

Can you really forgive? That's the question we're trying to answer, and by looking at the instructions in the Torah, as well as the example of the apostles, it appears that Yes – we CAN forgive — as long as the offender 1) repents, and 2) pays restitution if it is required.

So why is there a question about forgiveness? It's basically because it seems that Yeshua is expecting a person to just freely forgive — and quite frankly, that's hard to do. But is that really what He is expecting? As was pointed out in the last installment, if the disciples were following the teachings of their Master, their example shows that Yeshua taught what the Torah taught – forgiveness after repentance – even though His words sometimes seem to indicate otherwise.

In this installment, we're going to take a good look at what Yeshua himself said and taught about forgiveness. We're going to look at certain instances where forgiveness certainly was extended, and we're going to look at places we think forgiveness was extended, but it was not. Finally, we're going to look at parables about forgiveness.

The Lord's Prayer

Let's start by looking at one of the most well known and most often quoted passages in the Bible - the "Lord's Prayer". The prayer is given in Matthew 6 as well as in Luke 11. The Matthew 6 account was given to His disciples as part of a series of instructions given to them beginning at Matthew 5:1 continuing through 7:28¹.

The immediate context of the Lord's Prayer is that Yeshua is contrasting the "religious" ways of "hypocrites" with what He expects from His disciples. For instance, the "hypocrites" make sure everyone sees them when they pray and give offerings; Yeshua told His disciples to do those things in private.

It's important to note that the meaning of the word "hypocrite" has changed from the time these words were spoken and today. Today, we oftentimes think of a "hypocrite" as one who says one thing and does another. In their day, the word meant "a pretender" – someone who pretends to be one thing, but is actually another². It was not uncommon for Yeshua to call the scribes, the Pharisees, or both "hypocrites" from time to time³. In each case those people were simply acting religious though their actions showed they were not.

With this context, Yeshua said to His disciples –

^{NKJ} **Matthew 6:8–9** "Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. ⁹ After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name ...

Yeshua was telling His disciples that instead of praying to be seen of men, pray with meaning and mean what you pray — and He gave four specific petitions to ask of God –

¹ It is clear that at the beginning of the narrative (Matt 5:1) Yeshua was attempting to escape the crowds and speak directly to His disciples. It ends with Him speaking to the "people" which is the Greek "ochlos" (3793) which can be a crowd or simply a few people. Note that He rejoined the crowds when He came down from the mountain. Other instances of "ochlos" indicate a group of people who were in a small room (Matt. 9:23, Mark3:32). When you consider that there were 12 disciples, when they and Yeshua came into an area, they were already a "small crowd". Luke's account seems to indicate that Yeshua was alone with just His disciples.

² "hupokrinomai" (Strong's 5271) - 1) to take up another's statements in reference to what one has decided for one's self 1a) to reply, answer 2) to make answer (speak) on the stage 2a) **to impersonate anyone, play a part 3) to simulate, feign,**

³ Matt. 23:13,14,15, 25, 29; Luke 11:44



- Restore your kingdom so that your will can be done on earth
- Provide our daily needs
- Forgive our debts
- Lead us away from trials

Of those four petitions, Yeshua elaborated on just one –“forgive our debts”. It is important to see that in the prayer, the word translated debts (KJV) is the Greek word “opheilema” (3783) which means “a legal monetary debt”. This same word is used in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant⁴ which we will get to later. This is important to see, because He used a different word just a few verses later.

Why do you think Yeshua focused on forgiveness of debts? Probably because that was an area where the “hypocrites” had been the most “hypocritical”. They were probably making it known that they had “released” the debts owed to them, but were instead, using a rabbinic invention called “prosbul” to continue a loan through the “shmittah” – the year of release that occurred every seventh year.

What is prosbul, and why would Yeshua focus in on it in His “Lord’s Prayer”?

In the late 4th millennium – a few years prior to when Yeshua was born, Hillel the Elder – a very popular Jewish rabbi – took note of the monetary hardships many of the Jewish people were suffering under. Part of the problem was that those who were wealthy were unwilling to loan money to the poor because of the Torah requirement to release a loan on the year of release. Moses spoke of this just weeks before the Israelites crossed the Jordan –

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 15:1–2** "At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. ² And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor. He shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the LORD'S release has been proclaimed ..."

According to the Torah, a lender was to completely forgive a debt on the “shmittah” – the year of release. Therefore, because of the high probability that they would not be fully paid back, the latter 1st century BCE Jews were unwilling to lend money – not even to the poor. In order to encourage people to loan to the poor, Hillel dreamed up a creative way to work around God’s law. The Jewish Encyclopedia⁵ explains it this way -

“The institution of the prosbul is ascribed to Hillel; and the manner of its introduction is described in the Mishnah as follows: "Seeing that the law which prescribed the release of all debts every seventh year ... brought about the harmful consequence that people refused to loan to one another and thus violated what was written in the Law, namely, that a money loan should not be withheld because of the approach of the Sabbatical year ..., Hillel instituted the prosbul" ... This institution was to benefit both the rich and the poor. The rich were thereby protected against loss of property; and the poor could thus obtain a loan whenever they needed it (Git. 37a)..."

The way it worked was that if you loaned money to a poor person, a written note was created and signed by both parties. If the note spanned the shmittah, the lender, at the close of the year just prior to the shmittah, would assign the unpaid portion of the note to the court (an entity) where it would remain dormant for one year. After the shmittah, the court would re-assign the note to the original lender who could then require the debtor to pay the unpaid portion of the note.

This was clearly a rabbinic creation and a clear violation of the Torah. Nevertheless, it was widely used in the first century CE and was very likely a huge point of contention between Yeshua and the rabbis. Using

⁴ Matt. 18:21-35

⁵ <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12390-prosbul>



prosel, a person could claim that he had forgiven a huge debt – knowing all along that he would begin to collect on that debt after the shmittah. So in His prayer, Yeshua said –

^{ESV} **Matthew 6:12** and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

What Yeshua was instructing His disciples to do was to ask God to forgive their debts by releasing the unpaid portion of the debt and to not be like the hypocrites who set the unpaid portion aside for a time, only to pick it back up later. In order to make it clear to his disciples, he went on to say -

^{ESV} **Matthew 6:14-15** For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Though Yeshua used the term “opheilema” (3783) which literally means “debts” in His prayer, He used the term “paraptoma” (3900) in His explanation. “Opheilema” means “to deviate from the truth or from the path”. In other words, it means “to sin”.⁶ So Yeshua was likening sin to debt — not that being in debt is a sin, but the burden of debt is much like the burden of sin — unless it is completely removed, it will always wear you down.

Tying this back to the hypocrites, He was in essence saying “Don’t say you’ve forgiven someone of an offense only to bring that offense up sometime later. What He was NOT saying is that a person should or must forgive a person who has not repented. To do so would be as much a violation of the Torah as what the hypocrites were doing.

Though we are not going to go there, you might note that Luke’s account of this prayer and the circumstances surrounding it are somewhat different than in Matthew, nevertheless Luke 11:4 makes it very clear that sin is like a debt, and that a righteous person WILL forgive another’s debt (in accordance with the Torah’s instructions).

Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Let’s now move to the other passage that speaks of debt and forgiveness – and like the Matthew 6 passage, it is important that we establish the context that prompts Yeshua’s words.

Matthew 18 begins with the disciples asking the question –

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:1** ... "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

Yeshua answered by setting a little child in their midst and saying –

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:4** “... Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

He then went on to talk about the consequences of causing one of these “little ones” to sin, but He did not use the usual word for sin – “hamartia” (266) – a word that means “to wander from the path”. Instead, He used the term “skandalizo” (4624) which means “to set a trap”. In other words, Yeshua was saying that if you try to trap one of these little ones in a sin, it would be better for you to be drowned in the sea. We all know that the “little ones” Yeshua was referring to were in fact newly converted believers. We also – as seasoned believers – know that it takes time to erase a lifetime of bad habits and that mistakes are made along the way. Nevertheless, we are at times tempted to find fault in another who is new to the walk when he makes a mistake. We somehow feel obligated to “point out his or hers sin”, and indeed we should – that’s the definition of “loving your neighbor” in Leviticus 19⁷, but Yeshua shows that there is a right way to do it, and there is a harmful way of doing it.

⁶ This word is used in Romans 5:17 which speaks of Adam’s sin

⁷ <https://www.amiyisrael.org/articles/LovingNeighbor/LovingYourNeighbor.htm>



Yeshua went on to show what they were to do if they observed their brother practicing sin (hamartia)⁸ – one who is wandering from the path. He states that they should go to him privately and help him get back on the path since – according to Yeshua -

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:14** ... it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Peter – apparently listening from a distance – then approached Yeshua asking –

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:21** ... "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

Based on the previous context of being patient with those “little ones” as well as the fact that Yeshua’s response was directed at all the disciples⁹, it appears that Peter was wanting to know how many times they should go to their brother in regards to the same type of sin, and of course, Yeshua’s answer was basically “as many times as it takes”. He could just as well said – “give him as much time as he needs”.

He then gave a parable to His disciples to explain what He meant. To paraphrase the parable, we find that a king extended mercy to a servant that owed him an exorbitant amount of money – more than he could ever repay in a lifetime. The servant asked for mercy in the form of more time to pay. The king – moved with compassion – instead of giving him more time, forgave the debt completely. As the story continues, that same servant had loaned a much smaller sum of money – an amount that could be repaid, to a second servant and now it was time for that second servant to pay up. The second servant apparently could not come up with all the money, so he – like the first servant – asked for mercy in the form of more time to pay, but the first servant refused and had him imprisoned. When word of this got back to the king, he was enraged and said to the first servant –

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:32** ... “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?”

As punishment for his lack of mercy, the first servant was sent to prison until he died since it was obvious he would never be able to repay his debt.

Though we might want to assign the parable’s personalities to religious beings, that is not the purpose of the parables, especially not this one¹⁰. We cannot say “the king is God” because God does not forgive us then retract that forgiveness. We cannot say that the first servant represents Israel and the second servant represents the Christians because we all have a spiritual debt we cannot repay. Therefore, we should take Yeshua’s conclusion and – as His disciples – apply it to ourselves -

^{ESV} **Matthew 18:35** “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

How much did each servant owe?

- 2nd servant owed 1 denari
 - a denarii = 1 day’s wages (8 hrs x 7.25 / hr = \$58 / day)
 - 2nd servants debt was 100 denarii.(\$5,800)
- 1st servant owed 10,000 talents
 - 1 talent = 6000 denarii (1 day’s wages * 6000 = \$348,000.00)
 - 10,000 talents = \$348,000 x 10,000 = **\$3,480,000,000**

⁸ In vs 15, the word “eis” (1519) is oftentimes translated “against”, but the word can also mean “among”. In fact it is translated that way 39 times in 39 verses, whereas it is translate “against” only 26 times. In the context of chapter 18 which deals with avoiding the skandalization of the “lost sheep”, the word “among” seems to be more appropriate both in versew 15 and 21. If Yeshua really did mean “against”, He would have used the word “kata” (2596) as He did in Matt. 5:23.

⁹ Verse 35 shows that Yeshua’s response was directed at all the disciples

¹⁰ See below



But let's remember the context of that forgiveness. It is in the context of not "skandalizing" the little ones – the new converts to the Hebrew walk. Instead – as He showed in vs. 15-20, there is a path to forgiveness for someone who sins. It includes confession and repentance¹¹. What we should pick up from the parable is that we need to be merciful to new converts and give them plenty of time to orient their lives to the Hebrew walk.

Healing the Paralyzed Man

Let's now turn to a few other passages where Yeshua mentions forgiveness. This next is where Yeshua shows the Pharisees that by healing the paralytic, He has the authority to forgive sins.¹²

^{ESV} **Matthew 9:2** And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are **forgiven**." ...⁵ or which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?⁶ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to **forgive** sins"- he then said to the paralytic- "Rise, pick up your bed and go home."

This man – through some type of paralysis – had lost the use of his legs. Though the Greek word "paralytic" (3885) implies "a suffering from the relaxing of the nerves" which might be a natural occurrence, the word can also mean that he is simply disabled. How did this happen? The text gives no hint. Maybe he injured himself in a fall, in a fight, or maybe doing something illegal — we don't know, but Yeshua did know, and so to heal him, Yeshua forgave his sins. This indicates that the man knew why he could not walk, and had likely prayed earnestly that whatever he had done that caused his injuries would be forgiven.

Explaining Why He Teaches Using Parables

In that context, let's go to Mark 4 where Yeshua is explaining to His disciples that He oftentimes speaks in parables to the crowds because it was not their time to understand the "mystery of the Kingdom of God". He quotes Isaiah 6:9, but changes the last word from "healed" (as it is in Isaiah) to "forgiven".

^{ESV} **Mark 4:11-12** And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, ¹² so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven."

In Isaiah, the word used for "turn" is "shuwb" (7725) which is oftentimes translated "return" as it is in this passage –

^{ESV} **1 Kings 8:47** yet if they **turn** (7725) their heart in the land to which they have been carried captive, and **repent** (7725) and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying, 'We have sinned and have acted perversely and wickedly,'

So by referencing a passage in the Tnakh, we again see Yeshua teaching repentance before forgiveness.

Woman Caught in Adultery – (John 8:3)

The story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11) never mentions forgiveness, but many believe forgiveness was extended to her by Yeshua. In the story, we see that the Scribes and Pharisees came to Yeshua with this woman in tow claiming that they had actually seen her committing adultery "in the very act".

¹¹ A perfect example is shown in 1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Corinthians 2. This was discussed in the previous installment - https://www.amiyisrael.org/articles/Forgiveness-Can_You_Really/Can-You-Really-FORGIVE_Apostle's-Example.htm

¹² This event is also mentioned in Mar 2:5 as well as Luke 5:20



Being an expert in the Torah and realizing that they were setting a trap, He noted that they had failed to follow the Torah requirement to bring the man¹³ who obviously had been caught “in the very act” as well. He also realized that they were trying to get Him to make a judgment in the case, even though He was not a judge. So Yeshua began to write something on the ground. We don’t know what He wrote, but whatever it was caused all her accusers to slip away until there was no one left but He and she. At that point, He could not judge her even if He was a judge because there were no accusers and no witnesses – the ones who the Torah requires to cast the first stone¹⁴. Without accusers and witnesses, there was in essence, no crime for which she could be convicted. Yeshua would have been in violation of the Torah if He had done anything other than just what He did. He sent her on her way with the simple statement “go and sin no more”.

Note that Yeshua knew she was guilty, but there is no indication of confession or repentance on her part. What’s more, because she had not harmed Him, He could not – by Torah standards – forgive her even if He wanted to.

Forgiveness at the Cross

There are other passages in the Gospels where Yeshua used words that are translated “forgive”, but most of them have to do with resolving quarrels or problems between believers or between a believer and a non-believer. We will take those up next time, but I want to close with another instance where Yeshua spoke of forgiveness — one that is often used as an indication that Yeshua taught forgiveness without repentance. These words were some of the last words He spoke before He died. They are -

^{ESV} **Luke 23:34** And Jesus said, "Father, **forgive** them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments.

This text seems to indicate that Yeshua, soon after being put on the cross, looked down at those below him and forgave them for what they had done in crucifying Him, but a close examination of the passage shows otherwise. Let’s take a look.

The first point to consider is the marginal reference that goes with the first part of that verse. That reference indicates that the sentence regarding forgiveness is not found in the most ancient texts and was probably added later. This is probably correct since forgiveness is not mentioned in neither Matthew’s nor John’s account of the same event¹⁵.

Then there is the question of whether Yeshua said to “forgive them” or did he simply ask God to “leave them alone” since – after all – they did not know what they were doing. In this verse, the word translated “forgive” (“aphieml” – 863) has a number of meanings and is translated a number of ways. One of those ways is found in another crucifixion passage –

^{NKJ} **Mark 15:36** Then someone ran and filled a sponge full of sour wine, put *it* on a reed, and offered *it* to Him to drink, saying, "**Let Him alone**; let us see if Elijah will come to take Him down."

So it is quite possible that forgiveness was never in Yeshua’s mind that afternoon, but setting that possibility aside for a moment and assuming He not only said it, but did indeed ask God to forgive them, we then have to determine who the they were that He was forgiving. We can narrow the possibilities down somewhat because whoever they were – they did not know what they were doing. That eliminates the Jewish leadership who certainly did know what they were doing. In fact, they planned it and solicited false witnesses in order to carry it out. We can also eliminate Pilate, after all “he” is not a “they”. What’s

¹³ Deut. 22:22

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 17:6-7

¹⁵ Matt. 27:35; John 19:23



more, he washed his hands after doing what he did in an attempt to separate himself from what he just did. So let's look a little deeper.

In the passage, the word "do" is from the Greek word "poieo" (4160). The primary meaning of "poieo" is "to make, fashion, form, construct", but It also can mean "fulfil" as it does in this verse –

^{ESV} **James 2:8** If you really fulfill (poieo) the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well.

So whatever they were doing, it likely had to do with "making" or "fulfilling", and in this case the word is in the present tense active form – which means that it was currently taking place as He was speaking the words.

According to the text, when Yeshua said "father forgive them ..." the action that was recorded as taking place around Him was that of the Roman soldiers who were ripping one of his garments into four pieces to divide among themselves and then casting lots for the other garment. This action was recorded by 3 out of 4 gospel writers.

Apparently, since the other garment was of such high quality, they did not want to divide it up.

What would have been the problem in what they were doing? Is there a Torah edict that forbids such action? What about a Jewish or Roman law forbidding it? There does not appear to be! But there certainly was a moral law that was being stepped on.

The text indicates that Yeshua's mother was standing nearby along with a number of His close friends¹⁶ while the soldiers were claiming His garments. Though it was not required, if they had known the women standing nearby were the crucified man's relatives, it would have been a kind gesture for the soldiers to hand His clothing over to them instead of claiming it for themselves.

Did they know what they were doing? Maybe! Maybe not! But what we are sure they did not know is that they were in fact fulfilling Biblical prophecy.

^{ESV} **Psalms 22:18** ... they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

Did God cause them to keep the garments for themselves? Would they have given them to His mother if the prophecy did not exist? Did they commit a sin, or did they simply offend an already terrified mother? All we know is that Yeshua believed they were not responsible for what they were doing and asked His Father to leave them alone. After all, if they had handed the garments to His mother, Yeshua would not be our Messiah. In Yeshua's mind, they had committed no offense; therefore there was no need for forgiveness.

From these gospel passages we see that, like the words of Moses and the prophets that came before, and the actions of apostles that came later, Yeshua followed the Torah in regards to forgiveness and taught His disciples to do so as well. When it comes to "Biblical forgiveness", repentance must always precede forgiveness.

So what do you do when a fellow believer will not repent? What about a non-believer? What can a person do in order to maintain a relationship?

We will talk about that next time.

Shalom Alecheim

¹⁶ John 19:25