: “Of you it is required to forgive all men.”⁷⁵

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