

# The Universal Law of Forgiveness

by Edward Payson

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*Jesus Christ is ready to forgive us as many times as we repent, and he will always be ready to receive us with kindness and love.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 103:12, Matthew 18:21, Luke 17:3, 1 John 1:9

**Topics:** "Forgiveness", "Repentance"

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## Description

Edward Payson preaches about the importance of forgiveness, emphasizing that just as Jesus is ready to forgive us repeatedly when we repent, we should also be willing to forgive others who trespass against us. He highlights the need for believers to have deep conviction in Christ's boundless mercy, as many struggles and sins stem from not fully grasping His willingness to forgive. Payson explains that Christ's forgiveness is not limited by the number of times we repent, but by our genuine repentance, and encourages believers to approach Christ with confidence for forgiveness and restoration.

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## Transcript

If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him. Luke xvii. 3, 4.

ON hearing this passage read, you will probably conclude, that the duty of forgiving those who injure us, is to be the subject of discussion. That is, indeed, an important subject, and a subject, to the consideration of which our text would naturally lead us. I do not, however, at present propose to discuss it. I wish to make a somewhat different use of this passage. I wish to set before you the proof, which it indirectly exhibits, of our Savior's readiness to forgive, again and again, those who trespass against him. It may, I conceive, be very satisfactorily shown, that he regulates his own conduct by the rule, which he here gives to us, that he is quite as ready to forgive, as he requires us to be, and that however frequently we may have trespassed against him, he will, if we repent of our trespasses, forgive us. And it is highly important, that his people should entertain a deep, heartfelt conviction of this truth; for many of the evils under which they groan, result from the want of such a conviction, or from their not having just and adequate views of the boundless extent of his pardoning mercy. They believe that it is great, but are far from seeing how great it really is.

They believe that he can forgive them once, twice, thrice, and they find that he docs so. But when, after being often forgiven, they are betrayed into new offences, they not unfrequently begin to think that he must

be weary of forgiving them, and that it will be little better than an insult to ask him to forgive them again. Hence they dare not implore his forgiveness, dare not approach him with confidence, but remain at a distance, unpardoned, oppressed with conscious guilt, and a prey to gloomy, desponding, apprehensions. They have no courage to attempt the performance of difficult duties, no strength to resist temptations; their comfort is gone, their religious progress is interrupted. Thus a sin, which, had it been immediately repented of and confessed, would have been pardoned, becomes the occasion of many sins, and perhaps of a long course of declension. Now all these evils would be prevented by adequate views of our Savior's readiness to forgive. Of course, it is highly important, that all his people should possess such views. I shall therefore, endeavor to show, that if we trespass against Christ seven times, or any number of times, in a day, and as often turn unto him in the exercise of unfeigned repentance, he will freely forgive us, and restore us to favor. But before we proceed to establish this truth, it will be necessary to make some remarks with a view to illustrate its import, and prevent dangerous mistakes. And,

1. It must be carefully kept in mind, that the rule, which our Savior here gives us, relates not to what men would call crimes, not to those gross public offences, which transgress the laws and disturb the peace of society; nor even to gross injuries, but to trespasses only. We cannot suppose him to mean, that if a man should attempt seven times in a day to murder, or rob us, or to steal our property, and when detected, should say, I repent,--we must forgive him, and suffer him to go at large unpunished.

It would be perfectly evident in such a case, that the offender did not repent, and that his professed repentance was all a pretence. The word, trespass, seems to mean offences of a different kind, and of a more private nature; such offences as a man may be led into repeatedly by misapprehension, or sudden passion, or an unhappy temper. These causes may, it is evident, lead men to offend, and to offend often, those whom they really love. They may lead a relative, a friend, a Christian brother, or one, on whom we have conferred favors, to speak reproachfully, to treat us unkindly, to withhold such acts and expressions of kindness, as we had a right to expect, and in various other ways to wound our feelings.

Now offences of this nature, are what our Savior means by trespasses, and such trespasses, however often they may be repeated, we are to forgive, if the offender expresses sorrow and asks forgiveness. It is to offences of a similar nature, committed against Christ by his disciples, that we refer in the present discourse. He, it will be recollected, sustains with respect to his people various offices and various relations. He is their master, their teacher, their shepherd, their guide, their advocate, their benefactor, their brother, and their friend.

He has therefore, a right to be regarded and treated as such. He has a right to expect their obedience, their confidence, their gratitude and love; in a word, their supreme affection and regard. He has also a right to expect, that they will follow him wherever he leads the way; that they 'will be contented and satisfied with all his dispensations, and that his honor and interest shall lie near their hearts. Whenever his people forget and overlook these rights, when they cease to regard and treat him as he deserves; when their love and gratitude grow cold; when their confidence in him declines, and they indulge doubts and suspicions respecting his faithfulness; when they murmur, repine, or become discontented with his allotments; when they feel little concern for his cause; in short, when they neglect to do what will please him, or indulge in any thing, which they know will grieve or offend him, then they are guilty of trespassing against Christ; for all offences of this nature are directly against him.

They are not, strictly and literally speaking, direct violations of the moral law; nor are they committed directly against God the Father, though he is, of course, offended whenever he sees his Son treated

unworthily; but they are, in the strictest sense, trespasses against Christ, considered as sustaining all those offices and relations, which were mentioned above. They are trespasses against one, who has condescended to become our brother, benefactor and friend; and he might justly be provoked by them to withdraw and hide himself from the offenders, and to suspend all further bestowal of his favor, all his kind interpositions on their behalf.

Now these trespasses against Christ include all the sins, into which his people are most liable to fall, and almost the only sins, into which they are liable to fall frequently; for Christians will not sin willfully, nor will any Christian be frequently guilty of gross and open offences. But any Christian may trespass against Christ, we cannot say how frequently, in some of the ways, which have just been mentioned. He may daily, and many times in a day, grieve his Savior, by the want of right feelings towards him, or by the exercise of those which are wrong.

Many times in a day he may forget him, or think of him without gratitude, confidence and love; at all times his affection for his Savior falls very far short of what he deserves. Now these are the trespasses which, however often repeated, Christ will always forgive, as soon as we turn to him in the exercise of repentance: and should we grieve and offend him by such trespasses seven times, or seventy times seven in a day, and continue thus to multiply our trespasses for years, still, every new exercise of repentance on our part, would be followed by a new act of forgiveness on his.

But let no bold presumptuous offender infer from this truth, that Christ will, in like manner, forgive known, willful, deliberate sins. Let no one suppose, that he may be daily or frequently guilty of fraud, or intoxication, or profaneness, or of any willful transgression, and yet escape punishment by saying at night, I repent. It is most evident, that such a man does not repent, that he is not a disciple of Christ, that he has no part nor lot in the matter. This leads me to remark,

2. That in the rule which our Savior here gives, he requires us to forgive an offending brother on his professing repentance, or on his exhibiting external evidence that he repents. As we cannot search the heart, this external evidence is all which we can justly require or expect; and where this evidence is given, we must charitably hope that the repentance is sincere. But our Savior, it must be recollected, can search the heart. He therefore cannot, and ought not, to be satisfied with any professions or external evidences of repentance, or with any thing indeed but repentance itself. In this respect therefore, the rule before us, considered as adopted by our Savior for the regulation of his conduct, must be slightly varied. We must forgive, when offenders seem to repent. He will forgive, when they really do repent. We remark,

3. That the word, forgiveness, may be used in two senses somewhat different. It may be used to signify either an official act, or the act of a private individual. Considered as an official act, forgiveness is the remission of deserved punishment, or of that punishment, to which transgressors are legally doomed. In this sense, forgiveness can be granted only by one, who has authority to do it. It cannot be granted by a private individual. No private individual, for instance, can forgive or pardon a murderer. No such individual has any right to say that a murderer shall not be punished. But forgiveness, considered as the act of a private individual, is something different. It consists in laying aside all feelings of revenge, and ill will, and displeasure, towards the offender, and in restoring him to the name place in our favor and friendship, which he held previous to his trespass. Now it is more especially, though not exclusively, in the latter sense, that we use the word forgiveness in the present discourse. What we mean to assert is, that Jesus Christ, not in his judicial character, but in his private capacity as an individual, will forgive every penitent, however frequently he may have trespassed against him. In other words, he will entertain no feelings of

displeasure towards the penitent offender, will regard him with no coldness, but will restore him to his favor, and receive him with as much affection as if he had never offended him. Not only so, but he will continue to act as his Savior and Advocate, and intercede for him, that he may be forgiven by his Father. This view of the subject will be found to meet exactly the case and the wants of one, who feels conscious that he needs forgiveness, but who is ashamed or afraid to ask it. Ask such a man the cause of his guilty fears and apprehensions, and he will reply, I have sinned against God, I have transgressed his law, and am justly condemned to die. Remind him, that God is ready to forgive every sinner, for whom Christ intercedes, and that Christ is equally ready to intercede for all who trust in him, and he will reply, I am ashamed to ask Christ to intercede for me; I have trespassed against him so often, have so often been forgiven, and abused his kindness afresh, and my whole treatment of him has been such a series of distrust, ingratitude, and want of affection, that it seems as if it must be impossible for him to pardon me again, and as if I ought not to ask it. But let such a man be convinced that his much injured Savior has adopted his own rule with respect to forgiveness, and that he will receive with unabated kindness every penitent, however numerous his trespasses may be, or however frequently he may have been previously forgiven; I say, let him be convinced of these truths, and his difficulties will vanish; he will again repent, and again be forgiven. And when he has thus obtained his injured Savior's forgiveness, he will through his intercession obtain forgiveness of God.

Having thus shown what is meant by the assertion, that our Savior regulates his conduct towards his offending people by the rule, which he has given us in the text, and that he is therefore as ready to forgive, as he requires them to be,-- we proceed,

II. To show what reason we have for believing this assertion. We have reason to believe it,

1. Because the relations, which Jesus Christ has taken upon himself, require that he should regulate his conduct by this rule. By assuming our nature, he has become, in the sense of the text, our brother. Agreeably, we are informed that he is not ashamed to call us brethren. He taught the same truth, when he said to his disciples, I ascend unto my Father and to your Father; for they who have the same father are brethren. He is also said to be the first-born among many brethren. Now if Jesus Christ has condescended to take upon himself the relation of a brother to his people, we may be assured, that he will faithfully perform all the duties of that relation. He has thus in effect bound himself to do it. And since he has taught us, that one duty of a brother is to forgive the trespasses of a penitent brother, however numerous they may be, or however frequently he may repent, we may be sure, that if we are penitent, he will forgive our trespasses, though they should be as numberless as the sands of the sea, and though they may have been repeated after frequent pardons.

Again. By assuming our nature, Jesus Christ is become a man. Of course, he has brought himself under obligations to obey all the laws and precepts, which God has given to man. Agreeably we are informed that being made of a woman, he was made under the law; that is, was made subject to its authority, and placed under obligations to obey it. That it was incumbent on him to obey all other divine precepts, as well as those of the moral law, appears from the reply which he made to John the Baptist previous to his baptism. John had said to him on this occasion, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? Jesus answered, Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. As if he had said, it is incumbent on me to obey every divine precept, and observe every divine institution, and since baptism is a divine institution, I must be baptized. Now if it was incumbent on Jesus Christ, considered as a man, to obey every divine precept, it was of course incumbent on him to obey those precepts, which require us to forgive the trespasses of a penitent brother. And if it was incumbent on him to regulate his

conduct by these precepts, we may be perfectly sure, that he has done it, and will do it, since he invariably does what is right.

Once more. When Christ came into this world, as the Savior of lost men, he undertook to be their teacher and guide. As such, it was evidently proper that he should teach them, not only by precept, but by example. Accordingly we are told, that he has left us an example, and that we should walk in his steps. But if he has set us an example, it must be in every respect perfect. It must be a perfect example of forgiveness, as well as of other duties. And that it may be so, it is necessary, that he should exhibit the same readiness to forgive, and to repeat forgiveness, which he requires of us. If he requires us to forgive a penitent brother, though he should trespass against us seven times, or even seventy times seven, he will forgive as frequently those, who trespass against him; for it is impossible to suppose, that in this, or in any other respect, he will suffer himself to be excelled by any of his disciples.

2. We have reason to believe that our Savior has adopted the rule before us, for the regulation of his conduct, because he has, in fact, always acted in conformity with this rule. However frequently any of his disciples may have trespassed against him, they have invariably found him more ready to forgive, than they were to repent. As it respects yourselves, those of you who are his disciples know, that this has been the case. You know, that after you have spent years in grieving and offending him and wearying his patience in ten thousand ways, after you have been a thousand times forgiven, and have then trespassed again; after you had treated him with such unkindness, ingratitude and neglect, as no human friend or relation could have borne, he has still been just as ready to forgive you, when penitent, as if you had never offended him before. And those of you, who have been his disciples for many years, know that he has forgiven you more than seventy thousand times seven trespasses. You have therefore ample reason to believe, and all his disciples have similar reasons for believing, that he regulates his conduct, in this respect, by the rule under consideration.

In passing to a practical improvement of what has been said, permit me to remark, that I am well aware of the manner, in which those who are disposed to convert the bread of life into poison, may abuse this subject. I am aware, that from the Savior's readiness to forgive those who trespass against him, they may draw encouragement to repeat their trespasses. Such men there were in the days of the apostles; men, who turned the grace of God into wantonness, and continued in sin, because grace abounded. But the apostles did not therefore conceal the grace of God, neither should we. We are not to conceal truths, which will be beneficial to Christ's real disciples, because his enemies may abuse them. And none but his enemies will abuse the truth which has now been exhibited. To all his real friends it will, if believed, prove most salutary. Nothing tends more powerfully to melt their hearts, to make them ashamed of their sins, to bring them to deep repentance, and to increase their confidence in the Savior, than just views of his readiness to forgive, and to renew his forgiveness, as often as they renew their trespasses. Such views I have now endeavored, my Christian friends, to give you.

In improving what has been said, allow me to place before you the Savior as he appears in the light of this subject. See him adorned with every possible excellence and perfection, uttering the kindest invitations, and bestowing freely the richest blessings; blessings, which cost him labors, privations, and sufferings, the greatness of which we can never estimate. See him, in return for these blessings, treated with the most cruel unkindness, ingratitude and neglect; wounded in the house of his friends by those, who have eaten at his table, and trespassed against, on every side, by multitudes in ten thousand ways. See him still forgiving all these trespasses, repeating his forgiveness a thousand and ten thousand times, maintaining, as it were, a contest with his people, which shall exceed, they in trespassing, or he in pardoning. See him

invariably gaining the victory in this strange contest, and constraining each of his disciples in turn to exclaim, O who is equal, or like to thee, in forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin ! Christian, can you contemplate the spectacle without emotion? Does it excite no shame or sorrow in your bosom? Does it not cause your heart to glow with admiration, and gratitude, and love to your Savior, and with indignation against yourself? And does it not, at the same time, inspire you with confidence to come and seek forgiveness afresh? You expect soon to approach your Master's table. And you will surely wish to meet with a kind reception. You surely will not wish to come borne down with guilty fears, and harassed by jealousies, doubts and suspicions. Believe what you have now heard, and your wishes will be gratified. Believe what you have heard, and you will repent, you will be forgiven, there will be peace between you and your Savior, and you will approach his table with confidence. Let no one say, I have already been forgiven so often, that I dare not, cannot ask forgiveness again. Let no one offend his Savior by suspecting that he is less ready to forgive than he requires us to be. It is a false humility, or rather it is concealed pride and unbelief, which prevents us from asking forgiveness and leads us to say, I am too unworthy to be forgiven. O then, my brethren, indulge not these feelings, but rather turn at once to Christ, receive his forgiveness, and love much, because much is forgiven. And while you receive your pardon, remember what it cost him to procure it. Remember, that it is wet with his own blood, and let it be wet with your tears, tears of deep contrition and repentance.

2. If Christ is so ready to forgive every penitent offender, then nothing can prevent any offender from obtaining forgiveness, but his own refusal to repent. And O, how great will be the guilt, how terrible, and yet how just, the punishment of every one who fails to obtain forgiveness. The guilt of such a man will be in exact proportion to the greatness of the mercy, against which he has sinned. But there can be no mercy greater than that which Christ displays. Consequently, there can be no guilt greater than that of those, who sin against this mercy.

My impenitent hearers, cease, O cease, I beseech you, to incur this aggravated guilt. If you repent, you will find the Savior no less ready to forgive you, than he is to forgive his penitent disciples. His language to you is, though you may have not only trespassed, but sinned willfully against me a thousand and ten thousand times; though you may have spent many years in neglecting and offending me, yet I am still ready to forgive you; I wish to forgive you, but I must not, I cannot forgive any, who refuse to repent.

My hearers, how is it possible that any man can retain a good opinion of himself, or refrain from despising himself, while conscious that he is insensible to such goodness; that he is not affected by the invitations of a Savior so ready to forgive; that he is refusing to accept of forgiveness and salvation on terms so reasonable, so easy? How is it possible, that he should not say to himself; surely I must be devoid of all sensibility; I must be a stranger to every ingenuous feeling; I must be incapable of gratitude; I must have a heart of stone, or I could not hear, without emotion, of goodness so unbounded, or refuse to seek forgiveness, when it is offered on terms like these.

My hearers, will any of you, can any of you, persist in refusing to comply with these terms! Will you leave this house unpardoned, when the Savior is present and ready to forgive, in a moment, every one who will return to him, saying from the heart, Lord, I repent. It should seem impossible, that any one can choose to go away unpardoned, rather than comply with these terms; and yet it is but too probable, that many will do it. What is still worse, it is but too probable, that some will take encouragement from the Savior's mercy to delay repentance, and repeat their trespasses with hopes of impunity.

But if any are tempted to do this, let them recollect, that our Savior cannot regulate his conduct by the rule before us, at his second coming. At his first appearing, he came, not as a judge, but as a Savior; and it was proper that, in this character, he should display unbounded readiness to forgive. But at his second appearing, he will come, not as a Savior, but as a judge; and in that character, he will be constrained to proceed according to the strict rules of justice. Those therefore, who now refuse mercy will then have judgment without mercy. O, then, seek the Lord, while he may be found; call ye upon him, while he is near. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, and sink to that world, where the sound of pardon will never break in upon the wailings of despair.

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