

# Divine Forgiveness Admired and Imitated

By C H. Spurgeon (1834-1892)

***"Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye." Colossians 3:13***

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To whom is this exhortation addressed? The apostle speaketh thus in the twelfth verse: *"Elect of God, holy and beloved."* Here are three particulars. They are, first of all, *"elect of God,"* that is to say, chosen according to his eternal purpose. They are made choice ones by being thus chosen. Next, they are sanctified by the Spirit of God, and are, therefore, called "holy": this holiness appertaining to their persons and their pursuits, their calling and their conversation. When the Spirit of God has fully done his work he sheds abroad in their hearts the love of God, so that experimentally they feel themselves to be "beloved." To abide in the love of God is the fruit of election, and the result of holiness. If any of you can with humble confidence claim these three titles, "elect of God, holy and beloved," you are among the most favored of all mankind: of you the Father hath made a special choice, in you his Holy Spirit has wrought a special work, and you possess within your souls the special joy of living in the love of God. *"Elect of God, holy and beloved":* it is as you enjoy these three things that you will find it easy to carry out the precept which is now set before you, *"Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye."*

**You see your example . . . COPY IT FOR YOURSELVES.** If the Holy Spirit enables you to write according to this copy, you will have the approval of the Lord resting upon you. See how large and clear the letters! It will be no small success if you can reproduce them. "Even as Christ forgave you"; the imitation should be as exact as possible. Mark the "even," and the "so," and endeavor to keep touch with your gracious Lord.

**Notice, however, in the text, that this precept concerning the imitation of Christ in forgiveness is *universally applicable*.** The text is not long, but see how unqualified is its range. "*Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any.*" You see it is not put that superiors are to forgive inferiors; or, on the other hand, that the less are to forgive the greater; but the circle of the command includes the whole: it is, "forbearing one another." The rich are to be forbearing to the poor, the poor are to be forbearing to the rich; the elderly man is to forgive the junior for his imprudence,\* the junior is to bear with the petulance<sup>1</sup> and slowness of the elder. It is an all-round business, implying that one of these days I shall have to forgive you, and you will have to forgive me. Personally, I tax your forbearance to put up with me; and I need not say that sometimes I have need to exercise forbearance towards one and another in so large a church. We have all our own angles and edges, and these are apt to come into contact with others. We are all pieces of one *puzzle*, and shall fit in with each other one day, and make a complete whole; yet just now we seem misshapen and unfitting. Our corners need to be rounded. Sometimes they are chipped off by collision with somebody else; and that is not comfortable for the person with whom we collide. Like pebbles in the river of the water of life, we are wearing each other round and smooth, as the living current brings us into communion: everybody is polishing and being polished, and in the process it is inevitable that some present inconvenience should be sustained; but nobody must mind it, for it is part of a great process by which we shall all come into proper shape, and be made meet for endless fellowship.

*"Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another"*: you see it has two sides. "Ah," says one, "I cannot understand it; people ought to be far more forbearing to me." Just so; but the first point is that you should be forgiving towards them. What numbers of church members think that the duties of a church are all one-sided. "I was ill, and nobody came to see me." "Did you send for anybody to see you?" "No, I did not." Brother, before you find fault,

remember your own fault; you have violated the command, "Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church." "But nobody exhibits Christian love," says one. Is that true of yourself? I have noticed that the man who says that love is dead is usually rather short of love himself. How very different the church looks to different eyes: one sees a thousand virtues to admire, and another a world of evil to expose. One gratefully cries, "When I was ill, the dear brethren came to see me so often that I had even to ask them not to stay very long." Another grumbles, "I might have laid there a month, and nobody would ever have come near me." We understand the reason for this difference: the tone of the speech is the key to the riddle. As a rule, with what measure we mete\* it is measured to us again. I do not find Christ's people to be one half so faulty as I am myself. I meet with many Christians whom I think it an honor to know, and commune with; and those of another sort are useful to me as warnings, and as fields for exercising my graces. The forgiveness and the forbearance are needed all round, and we must both give and take. By the sweet love of Jesus, let us not fail in this business.

**Let me say here that this matter is an absolutely essential one, — *this forbearance and this forgiveness are vital.*** Be not deceived; God is not mocked: no man is a child of God who has not a likeness to God; and no man is forgiven who will not himself forgive. In the Middle Ages a certain baron had a feud\* with another nobleman, and determined to avenge himself for some insult, real or imaginary. His enemy was to pass by the castle with a small retinue," and therefore the baron determined to waylay him and kill him, or, at least, to punish him severely, and exact a ransom. A holy man who lived in the castle begged and entreated the baron to forbear from bloodshed, and make peace; but for some time he pleaded in vain. The baron would not be appeased, but swore that he would be avenged of his adversary. So this godly man begged one favor of him, namely, that he would come with him into the chapel and offer prayer before he sallied' forth. They knelt together in prayer, and ere they rose the saintly man said, "My lord, repeat after me the Lord's Prayer." He went on saying word by word, as the other did, till he came to that, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us"; but

there the good man stopped, and said, "I charge you not to say this unless you really mean it! Do not mock the Lord. You may not go out and fight if you thus speak with God. You will have to appear before God and be judged for your sins, for you will not be forgiven if you do not forgive. Choose, then, either to utter this prayer and forgive, and be saved; or to refuse the prayer, and go forth to battle and be lost." The baron paused and bit his lip, but at last his better spirit prevailed, and he cried, "I cannot renounce my hope of heaven; I cannot renounce my hope of forgiveness; therefore my enemy shall pass by my castle in safety, and I will say, *'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.'*" Do not attempt to deceive God. If you must lie and cheat, practice your impositions<sup>^</sup> upon your fellow-men, but do not imagine that you can flatter your Maker or deceive the Omniscient One. If you will not forgive, say so, and expect eternal perdition;\*\* but if you profess to be a Christian obey this great and essential precept, and forgive as Christ forgave you. Be honest, be straight with God, for he will be honest and straight with you; but if you cannot and will not forgive, then look forward to a portion with the tormentors; for even the loving Jesus says, *"Neither shall my heavenly Father forgive you."*

**In urging you to this copying of Christ, let me notice that this forgiveness of those who offend against us is *gloriously ennobling*.** We are not asked to perform a duty which will in the least degrade us. Revenge is paltry,\* forgiveness is great-minded. Was not David infinitely greater than Saul, when he spared his life in the cave, and when he would not smite him as he lay asleep on the battle-field? Did not the king humble himself before David when he perceived his forbearance? If you would be the greatest among men, bear injuries with the greatest gentleness; if you would win the noblest of conquests, subdue yourself: To win a battle is a little thing if it be fought out with sword and gun; but to win it in God's way, with no weapons but love, and patience, and forgiveness, this is the most glorious of victories. Blessed is that man who is more than a conqueror, because he inflicts no wounds in the conflict, but overcomes evil with good. In the process of such a conquest the warrior is himself a gainer. A nation in fighting, even if it wins the campaign, has to suffer great expense and loss of life; but he that

overcomes by love, is the better and stronger man through what he has done. He comes out of the conflict not only victor over his adversary, but victor over sin within himself, and all the readier for future war against evil. He glorifies God and himself becomes strong in grace. Nothing is more glorious than love. Your Master, who is King of kings, set you an example of gaining glory by enduring wrong: if you would be knights of his company, imitate his graciousness.

**Notice that this imitation of Christ is *logically appropriate to you all.***

Brothers, if Christ has forgiven you, the parable we read just now shows that it is imperative that you should forgive your fellows. If our Lord has forgiven us our ten thousand talents, how can we take our brother by the throat for the hundred pence, and say, "*Pay me what thou owest*"? If we are indeed members of Christ, should we not be like our Head? If we profess to be his servants, are we to pretend to a dignity greater than our Master, who washed his disciples' feet? If he forgave so freely, how dare we call ourselves his brethren if our spirit is hard and malice lingers within us?

**I say, to conclude, that this copying of Christ is *most forcibly sustained by the example given in the text.*** We are to forbear and to forgive, "*Even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.*" I have heard it said "If you pass by every wanton offense, and take no notice of it, you will come to be despised, and regarded as a person of mean<sup>1</sup> spirit: your honor demands vindication." When Christ forgave you, did his honor suffer by that forgiveness? You transgressed most wickedly, and yet he forgave you; do you regard him as less honorable because of that readiness to pass by offenses? Far from it: it is his glory to forgive. The hallelujahs of saints and the songs of angels are sent up to his throne the more heartily because of the richness of his grace, and the freeness of his mercy. Dishonour indeed! What pride it is on the part of such poor creatures as we are to talk about our honor! Where is the honor of revenge? It is a dishonorable thing to put yourself on the level of him who injures you. A heathen philosopher used to say, "If an ass kicks you, is it necessary for the maintenance of your honor to kick that ass again?" That speech looks like a noble one, but yet it is too much flavoured with contempt.

When you speak, or even think, of another who has wronged you as though he were only worthy to be regarded as a beast, you are not right in spirit, a degree of evil remains in your heart. Think of the offender without contempt, as well as without resentment. Believe that he is a brother worth winning. Say, "If he does me an injury, for that very reason I will do him a double service. My only vengeance shall be double love. I will not allow myself even to think hardly of him. I will put the best possible construction on all that he does, and thus show that the spirit of Christ is in me, conquering the spirit of fallen humanity both in me and in him."

Says one, "If we always overlook offenses other people may be tempted to do us wrong also." Our text furnishes us with a ready answer to this also. The Lord Jesus Christ forgave you. Have you met anybody who has been tempted to do wrong because the Lord has forgiven you? He has freely forgiven myriads of poor unworthy sinners, and has that promoted sin? No. Is it not the very groundwork and case of holiness in the world, that Jesus is so gracious as to pardon sin? Why then should your forbearance do harm? Do not you pretend to be so very wise; for therein you censure\* your Master. You are not the ruler of the world. It is not for you to be refraining from good for fear that evil may come of it: attend to your own ways, forgive every one his brother his trespasses, and leave consequences with God.

"Oh, but," says one, "I know several pious persons who are very unforgiving." You do not know any really good man who is of that character. I make bold to say that no man is really good if he has not a forgiving spirit. Unwillingness to forgive is a grievous flaw in anyone's character. But if there were such good people, what have you to do with them? Is the servant to imitate his fellow-servant, especially in his faults? The example set before you is, "Even as Christ forgave you." You have nothing to do with either saints or sinners in this matter; your Lord says to you, "What is that to thee? Follow thou me." Perhaps you do not know all the story which you think proves that a good man has been unforgiving; and if you do know it, you are no judge of others. Mind your own business, and even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye."

But I hear another one saying, "These persons would not have forgiven *me*." Just so; but then you are a child of God, you are "elect, holy, and beloved." You are not to lower your standard to that of publicans and sinners. Does not Christ continually say, "What do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans and the sinners the same?" "If you love them that love you, what thank have ye?" But if ye love them that despitefully use you, then blessed are you when men shall persecute you. In that case you have an opportunity of showing your love to your Lord. When Dr. Duff first read to some young Brahmins\* in the Government school the precept, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you," one of the Brahmins cried out with delight, "Beautiful! Beautiful! This must have come from the true God. I have been told to love those that love me, and I have not always done that: but to love my enemies is a divine thought." That young man became a Christian under the influence of that precept. Do not darken this light, but be sure to display it in your life, that many may be attracted to Christ by its lustre. Let your goodwill go forth even to the worst of men, for Christ's sake. Forget *their* evil as you behold *his* goodness.

"Well," says one, "I would forgive the fellow, but he does not deserve it." That is why you are to forgive him: if he deserved it, you would be bound to do him the justice which he could claim; but as he does not deserve it, you have here an appeal to your Christian love. Does not your heavenly Father give good things to the unthankful and to the evil? Did not Jesus forgive the undeserving when he forgave you? Does he not overlook our wretched characters when he has mercy upon us?

I hear one say, "I cannot forgive!" That is a terrible confession. The apostle of the Gentiles said, "I can do all things through Christ which strength-eneth me." Is not the same strength available for you? Some persons find forgiving and forgetting to be hard work; but as you are bound to do it or stop out of heaven, you must cry to God for help, and set about it with determination. If you are indeed a child of God you will soon find the difficulty gone; indeed

forgiveness will become easy to you. To be forgiven is such sweetness that honey is tasteless in comparison with it; but yet there is one thing sweeter still, and that is to forgive. As it is more blessed to give than to receive, so to forgive rises a stage higher in experience than to be forgiven. To be forgiven is, as it were, the root; to forgive is the flower. That divine Spirit, who bears witness with our spirit when he breathes peace into us because we are pardoned, beareth yet a higher witness with us when he enables us truly to pardon all manner of trespasses against ourselves. Let it never be said in a Christian church, that fellow-members bear a grudge against one another. I do not know that it is so in your case; assuredly it should not be so anywhere. Let it not be said of any Christian man, that he is unloving, ready to take offense, apt to bear malice, or quick to anger. Cultivate forbearance till your heart yields a fine crop of it. Pray for a short memory as to all unkindnesses. I bless God that I know a man who finds it easy to forgive and to forget all offenses against himself. He takes no credit for so doing, for no one ever offends him in a way which is worth remembering. That man has been reminded again and again of the misbehaviour of unreasonable and unkind men, and he has honestly said, "I had quite forgotten it." He does not claim this forgetfulness as a virtue, for as a matter of fact his memory has become weak in that direction, and he has no desire to strengthen it. He has never tried to recollect unkindnesses, and now by long disuse his memory happily fails him upon such matters. That man has often enjoyed exquisite pleasure in doing good to those who have injured him; and he can truly say that at this moment he bears no ill-will to any soul upon this earth. He does not think this to be any singular attainment, for his belief is that every follower of Jesus should be of the same mind.

Do you not think the same? I am sure I do. I heard this man once say of another, "He spoke against me that which was false, but if he had known more of me, he might have said something far worse, and have been nearer the truth. Perhaps my false accuser believed what he said, and thought he was doing a right thing in protesting against what he thought was my fault. At any rate, no one can harm my character, unless I do so myself." It is a wise thing



to profit by every accusation, whether true or false, by trying to be better. Let us so live as to be able to say, "I am as much at peace with all men as a child new born." Thus shall we wear the mark of the Spirit of God. In a word, my brethren, "Even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye." Amen.

—Excerpted from a sermon delivered on Lord's-day morning, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1885, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington.

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**[Charles H. Spurgeon:** (1834-1892) Influential Baptist minister in England. *The New Park Street Pulpit* and *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* —the collected sermons of Spurgeon during his ministry with that congregation fill 63 volumes. The sermons' 20-25 million words are equivalent to the 27 volumes of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Born at Kelvedon, Essex.]