



**“AND FORGIVE US OUR SINS; FOR WE ALSO FORGIVE EVERY ONE THAT IS INDEBTED TO US.”**

BY THE RIGHT REV. THE BISHOP OF COLCHESTER.

**F**ORGIVE us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.” Such is the familiar liturgical form, representing exactly neither the text of St. Matthew nor that of St. Luke, by which these words of the Saviour are impressed on our memories. Older English versions, such as “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive to our debtors,” were more exact; but the change is an improvement, and is likely to be lasting.

To be forgiven; to feel that the barrier of offence, of mutual misunderstanding, for the time even of mutual distrust and dislike, has been removed, and that we, who perhaps think that we on our side have also something to forgive, have had the debt which we know to have been the larger of the two freely and fully remitted, so that affection and friendship can flow once more in the old channels! Who has not had occasion both to give and to receive this forgiveness? Who has been so unhappy as never to have received it, or so hard-hearted as never to have bestowed it?

But this is as between man and man. Our Lord guarantees to us that there is also such forgiveness waiting for us from Him who can never need forgiveness, from God Himself; for He would not teach us to pray for that which cannot be granted. One only condition required for that forgiveness is here named. The mystery of the Atonement, the “pardon through the precious blood”—this was not yet to be disclosed. Nothing short of that Atonement of Christ can bring that forgiveness; but once given it is complete and perfect. Man’s forgiveness, it has been said, relates to quantity: “*how oft* shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” God’s forgiveness relates to quality: man forgives *sins*, God forgives *sin*. More, infinitely more, even than Christ’s “seventy times seven,”

may be bestowed by Divine compassion, not infringing on Divine justice, on the worst of human transgressors.

But there is one condition, and only one, here set before us as that on which the forgiveness of God hinges. “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us: 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.” The teaching is enforced by the parable of the “unmerciful servant”—the relentless, unforgiving creditor contrasted with the large-hearted, generous master. Without this we stop the flow of Divine mercy at its very source. An unforgiving world, could such be imagined, would close up for ever the “fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness,” would do away with that absolute pardon for the sins of the past which the Psalmist has imaged by the remotest distances of the physical world: “Look how high the heaven is in comparison of the earth; so great is His mercy also toward them that fear Him. Look how wide also the east is from the west; so far hath He set our sins from us.”

The necessity, therefore, of forgiving our brother, if we are to look for forgiveness ourselves, ought, one would think, to have impressed itself on the consciences of Christians as one of those primary and foundation conditions, without which hope is vain and faith unfruitful, while love, the third and greatest of the trinity of Christian graces, is excluded by the very nature of the case. And yet is it not true that some who would be the last to consider themselves outside the circle of true Christians, often nourish an unforgiving spirit against another through life—nay, carry it with them to the grave? The story is told of a nobleman who nourished such a grudge