

Dear Friends,

Thank you for your correspondence to the Al Denson Show and for tuning in every week to our program. My prayer for you is to be encouraged in your daily walk with Christ through the words of this booklet. Our hope is that in turn you will tell others of what God is doing through our ministry to youth and parents on TV. I am convinced you will not find another program on any network anywhere that deals with issues today's youth and their parents are facing, and provides answers from a Godly perspective.

In addition, we would love for you to help us by going to our web site at www.aldenson.com. Here you can write to us, order additional material like this booklet, check out all my music, have a daily bible study, and stay up to date on the ministry. You can also send us a prayer request and questions for the TV show. But more importantly, please continue to be in prayer with us as we work together to help those that are in need.

Thanks for watching and God Bless!

Sincerely,

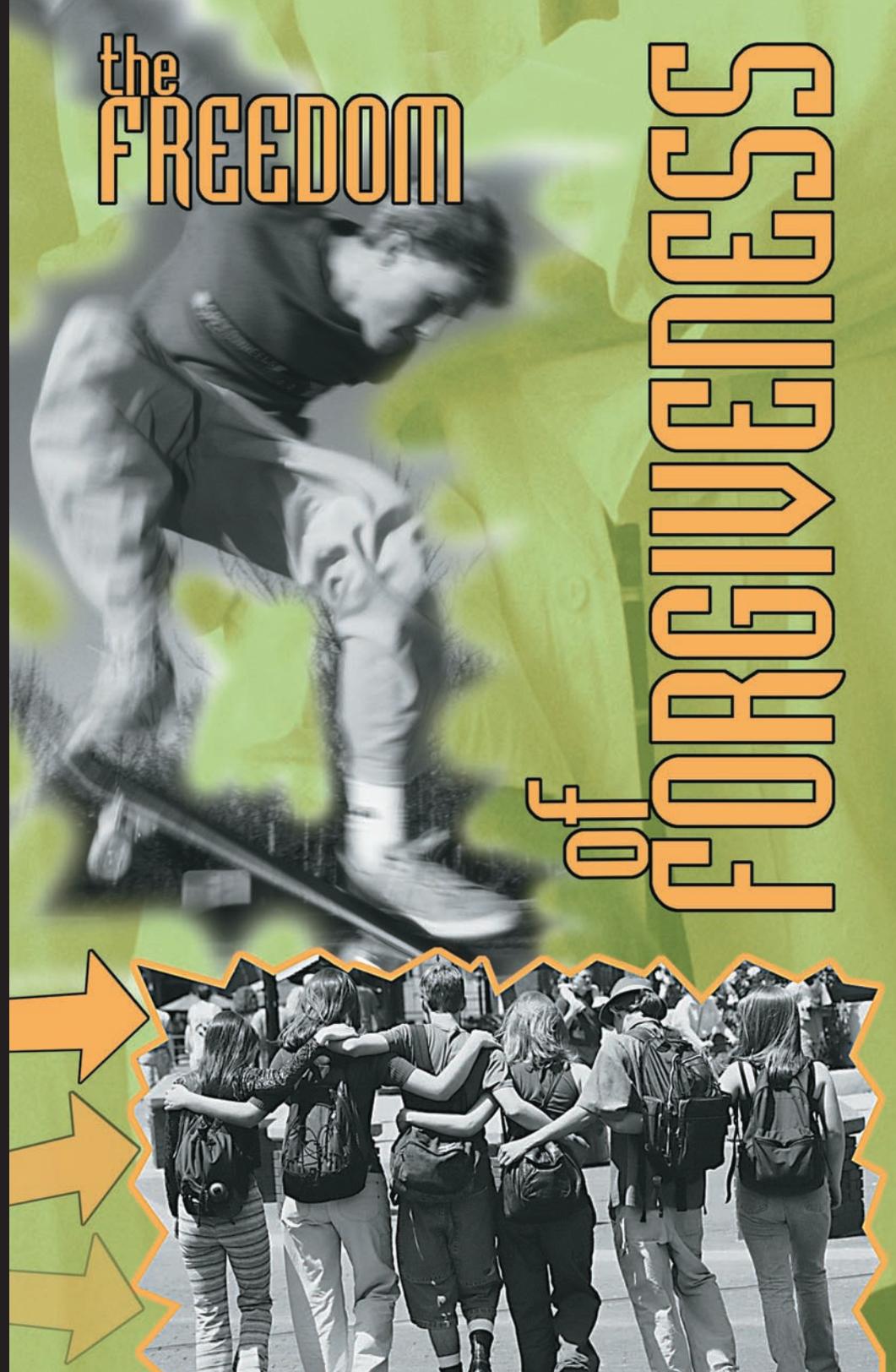


An Outreach of Celebration Ministries

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the
FREEDOM

**of
FORGIVENESS**





Most artists create for only a brief moment in time. That phenomenon was once known as "15 minutes of fame". Yet even in a fickle world, there still emerge a talented few that transcends time and trends. With nearly 15 years as a major label recording artist and seven hit

albums to his credit, Al Denson is that kind of artist.

But the attention and acclaim his artistry has brought him over the years are anything but the routine rewards of worldly success. Rather, they are the fruits of a life of purpose and passion, and a mission that has always reached far beyond merely making music.

The millions of young people Al has performed for, befriended, counseled, consoled and clowned around with in his career already know that. And thousands more are finding out every day.

This past year has seen Al expand his efforts to a global audience through the reach of his daily syndicated television production, "The Al Denson Show." "You've got to reach out to people where they are with the most powerful means and this form of media allows you to build trust and a rapport," says Al. "This has all been so amazing. I can't imagine what lies in store when the Lord finally calls me home, but I don't have to wait for heaven to receive rewards. I get them every time a kid comes up to me and says, 'I heard what you said, and I accepted Christ.' You can't ask for anything more or better than that."

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THE FREEDOM OF FORGIVENESS

Suppose with me for a moment that one spring day you go out in your backyard and dig all the green grass from a large, circular area. You then spread a particular kind of soil there and later plant a tree. You are faithful to nurture that tree, so with each day that goes by the tree gets larger, stronger, and more deeply rooted.

One day you notice the tree is beginning to produce fruit. What you aren't aware of is that the fruit on this tree you have planted is poisonous. Since you don't know the fruit is dangerous, each day you take some off the tree and eat it. At first you

don't notice anything is wrong but before long you begin to experience symptoms in your body that tell you things are not well. Not realizing the problem is the fruit you are getting from the tree you planted in your own yard, you continue to eat it every day. You get sicker and sicker, then one day you die--all because you didn't understand the soil you used was contaminated.

In the same way many Christians are poisoning themselves to death each and every day they live with the deadly fruits of bitterness--all because one day they went into the backyard of their life and spread the soil of unforgiveness. In that soil they planted a tree of bitter-

ness and before they even realized how strong and deeply rooted the tree had become, all kinds of deadly fruit began to appear on its limbs.

The fruit has names like resentment, hostility, anger, rage, depression, spiritual doubts, the inability to love and be loved, to pray and live a consistent life, physical problems and emotional disorders. Many Christians have hard lives which are characterized by difficulties and problems, and don't understand why. These Christians truly don't realize what is happening in their lives because they aren't

aware the problem is in the soil.

What they don't understand is that the bitterness in their lives makes them extremely vulnerable to unwise decision making and destructive patterns of living. The poison they carry around inside every day damages their emotions, thoughts, and memories, and this negatively affects everything in their lives. Many professionals tell us as many as 80% of all physical problems and 70% of all emotional problems are caused by the contaminated soil of unforgiveness. For this reason, God makes it very clear in His Word that forgiveness is not a suggestion but a commandment He gives to us for our own well-being.

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Forgiveness is not an easy topic to address because there are so many misconceptions surrounding it, and misunderstandings about what it is, and what it isn't. This was true even when Jesus was on earth, so one day He told a parable to help His followers understand this most important subject of forgiveness.

This story is found in Matthew 18:23-35. It says, "The Kingdom of God is like a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of a hundred thousand dollars. He couldn't pay, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and goods, to be auctioned off at the slave market. The poor wretch threw himself at the king's feet and begged, 'Give me a chance and I'll pay it all back.' Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt. The servant was no sooner out of the room when he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him ten dollars. He seized him by the



throat and demanded, 'Pay up. Now!' The poor wretch threw himself at the servant's feet and begged, 'Give me a chance and I'll pay it all back.' But he wouldn't do it. He had him arrested and put in jail until the debt was paid. When the other servants saw this going on, they were outraged and brought a detailed report to the king.

The king summoned the man and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn't you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy? The king was furious and turned him over to the jailers until he should pay back the entire debt. And that's exactly

what my Father in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn't forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy" (The Message).

This story sounds hard to believe. Here is a guy who has been forgiven a huge debt who turns right around and won't forgive somebody a small debt! There is more to this story than meets the eye, so let me try to explain what is really going on here. In the King James transla-

tion of the Bible it says the first servant fell on his knees before the king and begged for "mercy." In this form the word mercy means, "an extension of time--a delay." What he was really saying to the king was "have patience with me. Please give me more time and I'll pay you back." Herein lies the first misconception about forgiveness.

We see here that the servant's idea of forgiveness was one thing, but the king's was another. When the servant asked for mercy, he was defining forgiveness as an extension of time so he could earn enough money to pay the king back. This was a totally ridiculous request because the debt was so great there was no way a common servant could ever earn enough money in his lifetime to pay what he owed. As far as the servant was concerned, forgiveness was something that must be earned. On the other hand, the king's definition of forgiveness was to erase the debt entirely from his books. As far as the king was concerned, the debt no longer existed.

When the king forgave him, the servant applied his own definition of forgiveness to what the king said and, as a result, left believing he was still in debt to the king. Now, he believed, it was up to him to work as hard as he could to earn money, in any way he could, to try and pay off his debt.

We know in this parable that God is depicted as the king, and we (all sinners), are depicted as the servant. Many Christians are

exactly like the first servant in that they don't understand that when God forgave them, He cancelled their sin debt completely. As far as God is concerned, the debt no longer exists. They believe all God did when He saved them was to grant them an extension of time. Now they have to work really hard to earn His forgiveness, even though realistically, the debt they owe God is so great it is humanly impossible to repay.

So back to our story. Believing he still owed the king an unbelievable amount of money, the frantic servant begins to look for ways to pay the king back. Well, who should come along but a fellow servant who owed him a small amount of money. As soon as the first servant saw him he immediately tried to collect the debt. Because he thought he still owed the king, he believed it was necessary to go around collecting debts from others. Do you see? The servant thought he had failed to receive forgiveness from the king, so he had no forgiveness to give. You cannot give what you believe you haven't received. This poor guy was trying to pay a debt he no longer owed. Because he thought himself to be "unforgiven," he was also "unforgiving."

Willingness to forgive is evidence we have been saved.

One of the Biblical descriptions of sin is “violation of God’s laws.”

You see, when we break a law, whether it be God’s law or man’s law, we are in a sense in debt to it. For instance, if you get stopped for speeding you will be issued a ticket because you have broken the law. Now you are in debt to that law because you owe a fine to the state.

What is true about God’s law and man’s law is true in the area of relationships. When we offend someone, we feel we are in debt to that person--as if we owe them something--restitution or an apology. When we have been wronged by someone, we feel the need to collect the debt that is owed to us. If we are unable to forgive ourselves, we will sometimes even try to collect that debt, too, by punishing ourselves with different forms of self-injury, including sometimes even suicide.

How does this play out in your life? Who are those that owe you a debt? Perhaps...

- parents who hurt you when you were growing up
- brothers and sisters who failed you or let you down when you needed them
- a boyfriend or girlfriend who rejected you
- a friend who betrayed you
- a business partner who cheated you
- a husband or wife who abandoned you
- children who have disappointed you

They owe you a debt, don’t they?

These people owe you love, acceptance, approval, loyalty, and security. So now you have to

make all the people who have hurt you pay the debt they owe you. “How can I collect from them?” You ask yourself. “I know, I’ll punish them by not forgiving them!” So like the servant in the parable, you refuse to forgive everyone in your life who you feel owes you something.

The servant thought the king was a harsh debt-collector. Because he didn’t understand his debt had been cancelled, he became a debt-collector, too. There are Christians who believe God to be a harsh debt-collector because they don’t understand their debt has been cancelled, as well.

When the king heard about what the first servant had done to his fellow servant, he got so angry he had the first servant thrown into prison. Jesus went on to shock his audience by adding, “And that’s exactly what my Father in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn’t forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy.” Because the man who wouldn’t forgive was a forgiven man, the king had to deal very harshly with him.

In the same way, God takes the unwillingness to forgive on the part of one of His chil-

dren very seriously, and He will deal with that one in a very forceful way to get their attention. He does this because He loves us and knows unforgiveness will cause us to live in a prison of anger, guilt, and resentment where we will be tortured by all kinds of inner emotional conflict and pain.

The willingness to forgive is an evidence we have been saved. Thomas Watson wrote a long time ago, “We need not to climb up into heaven to see whether our sins are forgiven. Let us look into our hearts and see if we can forgive others. If we can, we need not doubt that God has forgiven us.” It is true, there are many misconceptions and misunderstandings concerning forgiveness that, on the surface, appear to keep people from forgiving, but in reality there are only two real reasons a person who calls himself a Christian doesn’t forgive. Either that person has never really been saved and HASN’T experienced God’s forgiveness, or like the servant in the parable HAS experienced God’s forgiveness, but doesn’t understand he is forgiven because he doesn’t realize his debt has been paid in full by Jesus.

Over and over again in Scripture Christians are commanded to forgive as we have been forgiven. Colossians 3:13 says, “Bear with

each other and FORGIVE whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as God forgave you.” Ephesians 4:32 says, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” The problem for most Christians is that they don’t understand what actually happened when God forgave them.

There is a verse that explains this and it is Colossians 2:14. It says, “having canceled the CERTIFICATE OF DEBT with its regulations that were against us and that stood opposed to us, He took it away, nailing it to the Cross.” Today the term “CERTIFICATE OF DEBT” is not one that we are familiar with, but if we had lived in Paul’s day this verse would have painted



You don't owe God anything, so you don't have to collect from anything else.

a powerful word picture. Back then, whenever a person was convicted in a Roman Court of Law, the scribe of the court would make a written list of all the crimes for which that person had been convicted.

That list was called a "CERTIFICATE OF DEBT." This certificate would be taken along with the criminal to the place of imprisonment and nailed to the large wooden door of his cell. When the sentence had been completed, the scribe would take down the "CERTIFICATE OF DEBT" and write across it the word that meant "IT IS FINISHED," roll it up, give it to the prisoner, and he could never be convicted of those crimes again.

Do you understand what Paul was saying in this verse? Two thousand years ago a "CERTIFICATE OF DEBT" was prepared for you. A list was made of ALL your sins, and that list was nailed to an old, rugged cross. The words Jesus spoke from the cross were not a cry of defeat, but a shout of victory.

IT IS FINISHED!

It meant PAID IN FULL! All your sins, past, present and future, have

been paid for, and you can never be found guilty of them again.

Because God accepts and approves of Jesus, He COMPLETELY accepts and approves of you, because you are "IN CHRIST." You don't have to perform or meet certain standards to win God's love and acceptance, or to prove that you have value and worth. You don't have to earn His forgiveness, either. Your debt has been cancelled because it was paid in full by Jesus. You don't owe God anything, so you don't have to collect from anyone else. You are free to forgive because you are forgiven. Because He has set you free from your debt to Him, you can set others free, too. Jesus said, "Freely you have received, now freely give" (Matthew 10:8).

Knowing these truths in your head and allowing them to get into your heart is another story. Author David Seamands said, "...I have come to the conclusion that the major causes of most emotional problems among Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God's unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people. We read, we hear, we believe in a good theology of grace. But, that's not the way we live. The good news of the gospel has not penetrated the level of our emotions."

Grace. Do you really understand it? Have you really accepted it? It is only those who know they are forgiven who can truly under-

stand grace. Grace--God's love coming free of charge, no strings attached, is the thing that separates Christianity from every other religion. Every religion in the world revolves around man's responsibility to secure God's approval. Only Christianity makes God's love, forgiveness, and grace unconditional. Dr. Robert Jeffress says that grace is a deliberate decision to give something good to someone who doesn't deserve it.

We get grace because God offers to release us from the consequences of our sin. But grace doesn't mean God overlooks our sin. God is holy and because of His holiness, He can't just ignore sin. Someone had to be accountable, someone had to pay the sin debt. Jesus Christ chose to assume the obligation for our sin. When we become Christians, not only does God place our sins upon Christ, but He takes the righteousness of Christ and credits it to our spiritual bank account.

This is like having a bank account in your name that is seriously overdrawn. Jesus has an account in the same bank, but His account has a million dollars in it. When you got saved, God took your name off of your account and put Jesus' name on your account. At the same time, He put your name on Jesus account! Now the resources of Jesus belong to you, and Jesus is totally responsible for the debt you owe the bank. That is grace!

Choosing not to forgive will chain us to the past, the offense and the offender.

The greatest hindrance to our being able to “grace” our offenders are some misconceptions about **GRANTING FORGIVENESS**:

1. Granting forgiveness is not denying, excusing, or minimizing what happened. It is being honest and objective about the offense, the pain and the consequences caused by the offender.

2. Granting forgiveness has nothing to do with how you feel. It is a decision you make with an act of your will.

3. Granting forgiveness is not something you do for the person who has offended you. It is something you do for your own good.

Choosing not to forgive is like eating that poison fruit and expecting someone else to die.

4. Granting forgiveness is giving an undeserved pardon and an undeserved release. Forgiveness is the releasing of an obligation. Of course, the only ones in need of forgiveness are those who owe a debt, so forgiveness would have to be, by definition, only for the undeserving. If you think forgiveness is only for those who ask for your forgiveness or deserve your forgiveness, then you don't understand forgiveness at all.

5. Granting forgiveness is not letting the offender off the hook. Forgiveness is acknowledging what was done is wrong and inexcusable but choosing to show someone else the same kind of forgiveness God showed us, which is unconditional and complete. We don't deserve it and God provided it before we ever asked for it or even knew we needed it.

6. Granting forgiveness will be a struggle for those who mistakenly believe there's some type of payment they can get from the one who has offended them that will compensate for their loss. Gandhi made an observation once that the rule of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth cannot sustain itself forever; ultimately, both parties end up blind and toothless.”

Jesus offered a better solution when in Matthew 5:38-39 He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

You see, Jesus understood that forgiveness is sometimes the only way to break the endless cycle of hurt and unfairness, and forgiveness is simply surrendering our right to hurt someone else because they have hurt us.

7. Granting forgiveness can be a problem to the Christian who also mistakenly believes a person must be repentant before they can offer to forgive them. This is not true, and not Scriptural. We need to understand there is a difference between **RECEIVING** forgiveness and **GRANTING** forgiveness. Of course, repentance is required before we can accept someone's forgiveness, but repentance has nothing to do with granting forgiveness. God forgave us “while we were yet still sinners,” the Bible says. God grants all of us His forgiveness before we ever ask for it, or even are aware we need it.

8. Granting forgiveness does not automatically free the offender from the consequences of his actions. We can release the offender from any personal obligation toward us, but we do not have the power to release him from the consequences of those actions. When God forgives us, He removes the eternal consequences of our sins but not necessarily the temporal consequences of our actions.

9. Granting forgiveness is not forgetting about the offense. Forgiving as God forgives is to be our example, but this is one aspect of forgiveness where we are different. The Bible says in verses like Jeremiah 31:34 that when God forgives our sin, He forgets about it. This doesn't mean He gets a case of “holy amnesia.” It simply means He puts our sins “as far as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12) and He chooses not to remember them.

But for us humans, there is a difference between forgiving and forgetting. Forgetting is a function of our brain; forgiveness is a function of the spirit. Forgetting an offense is not possible. It takes time, but eventually we will find our decision to forgive has taken the “sting” out of the memory for us.

Choosing not to grant forgiveness will chain us to the past, the offense, and the offender. We can never be free of reliving the offense over and over again, no matter how hard we try, and it is like being confined to a small prison cell with the very person who hurt us--

just like the prison the unforgiving servant was sentenced to. The difference is, however, that this prison is of our own making and we are not only the prisoner, we are the jailer, as well.

Granting forgiveness provides a way to be “unshackled” from our offender. When we choose to release our offender from any obligation to us, we can walk out of that prison cell and move on with our lives. Lewis Smedes said, “The first and often the only person to be healed by forgiveness is the person who does the forgiveness...When we genuinely forgive, we set a prisoner free and then discover that the prisoner we set free was us.”

Every time we are offended, no matter how small the offense or how horrific, we come to a fork in the road of our life and we must decide which way we are going to go. There are only two roads from which to choose. One road is named “better” and the other road is named “bitter.” The choice is always ours regardless of what has been done to us or who has done it.

Not only must we be able to grant forgiveness in order to be free, we must also know how to **RECEIVE FORGIVENESS**.

Of all the emotions we can experience, guilt has to be one of the most destructive and paralyzing. It has the power to destroy our fellowship with God and our relationships with other people. Make no mistake about it--unresolved guilt will poison us spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically.

Having a clear conscience simply means we can look any person in the eye and know there is no wrong we have not attempted to make right.

King David realized an important truth that all of us who are standing in need of receiving forgiveness must know. Remember, he had committed a sexual sin with another man's wife. When David learned she was pregnant with his child, he had her husband killed to cover up his sin. As you can imagine, because he was the leader of a nation, the list of people David had offended with his sin was very long. In spite of that, in Psalm 51:4 David says, "Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight."

David was not denying he had hurt and greatly offended many other people; he was simply acknowledging that when any of us sin the One who is offended most is a holy God. So whenever we find ourselves guilty and in need of receiving forgiveness, we must understand it is God's forgiveness we first need.

God hates sin, but he loves sinners and He loves to forgive sinners. If we are saved, no matter what our sin, God can never be angry with us. He can hate what we have done but He can never stop loving us, or being loving toward us.

Sin is always going to produce guilt, so every time we are guilty, we need to agree with God that what we have done is sin. We repent, which is not only acknowledging

we have sinned but are willing to move in a completely different direction, and receive the forgiveness that is already ours because of what Jesus did on the cross. Once we have done this we are no longer guilty, so we SHOULD NOT allow Satan to keep us trapped in false guilt. Whenever he tries to accuse us and bring back those old feelings of guilt, we need to remember the cross! We must also remember our feelings have nothing to do with whether or not we are forgiven by God. He did His part, and if we do ours then the transaction is complete--whether we feel like it or not.

Receiving the forgiveness of others we have offended is not as easy, because unfortunately most people aren't like God. Our goal in life should be the same as the apostle Paul's. He said in Acts 24:16 that his goal in life was to "strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man." Having a clear conscience simply means we can look any person in the eye and know there is no wrong we have not attempted to make right.

When it comes to seeking forgiveness from others, there are several things we need to remember:

We're to seek forgiveness only from those we have wronged. This means those who are "aware" of our offense. This, of course, does not include situations where restitution is neces-

sary, such as money that has been stolen. But if restitution is not involved and if the one we have offended is unaware of the offense, then our confession should probably be limited to God. We should always ask ourselves, "Will confessing help or hurt the other person?"

Sometimes our desire to confess is nothing more than a self-centered desire to unload all our garbage on some unsuspecting person. Most of the time it requires a greater love to bear our own burdens instead of asking someone who isn't even aware of what we have done to share the load.

We should always try to ask forgiveness of the one we have offended face-to-face. Arrange a meeting that includes ONLY those who we have actually offended, and no one else. If it is not possible to meet face-to-face, then call them on the telephone. Only ask for forgiveness in a letter if it is totally impossible to do it any other way.

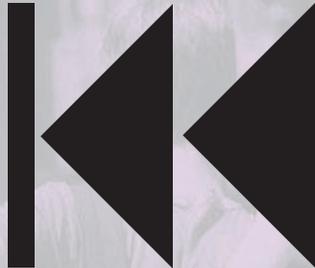
We need to understand the difference between an apology and asking for forgiveness. An apology can be very sincere, but it is one-sided and calls for no response. Asking forgiveness is a very humbling thing because it is asking

to be released from our obligation. When asking for forgiveness from another, we can never blame anyone else--we must assume the full responsibility for the offense. We also cannot try to minimize or excuse what we have done.

We need to understand that just because we do what we are supposed to, the way we are supposed to doesn't mean that we will be received well and extended forgiveness. But whether the other person forgives us or not, we will find freedom in having a clear conscience and knowing we have done everything possible to make things right.

Sometimes the person it is hardest to receive forgiveness from is our self. How many times have we heard someone say, "I know God has forgiven me, but I can't forgive myself." That may sound very spiritual to some, but the truth is what is really being said with that statement is, "My standards are higher than God's, so even though He may be able to forgive what I did, I cannot."

When asking for forgiveness from another, we can never blame anyone else--we must assume the full responsibility for the offense.



Setting ourselves above God in any way is a dangerous thing to do, so we need to remember three things about forgiving ourselves:

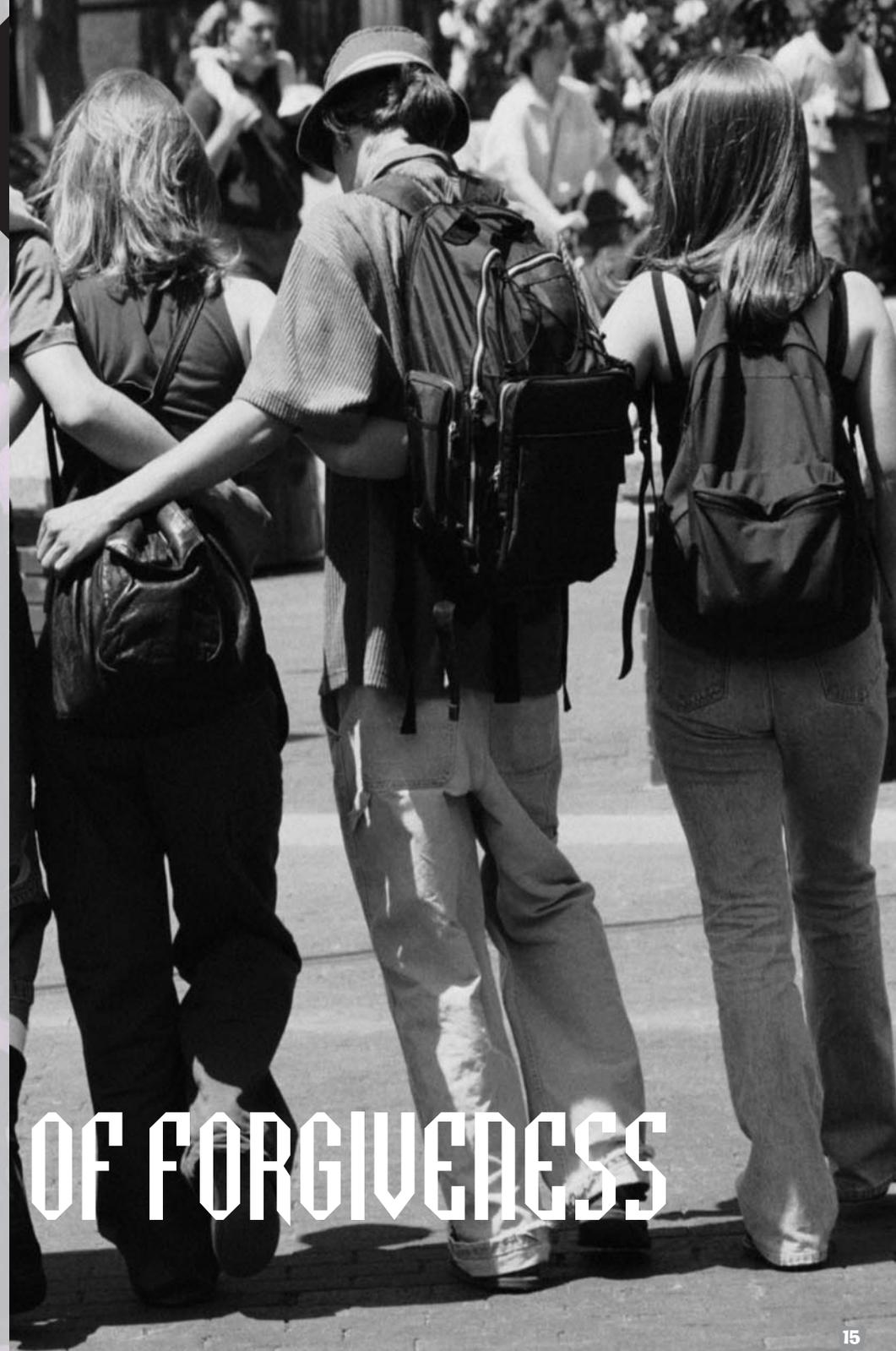
1. If we have received God's forgiveness and sought the forgiveness of those we have offended, then we need to release ourselves from guilt by accepting something God does--we are human and our humanity gives us feet of clay. God accepts that and so should we.

2. We need to remind ourselves that God does not "overlook" our sin. He requires that every sin be paid for. He can only forgive us and release us from our debt because Jesus paid our debt, our entire debt of sin. The debt has been removed from our account, so not to forgive ourselves is to ignore the blood Jesus shed and the sacrifice He made to pay our debt.

3. We also need never forget that it is not the depth of our remorse or repentance that makes God's forgiveness possible--it is His grace and grace alone. If God has "graced" us, then we should be able to "grace" ourselves.

One day Jesus was in the home of a "graceless" Pharisee named Simon. Jesus said, "A certain money lender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were both unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him more? (Luke 7:41-42) Simon answers, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." "You have judged correctly," Jesus says.

Remember, the most "grace-giving" Christians will always be those who are the most aware of how much grace they personally needed, and how much grace they have received. The best "forgivers" will always be those Christians who are the most aware of how much they have been forgiven. May we never, never get over, or forget, what it is like to be the recipient of God's great grace and forgiveness.



THE FREEDOM OF FORGIVENESS