

OFFENSES

Ordinances of God



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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
is from the *King James Version*.

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“A brother offended *is harder to win* than a strong city, and contentions *are* like the bars of a castle.”—Proverbs 18:19.

INTRODUCTION

Repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation are central to the Bible and a Christian’s life. They are part of a chain of events that are critical to our relationship with God and each other because we all sin against God and offend one another.

While they have been the subject of many sermons and articles, there is a great deal of misunderstanding of how to properly apply them to offense. Worst of all, there is a great reluctance to address offenses. Why are offenses so challenging? First of all, it is always hard to admit when we are wrong. This goes against our pride. No one likes to be corrected, so we become unwilling to apologize to others.

On the other hand, many times when we are offended we want “justice” for the wrong done to us. Offenses can produce anger that not only makes it hard to forgive but creates a barrier between the offender and the one who was wronged.

So, how can anyone who is unwilling to repent expect others to be forgiving? Likewise, how can anyone who is in a state of anger expect others to apologize?

So there is a stalemate. The offender is either unaware of the offense or gets away with it, leaving victims hurt and angry. If the aftermath of an offense is ignored, it can affect the relationship between a Christian and God as well as the relationships between believers. These days, many victims of offenses focus on dealing with their personal emotions through “counseling” or self-help groups and books rather than following God’s instructions to resolve them.

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The purpose of this booklet is to show just how serious offenses are to God and explain His ordinances for resolving them. In fact, they are so serious that unresolved offenses can be cause for both the offender *and* victim to lose out on salvation.

On a final note, the Greek word *ekklesia* means an assembly or congregation called. It should never be translated *church*, which is an organization men or a building. All references to *church* have been replaced with *ekklesia* to distinguish it as an assembly called out by God.

CHAPTER 1

Relationships of Offender, Victim, & God

When an offense occurs, there are three parties involved: the offender, the victim, and God. It is important to understand their roles as well as the responsibilities in those relationships when an offense occurs. These can involve more than one offender or victim, but, for the sake of simplicity, the discussions that follow will assume an offense occurs between two people. Therefore, the three principle relationships involved in an offense are:

- 1) The relationship between the *Offender* and *God*.
- 2) The relationship between the *Victim* and *God*.
- 3) The relationship between the *Offender* and the *Victim*.

There are not only relationships between God and each of those involved in the offense, but an equally important one between the offender and victim. However, before we can discuss these relationships, we must define some terms.

What is Sin?

What is sin? 1 John 3:4 says, “Sin is the transgression [*violation*] of the Law”. Therefore:

DEFINITION: **Sin** is a VIOLATION of God’s Law.

Sin is a violation of *God’s Law* because God is the **Lawgiver**. It says in James 4:12, “There is **one** Lawgiver ...” This is important to understand. Because God established the Law, all sin is *against* God. As it says in Psalm 51:4, “Against You [*God*], You only, have I sinned.” King David said this when he repented of murdering Uriah the Hittite. Since it was Uriah the Hittite who was murdered, one might think that David sinned against him. However, sin is a *violation* of God’s Law, not the *result* of the sin. In other words, David violated God’s Law when he murdered Uriah the Hittite but the result of David’s sin was the death of Uriah the Hittite.

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Therefore, anyone who violates God's Law is a sinner in God's eyes even though the result of sin can impact someone else.

PRINCIPLE: All **sin** is against GOD because He is the Lawgiver.

Also, since God is the Lawgiver, He is the "Judge of all" (Heb. 12:23). Why? As the Lawgiver, only He is qualified to judge when someone violates His Law. In Hebrews 10:30 it says, "The Lord will judge His people."

PRINCIPLE: Only **God** can JUDGE sin because He is the Lawgiver.

Although many times we think judgment equates to punishment, forgiveness is also a judgment. This is similar to any court case in which the outcome is either conviction or acquittal.

PRINCIPLE: God's **judgment** can be PUNISHMENT or FORGIVENESS.

Look at all this from a secular point of view. Communities establish laws requiring vehicles to stop for red traffic lights. When someone fails to stop, it is a crime against the community laws; that is, it is a "sin" against the community government. Why? Because it established the traffic laws. Likewise, it is the responsibility of the community to uphold those laws through officially appointed judges. The victim of a collision has no authority to pronounce judgment against someone who runs the red light. This is no different with God. As the Lawgiver, violations of His Law are sin against Him alone. When someone violates His Law, they are a sinner and He will judge them.

But what about motive? A sin can be committed intentionally or in ignorance but any violation of God's Law is sin. God takes the motive of the sinner into consideration when they are judged. So, motive has nothing to do with whether or not sin occurred even though God shows mercy in judging those who repent. Any person that violates God's Law sins against Him. Summarizing, we know:

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PRINCIPLE: Any violation of God’s Law is sin **regardless** of a person’s MOTIVE.

Finally, we need to recognize that all sin has the same penalty without, or prior to, repentance. It says in Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin *is* death”; and in Ezekiel 18:20, “The soul who sins shall die.” This applies to each and every violation of God’s Law, regardless of how minor the violation or whether or not the sin was intentional. Therefore:

PRINCIPLE: The **penalty** for all sin is DEATH, regardless of motive, until there is repentance and forgiveness.

Sin is a seemingly simple and obvious concept, so why make such a point of it? Because it is important to realize that sin, the violation of God’s Law, is against God alone and all sin that goes without repentance has a death penalty. So sin is a very serious matter.

But what about the victim? Doesn’t sin cause others to suffer? Yes, but now we need to understand the term *evil*. While sin is the violation of God’s Law, evil is the *consequence* of sin.

What Is Evil?

When someone sins, it is against God. However, the *result* of sin is *evil*. When David killed Uriah the Hittite, he admitted that he sinned against God but he also said that he did *evil* to Uriah the Hittite. Notice:

PSALM 51:4 Against You [God], You only, have I sinned, **and done this evil [to Uriah the Hittite]** in Your sight– that You may be found just when You speak, *and* blameless when You judge.

Who was the evil against? God? No, the evil was done to Uriah the Hittite because he was the one murdered. The phrase “done evil in Your sight” means that David’s sin caused evil to Uriah the Hittite and God saw him do it. Think about it. The sin was murder; therefore, the sin broke God’s Law. Even though it wasn’t God

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who was murdered, the *result* of David's sin was the murder of Uriah the Hittite. The outcome of all sin is evil. Sometimes sin is evil against God and other times it is against people. For example, worshipping other gods is evil toward the true God whereas slander is evil to a person's reputation. Knowing this we can say:

DEFINITION: Evil is the RESULT of sin.

As an example, imagine a person who wrongly charges another of a crime. First of all, the false accusation is a clear violation of the Ninth Commandment ("You shall not bear false witness [*testimony*] against your neighbor"—Exod. 20:16). Who gave the Ten Commandments? God did. Therefore, the false accusation was a sin against God who is the Lawgiver. But what about the victim of the false accusation? Did the false accuser sin against the victim? No, because the Law was established by God. However, the false accusation certainly caused the victim to suffer. The result of the false testimony is *evil* because it harmed the victim. In other words, the false accusation was a sin against God because it violated His Law, but the false accusation resulted in evil against the victim who suffered as a result of the sin.

What exactly is suffering? *Suffering* is:

Any hardship (financial loss, harm to reputation, etc.),

Physical hurt or injury, or

Mental or emotional pain or stress.

Evil done to people causes them to suffer. It can be immediate, such as an injury resulting from a collision between two cars, or deferred as in the case of a lie. Summarizing:

DEFINITION: Suffering is any hardship, physical hurt or injury, or mental or emotional pain or stress.

Returning to the example of traffic laws, imagine a case where someone runs a red light and collides with a vehicle legitimately passing through the intersection. Failure to stop at a red light is a violation of the community laws that were established to prevent

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collisions. It is a sin against the government, not the victim, because the victim did not establish the traffic laws. It was the community government that instituted the traffic laws and, just as important, it is the government that has legal authority to enforce those laws through the police and to impose penalties for violating those laws by the appointed judges.

However, the victim still suffered damage to the car and maybe physical injury as well. By failing to stop at the red light, the lawbreaker caused the victim to suffer. In other words, the lawbreaker did evil to the victim by violating the law regardless of whether it was intentional or not. Even in the context of community laws, a violation (unless they contradict God's Law) is a sin—although is called a crime today. Still, the sin is only against the lawgiver; in this case the community government. However, the violation resulted in suffering for the victim through the evil consequences of the sin.

PRINCIPLE: Evil is the result of sin whether or not the sin was INTENTIONAL.

However, we know that the Bible clearly states that it is possible for a “brother sin [to] against me” (Matt. 18:21). How does that fit? Saying someone sinned against another person is a colloquialism—a common expression. For example, when two cars run into each other, we often say it was an “accident” even if one of the drivers was drunk. Obviously, a drunk driver did not “accidentally” drink too much before getting into a car and colliding with someone. A more accurate expression would be to say that the cars collided or that there was a collision. Likewise, it is more accurate to say that someone sinned *and* did evil against another person. We saw this in Psalm 51:4. However, it is common to say that someone “sinned against” another person even though it was actually evil done to the other person as a *result* of the sin. Although not technically accurate, saying someone “sinned against me” is an accepted expression. Notice:

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1 CORINTHIANS 8:12 But **when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.**

Notice the expression “when you sin against the brethren and **wound**” them. How can sin be against both the brethren and God? It was *evil* against the brethren because it wounded their weak consciences. In other words, the result of the sin was their wounding. However, it was a violation of God’s Law, so the sin was against God. Paul clarifies this by saying it was actually a sin against *Christ*. Again, the consequences (the evil) of sin are connected with the wounding, or suffering, of others.

God’s Law is a law of *agape* love. Perfect love does **no harm** to anyone. Anything that hurts another person is evil, and evil results from sin that violates God’s perfect Law of love. Why is it a Law of love? Because it was established to *prevent* suffering. Therefore, harm to others is always a sin against God. Is it wrong to say that someone “sinned” against me? No, it is an acceptable expression. But for the purposes of this discussion, it is important to understand that sin is only against God’s Law—whereas the result of sin is evil because it produces suffering for others.

In modern times, people think of biblical Law as being separate from secular law so that the term *evil* has taken on a “moral” implication rather than a legal one. It used to be that people thought evil applied only to biblical laws rather than the laws established by people. But even that has changed because most people today believe evil is only equated with “bad” people rather than the result of breaking any laws. They say, “That *person* is evil.” What most people mean is that a person has a lot of hatred and intentionally causes others to suffer. However, the Bible uses the term *evil* to describe the *result* of sin.

In fact, there is a term for those who practice evil—they are *wicked*. It refers to anyone who loves to **do** evil, so it includes people and demons (2 Thess. 3:2; 1 John 2:3; et al).

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DEFINITION: Anyone who **practices** doing evil is WICKED.

For example, 2 Samuel 3:39 says, “The LORD shall repay the **evildoer** according to **his wickedness**.” That is, God will punish according to how much someone *loves* to do evil works. Satan and the demons are wicked by definition because they love to do evil.

What an Offense is NOT

Now we can begin talking about offenses, but first we need to define what is *not* an offense.

The English dictionary defines an offense as “an **annoyance or resentment** brought about by a **PERCEIVED insult** to or disregard for oneself or one’s standards or principles.” In the modern world, people think an offense is anything that is annoying or that they resent regardless of what was said or done. In other words, they believe an offense is anything that they disagree with or that causes bad feelings; they are perceived or imagined insults.

Today, it seems anything someone says or does will offend someone somewhere. This is plainly evident with so many people who are downright insulted every time someone disagrees with them, especially when it comes to religion, politics, marriage, climate change, etc. From this perspective, it is impossible to avoid causing an offense.

However, as we will see in the next section, a *real* offense involves sin (transgression of God’s Law) and/or causes suffering (hardship, physical hurt or injury, or mental pain or stress). For now, it is important to understand that:

PRINCIPLE: A **real offense** involves SIN and/or causes others to SUFFER.

Because real offenses in the Bible involve sin, they are very serious matters. However, we must be careful not to suppose that every disagreement, argument, difference of opinion, snub, insult, rebuff, rejection, etc., fall into the category of a biblical offense.

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PRINCIPLE: Situations that do **not involve sin** are NOT offenses according to God.

Take, for example, the contention that arose between Paul and Barnabas over Mark (Acts 15:37-39). Whatever the cause, Paul and Barnabas parted ways—but scripture never mentions any sort of reconciliation. However, later we find they were once again united. While we do not know the details, there is no evidence that this ever reached the level of an offense involving a sin. Theirs was just a matter of disagreement even though it was a “sharp contention.”

We, too, must have the same perspective when it comes to offenses. When someone fails to extend a greeting, is less than friendly, says something insulting or that we take wrongly, or does not live up to our expectations, it is not an offense. Disagreements and even arguments, whether between spouses, friends, brethren, or people in general, are not necessarily offenses.

While all of these could become offenses if we allow them to, God expects us to manage our own thoughts and emotions so that we prevent these from being more than just a consequence of human shortcomings. Everyone has good and bad days, usually the result of misunderstandings, physical ailments, stressful situations, personal problems, or just the simple fact that we live in an extremely evil world controlled by Satan. Each of us will fall short from time to time. Instead of imagining the worst, we can give others space and time to deal with their problems rather than responding in kind, assigning blame, demanding an apology, or otherwise adding “fuel to the fire.” We should recognize that these are opportunities to offer help or comfort.

What is an Offense?

So, what is a **real** offense? When it comes to the Bible, we must recognize that offenses are very serious matters with consequences to our eternal life. First of all, notice that an offense is a sin:

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MATTHEW 13:41-42 “The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom **all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness**, 42 “and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Offenders are in the same category as those who practice lawlessness (sin). Offenses clearly involve sin such that, without repentance, an offender could end up in the lake of fire. Therefore:

DEFINITION: All **real offenses** are SIN.

Today, almost everything someone disagrees with is considered to be an offense. This is absolutely wrong because an offense in the Bible starts with a sin, i.e., breaking God’s Law. Anything that is not a sin cannot, therefore, be an offense as far as God is concerned. Telling the truth at a criminal trial is not a sin (in fact, it is required by the Ninth Commandment), so it cannot be an offense even if the defendant gets angry when he or she is convicted by the testimony. Just because someone gets angry does not mean that it was an offense. An offense can only occur if there is a violation of God’s Law.

But what distinguishes an offense from a sin? Understanding the difference between sin and offense starts with understanding *who* is impacted by the sin. While an offense always involves a sin against God, whenever the resulting evil impacts another *person*, the sin is called an offense.

Take, for example, the Ten Commandments. The last six describe sins that involve other people. In simple terms, the last six of the Ten Commandments deal with offenses. Dishonoring parents, murder, adultery, stealing, false testimony, and coveting are all sins. But these have evil consequences (suffering) for people, so they are offenses as well.

On the other hand, the first four of the Ten Commandments define sins that are strictly against God. While it might seem that breaking the first four commandments would be offenses to God, the Bible exclusively uses the term *sin* instead. To understand why these are

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not offenses, we must delve a little deeper into the biblical meaning of *offense*.

In the Greek, the noun form translated as *offense* is *skandalon*, which is the source of our English word *scandal*. It literally means a *trap, snare, or stumblingblock*. However, there is no guarantee that anyone will actually get caught in the trap or snare, or that they will stumble. The Greek word means that a trap, snare, or tripping hazard was *put in place*. Specifically, someone does *not* necessarily have to fall into it. This is further emphasized by the way it is used as a verb (Greek *skandalizo*). It means to entrap, trip up, cause to stumble, or *entice to sin*. All of these are **intended** outcomes. But notice that last one—*entice to sin*. This is what an offense is all about—a temptation for someone to sin. Therefore, an offense is a *temptation or enticement* for someone else to sin.

DEFINITION: An **offense** is a sin against God where the resulting evil is a TEMPTATION or ENTICEMENT for the potential victim to also commit sin.

This is the reason the first four commandments are sin and *not* offenses—because God *cannot* be tempted by evil (Jas. 1:13). However, people *can* be tempted. Notice how offenses are described in Proverbs 1:10: “My son, **if sinners entice you, do not consent.**” Solomon is saying that potential victims of an offense must resist the temptation to sin. In the case of offenses, many respond by doing the opposite—they react with anger and desire to have revenge. While offenses certainly come upon all people, we are expected to resist and avoid the temptations of sin.

But what if the potential victim avoids the temptation and does not sin. Is an offense still a sin to the offender? Yes! Why? Because all offenses start by breaking God’s Law, so offenses are always a sin regardless of how others respond. Notice:

ROMANS 14:13, 20-21 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, **not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall** in our brother’s way. 20 ... All things indeed are pure, but **it is evil** for the man who

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eats with offense. 21 *It is* good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor *do anything* by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.

Paul says “*it is evil*” to even create an *occasion* for someone to stumble; that is, tempting others to sin is evil. It is enough to break God’s Law to cause an offense, regardless of how a victim might react. Fundamentally, an offense is a sin whether or not it was intentional *and* whether or not anyone succumbs to the temptation to sin. Therefore:

PRINCIPLE: An offense can still occur even if the victim AVOIDS the temptation to sin.

So why is an offense a temptation or enticement to sin? Because it can cause someone to become angry and bitter enough to be unwilling to forgive the offender (this will be discussed further in the section *Victim’s Responsibility to God*).

A very common offense is false teachings that entice brethren away from God’s truth. Another is slander or spreading gossip. This can cause us to harbor wrong thoughts and feelings toward someone we might not even know. How many times have we heard gossip about someone, only to finally get to know the person and hear quite a different story? The gossip poisons our view, and maybe even prejudices us, such that we can have evil thoughts against someone we might not even know. Worst of all, even if it was based upon fact, what if the victim has already repented? The gossip is just perpetuating the memory of it even though God has forgiven the person.

DEFINITION: The temptation or enticement to sin of an offense is that the victim becomes UNWILLING to forgive the offender, usually through anger.

When it comes to resisting temptations, we have the example of Jesus Christ. Notice Hebrews 4:15, “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

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Avoiding the usual negative emotions of anger and resentment when an offense occurs is the best way to successfully resist the temptation of an offense. The trap, snare, or stumblingblock of the offense presents every person with the choice to either avoid sin or to commit sin. Therefore, when someone causes an offense, it is up to us to recognize the temptation and choose whether or not we avoid it. How does a Christian do this? One powerful tool is prayer:

LUKE 11: 4 And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And **do not lead us into temptation [of offenses]**, but deliver us from the evil one.”

“Evil one” can also be translated *evil*. Jesus tells us to pray to avoid the temptations of offenses. This is so vital that it should be a fundamental part of our prayers. Pray to stay alert for offenses and resist temptations because they are everywhere, including within the *ekklesia*. In Matthew 18:7 it says, “Woe to the world because of offenses! For **offenses must come**.”

So, is it possible to commit an offense without sinning? In other words, can someone cause an offense even if they are not breaking any of God’s Laws? This is where things become a little more complicated.

1 CORINTHIANS 8:7-12 However, *there is* not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat *it* as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8 But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. 9 But **beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak**. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, **will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols**? 11 And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? 12 But **when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin** against Christ.

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Paul describes a situation where a person who is weaker in spiritual knowledge can be tempted or enticed to sin by someone who is wiser in the Scriptures. Even though the wise believer is not breaking God's Law, the weaker brother (or sister) can sin because of his ignorance of the Scriptures. (There are sins of ignorance—refer to Lev. 4:2, et al.) In a case such as this, the wiser believer ends up causing an offense even though it was not intentional. Again, Romans 14:21 says to avoid creating any situation whereby anyone “stumbles or is offended or is made weak.”

PRINCIPLE: If our **direct influence** causes someone else to sin regardless of our motives, we *might* be the cause of an OFFENSE.

So how do we apply this in our lives? First, understand that the situation in 1 Corinthians 8 is dealing with two brothers in Christ. Ideally, we will always regard each other with *agape* love. Notice:

EPHESIANS 4:15-16 but, **speaking the truth in love**, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ— 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of **the body for the edifying of itself in love**.

We are to edify one another with the truth, but doing it with God's love. Does this mean we avoid speaking the truth so we do not “offend” someone? Absolutely not, but it should be done with wisdom, humility, and love.

The second point is never go to any lengths to avoid “offending” someone if it compromises our relationship with God or obedience to His Law. While the scribes and Pharisees were angry at many of the things that Jesus Christ told them, He only spoke the Truth. It is *never* a sin if someone else is “offended” by our faith in God or when we speak the truth.

While it might seem that all this detail is all unnecessary, look at one scripture where understanding the biblical meaning of offenses makes all the difference:

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MATTHEW 24:10 “And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another.

This would not make any sense if it is read according to the strict English definition of *offend*. In other words, why would people who betray others be offended? The scripture makes sense when we understand that *offend* means to violate God’s Law and tempt another to sin. This verse could be written, “And then many will [sin], will betray one another, and will hate one another”—which makes the meaning clearer.

Finally, the other consequence of an offense is the potential to cause suffering. As we mentioned in the previous section, evil can hurt or harm others. So, offenses not only tempt others, the sin of the offense can result in their suffering as well.

PRINCIPLE: An offense can cause others to SUFFER.

Understanding the biblical meaning of *offend* will be very important when we get to the section on Matthew 18. But for now, let us move on to the next topic: *repentance*.

What Is Repentance?

It is impossible to talk about forgiveness without also discussing repentance because the latter depends upon the former. In fact, repentance is *how* we receive forgiveness from God because forgiveness is not freely given to everyone who just simply says to Him, “Please forgive me” or to those that claim they are “once forgiven, always forgiven.” Because God’s forgiveness is only through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, He will not grant it lightly. While repentance is not complicated, it is a deeply emotional and spiritual response of the heart resulting from our desire to love God. Much could be said about the topic but we will only summarize the basic aspects of repentance.

DEFINITION: Repentance is:

- 1) Asking God to apply the precious blood of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to cover and cleanse our sin:

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COLOSSIANS 1:14 in whom [*Jesus Christ*] we have redemption **through His blood, the [remission] of sins.**

ROMANS 4:7 “Blessed *are those* whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose **sins are covered [by the blood of Jesus Christ];**

1 JOHN 1:7 But if we walk in the light as He [*Jesus Christ*] is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and **the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.**

2) Asking God to apply the precious broken body of Jesus Christ for the healing of the sinner’s mind and heart:

a) 1 PETER 2:24 who Himself [*Jesus Christ*] bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for [justice]—**by whose [Jesus Christ] stripes you were healed.**

1) NOTE: The body of Jesus Christ was sacrificed for our SPIRITUAL healing from sin as well as physical healing.

3) Deep and heartfelt sorrow for both the sin and the resulting evil:

a) 2 CORINTHIANS 7:9 Now I [*Paul*] rejoice, not that you were made sorry, **but that your sorrow led to repentance.** For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing.

4) A sincere, fervent, and deep desire to never sin again:

a) 2 CORINTHIANS 7:10-11 For godly sorrow produces repentance *leading* to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. 11 For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: **What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication [of the sin]!** In all *things* you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

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A sinner must show God, through repentance, that he is worthy of receiving the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This is accompanied by a desire to put away sin and a renewed commitment to obeying His Law. Confessing our sins is not just obedience. We obey God's commandments *because* we have His *agape* love in us:

JOHN 14:21 **"He [Jesus Christ] who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me.**
And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him."

If we sincerely love God, then we desire above all things to obey Him and we strive to never disappoint God. It is because we love God that real repentance is a deeply emotional and spiritual response of the heart when we violate His Law.

What is Forgiveness?

For some, forgiveness is simply putting aside feelings of anger, bitterness, or guilt. Others consider it simply accepting an apology from someone for hurting them. But forgiveness is much more than that to God. Like repentance, forgiveness is not hard to understand but it is a major element of our relationship with God because it is impossible to avoid sin in this life. In fact, next to having *agape* love, forgiveness is the most important part of our relationship with God. However, we will only touch on forgiveness and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ because the Bible has much to say about it.

The Greek word for *forgive* means *to send away guilt*. This simple statement encapsulates the purpose of seeking God's forgiveness for sin. We can summarize it as:

DEFINITION: Forgiveness is:

- 1) God covering (atoning) the sin by the blood of Jesus Christ's sacrifice:
 - a) ROMANS 4:7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose **sins are covered [by the blood of Jesus Christ];**

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- 2) God cleansing the heart and mind of the sinner from the lust that led to the sin by the blood of Jesus Christ:
 - a) 1 JOHN 1:9 If we confess our sins, He *[God]* is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to **cleanse us from all [injustice]**.
- 3) God healing the heart and mind of the sinner of the sin by the broken body of Jesus Christ.
 - a) PSALM 41:4 I said, "LORD, be merciful to me; **heal my soul, for I have sinned** against You."
- 4) God releasing the sinner (lawbreaker) from the penalty for sin (death):
 - a) COLOSSIANS 2:13 And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He *[Jesus Christ]* has made alive together with Him, **having forgiven you all trespasses**,
 - b) 1 PETER 2:24 who Himself *[Jesus Christ]* bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that **we, having died to sins, might live** for [justice]—by whose stripes you were healed.

In the same way that sin is only *against* God, forgiveness is likewise only *from* God.

CHAPTER 2

Offender's Responsibility to God

With the important terms now defined, we can discuss the relationships of those involved with an offense. The first of these involves the offender and God. An offense always involves a violation of God's Law; that is, a sin. Because forgiveness for sin only comes from God and is only granted upon repentance on the part of the offender, it is the responsibility of the offender to reach out to God in prayer—and sometimes fasting as well. This kind of prayer is generally referred to as a *supplication*. We realize that our sin has separated us from God and that we have incurred the death penalty; so we plead with God to be merciful and forgiving.

Imagine a young boy who disobeys his parents. Upon seeing the displeasure or anger on the faces of his parents, the little boy breaks down in tears just from knowing how much he disappointed them. When someone sins, true repentance will be reflected in the heart in much the same way as the little boy. The offender will come to God quickly and beg for forgiveness.

In fact, the biblical meaning of *supplication* is to “*entreat* someone for a favor by offering an olive branch.” This is why fasting is quite often one of the responses of an offender, because it is a reflection of a humble and contrite heart that shows God a sincere desire to be forgiven. A humble and contrite heart (Isa. 57:15) is the first step in repenting of an offense.

Upon hearing the offender's prayer of repentance, God, in His love, mercy, and grace, grants forgiveness. But God does not just simply say, “Okay, you are forgiven.” Forgiveness requires the blood of Jesus Christ to cover the sin and cleanse the offender, as well as applying His broken body for healing the offender. The sacrifice of His Son is precious to God and will not be applied frivolously. In some cases, cleansing and healing of the heart and mind takes time and may require additional fasting and prayer to

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complete the process—but God’s forgiveness is absolute and complete.

Once the offender repents and God grants forgiveness, the relationship between them is restored; that is, *reconciled*. As it says, “**Repent** therefore and be converted, **that your sins may be blotted out.**” (Acts 3:19). God completely removes our sins so that we are reconciled to Him:

COLOSSIANS 1:20-21 and **by Him [Jesus Christ] to reconcile all things to Himself**, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. 21 And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet **now He has reconciled [you]**.

The word *reconcile* used here is unique and specific to our relationship with God. It is from two independent Greek words meaning to *fully reconcile*. Full reconciliation is only possible with God because only He is capable of removing our transgressions “As far as the east is from the west” (Ps. 103:12).

DEFINTION: **Full reconciliation** is ALWAYS possible with God.

With God, forgiveness is absolute and total. He does not remember our sins once He grants forgiveness (Jer. 31:34). In other words, there are no encumbrances between us and God when He forgives our sins. So, God’s forgiveness *fully* reconciles us.

While full reconciliation with God is always possible, this is not necessarily the case with people. We all have the “law of sin and death” within us and some offenses are worse than others. Because of this, there are some offenses where full reconciliation is not always possible or prudent. More on this later.

Victim’s Responsibility to God

Now let us look at the responsibility of the victim to God that results from an offense.

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When an offense occurs, it may be surprising to know that the victim also has a responsibility to God. Notice:

MATTHEW 6:14-15 “For if you forgive men their trespasses, [offenses] your heavenly Father will also forgive you [your sins]. 15 “But if you do not forgive men their trespasses [offenses], neither will your Father forgive your trespasses [offenses].”

These scriptures (see also Mark 11:26 and Luke 6:37) emphatically state that the victim of an offense *must* forgive the offender. If we do not forgive the offenses of others, God says He will *not* forgive our sins. Scripture is very clear about this, but how many take this seriously? How often have we gone to God with sincere, heartfelt repentance for a sin we have committed and not even given it a second thought that we have refused to forgive someone who offended us? It is a serious matter indeed to contemplate that forgiveness for our sins is refused by God because we have not forgiven someone else.

PRINCIPLE: God will not forgive the sins of a victim if he or she is UNWILLING to forgive the offender.

Forgiving others is hard. It absolutely requires God’s love in us. It requires humility to sincerely forgive someone who offends us.

ISAIAH 57:15 For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

Agape love and humility are not natural to mankind, but they are essential for true Christians because we are to love one another as well as our enemies (Matt. 5:44).

1 JOHN 3:11, 14-15 For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, ... 14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love *his* brother abides in death. 15 Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

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So, again, what is our responsibility to God when an offense occurs? To have *agape* love and humility so that we are WILLING to forgive those who offend us.

PRINCIPLE: God requires a victim to at least be WILLING to forgive an offender.

This is also how we avoid the temptations and enticements to sin when an offense occurs. What is the temptation or enticement to sin? Most often through anger. This can lead to our being *unwilling* to forgive. Since God forgives us only as we forgive others, this can be the biggest threat to our eternal lives.

DEFINITION: The temptation or enticement to sin of an offense is because the victim becomes UNWILLING to forgive the offender, many times through anger.

Forgiveness also means that a Christian accepts repentance from an offender. Someone who stays angry can even be the cause of a situation or environment that prevents the offender from repenting. This can happen if we think or say evil things or by deliberately shunning the offender. Again, sustained anger is a major barrier to forgiveness.

Think about it. If an offender comes to us and repents, would we be able to sincerely and humbly forgive them if we are still angry? No! Would we be showing *agape* love to the person? No! This kind of anger puts us in a very dangerous spiritual condition because God says He will not forgive our sins if we do not forgive those who offend us and accept their repentance.

PRINCIPLE: Refusing to forgive an offender is a SIN.

This is why *agape* love and humility are foundational to forgiving others—because we, like any offender, are sinners who require God’s forgiveness. Therefore, God commands us to show love to both our brethren *and* our enemies:

LUKE 6:31, 35-37 “And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise. ... 35 “But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your

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reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. 36 “Therefore **be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.** 37 “Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. **Forgive, and you will be forgiven.**

God loved us when we were sinners, and He expects His children to extend the same willingness to forgive as He does to us. In fact, it does not matter if the offender repents at all. Our duty is to be *willing* to forgive whether or not an offender repents.

So, does God expect us to never be angry? No, but God is merciful to help us work through it. Through prayer we can have the *agape* love and humility to be able to forgive those who offend us. Notice the focus on offenses when Jesus taught the disciples how to pray:

MATTHEW 6:12-13 And **forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors [indebted by an offense].** 13 And **do not lead us into temptation [offenses],** But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

When we pray and ask God to forgive us, we are to remember that we must “also forgive our debtors”; that is, be mindful that God forgives our sins only as we forgive those of others.

So, what about us? Can we forgive those who offend us? What do we think or do that prevents us from forgiving others? Perhaps we wrongly assume that an offender does not want to repent and, in doing so, we put up barriers against him or her. Or, maybe, deep down we are secretly hoping that the offender refuses to repent. We must examine our motives and assumptions to ensure our carnal nature is not standing in the way of forgiving someone. Or, what if someone refuses to repent? Would that also prevent us from forgiving them? Can we still be willing to forgive?

In the end, it is *our* choice. Are we humble and contrite? The love of God in our hearts is reflected in our willingness to forgive others. In this life we are constantly fighting our own sins and the offenses of others to stay *fully reconciled* with God. It can be terribly difficult and requires tremendous effort. Our eternal lives

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are at stake so it is vital that we forgive anyone who offends us. Those who are unforgiving will not be in the Kingdom of God.

Responsibilities of the Offender & Victim

Perhaps the most difficult relationship is the one between an offender and a victim. Offenses can cause a rift in the relationship between people. Restoring the broken relationship is called *reconciliation*. Notice:

MATTHEW 5:23-24 “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that **your brother has something against you**, 24 “leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. **First be reconciled to your brother**, and then come and offer your gift.

Here is a case where a brother (or sister) in Christ was offended because he has something *against* the person offering the gift. Jesus said it is the responsibility of the believing offender to go to his brother and be reconciled. So what is reconciliation?

DEFINITION: **Reconciliation** is restoring a broken relationship between people or between a person and God.

But how does reconciliation occur between people? Is it different from the *full* reconciliation between people and God? Many assume that reconciliation fully restores a relationship physically, mentally, and emotionally to the way it was prior to the offense. However, that is not always possible or prudent in the case with people because it is dependent upon the nature and seriousness of the offense.

For example, serious offenses, such as adultery or spousal abuse, can permanently alter a relationship and can be a legitimate reason for divorce even in marriages between converted people. Even when there is repentance, it is not unusual for there to be deep wounds that take a long time to heal. Furthermore, in some cases there are behavioral patterns that are cause for concern. This means that full restoration of the physical, mental, and emotional

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relationship is not always possible, or even prudent, between people—unlike with God.

However, other offenses—such as gossip, hurt feelings, disagreements, false accusations, and jealousies—might be resolved so that a relationship is fully restored. So, what does God expect when people try to reconcile with one another? At a minimum, we are to restore *agape* love one to another:

1 JOHN 3:23 And this is His [*Jesus Christ's*] commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and **[agape] love one another, as He gave us commandment.**

Jesus Christ commanded us to love one another even as He loves us (John 15:12). What is *agape* love? It is one of the most misunderstood terms in the Bible because the English word *love* only refers to an emotional feeling for someone. In fact, most of the time it is used as a noun, whereas *agape* love is **always** a verb in the sense of showing or giving love. In other words, the Greek word *agape* is less about feelings and more about doing. Notice how Paul defines *agape* love:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7 [*Agape*] Love suffers long [*forbears*] and is kind [*well-meaning*]; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; 5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; 6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

As mentioned several times, *agape* love is the foundation of reconciliation between us and God as well as between people. The problem with reconciliation between people is that the relationship may not be able to be fully restored, as it can be with God. However, God commands us to show *agape* love to one another in spite of our differences. Therefore:

DEFINITION: **Reconciliation** between people is, at a minimum, restoring *agape* love among them.

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On the surface this can be hard to accept because many misunderstand the meaning and intent of *agape* love. How did Paul define it? He said *agape* love is:

- 1) Forbearing with one another (long-suffering),
- 2) Intending to do good to others (kindhearted),
- 3) Not envious (generous),
- 4) Not boastful (humble),
- 5) Not prideful (meek),
- 6) Not behaving disgracefully (acting decently),
- 7) Not being selfish (giving),
- 8) Not easily provoked (patient),
- 9) Not thinking evil (justice),
- 10) Not rejoicing in iniquity (just).
- 11) Rejoices in the truth (truthful).

If *agape* love is all these things, can we show love regardless of whatever offenses come our way? Yes! Can a repentant offender show love toward those who were hurt? Yes! *Agape* love does not require anything in return. It simply desires to serve and obey God while doing good for others. In fact, *agape* love can be demonstrated even when someone is absent. How? One way is by not talking about the problems and sins of others. Instead, we can *pray* for them (Matt. 5:44).

DEFINITION: **Agape love** is an unconditional, wholehearted desire to serve and obey God the Father and Jesus Christ. It is also a discipline of thoughts and emotions to do good for others without expecting anything in return. *Agape* love is long-suffering, kindhearted, generous, humble, meek, behaving decently, giving, patient, just, and truthful (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

This is in complete contrast to the selfish so-called love of many in the world. But why is reconciliation restoring *agape* love toward one another? Because the primary purpose of reconciliation is to

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reestablish a relationship with a brother or sister after it has been damaged by an offense. While all parties involved in an offense need to deal with their personal sins, there is more to it than that. We need to reconcile with each other at least to the extent that we are *all members of the body of Christ* (1 Cor. 12:27). Notice this particular scripture:

MATTHEW 18: 15 “Moreover **if your brother sins against you**, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, **you have gained your brother**.

The word *gained* is used in the sense of “winning a convert” back to God. When there is reconciliation, the victim has “gained” the offender back as a spiritual brother or sister, indicating that the offender is also reconciled to God through repentance. This word is also used by Paul:

1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-22 For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a servant to all, **that I might win the more**; 20 and to the Jews I became as a Jew, **that I might win Jews**; to those *who are* under the law, as under the law, **that I might win those who are under the law**; 21 to those *who are* without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), **that I might win those who are without law**; 22 to the weak I became as weak, **that I might win the weak**. I have become all things to all *men*, **that I might by all means save some**.

The word *gain* is used in the sense that Paul might “SAVE some” (verse 22). So, reconciliation between people is about restoring the relationship between people—as well as their relationship with God that was compromised by the sin of the offense.

DEFINITION: To **gain** a brother or sister means to restore the relationship between people, as well as with God.

This is also described in Galatians 6:1: “Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in some offense, you who are spiritual, **restore** such a one in a spirit of meekness....” Here, *restore* means to help the offender reestablish his or her spiritual relationship with God and with

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others. This is showing *agape* love to the other person, which is how reconciliation occurs.

So, what is required for reconciliation between people? Exactly the same things as required for reconciliation between us and God—repentance and forgiveness. Notice:

LUKE 17:3-4 “Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and **if he repents, forgive him.** 4 “And if he sins against you seven times in a day, **and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.**”

An offender must repent to the victim—who must, in turn, forgive the offender. This is not a suggestion; it is a commandment from Jesus Christ. However, it is contingent upon the offender’s repentance because in verse 3 it says, “IF he repents.”

PRINCIPLE: If the offender **repents**, the victim must FORGIVE the offender.

If only God can forgive sin, what does this mean? Think of it as the offender saying with *all* humility, “I regret the suffering I caused and desire to have peace between us”—and the victim saying to the offender with *all* humility, “I accept your apology and am willing to reestablish peace between us.” This is a vital exchange. This is what sets the foundation for reconciliation; but it must be done with humility, as will be evident in their sincerity.

PRINCIPLE: **Reconciliation** requires the offender to REPENT (acknowledge the evil of their sin) and the victim to FORGIVE (accept the offender’s repentance).

Ideally, both parties will spend time in prayer to God before they attempt to reconcile with each other. This helps prepare them spiritually so that they can show each other humility and godly love.

So what happens when the offense cannot be resolved? If the offender refuses to repent, the victim only has the responsibility to be *willing* to forgive the person. Likewise, if the victim refuses to

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forgive, the offender can only be *willing* to repent. However, without repentance or forgiveness, reconciliation is not possible.

PRINCIPLE: Reconciliation between people can only occur when there is both REPENTANCE and FORGIVENESS.

Such is common in the world today. It is rare that someone, even in the *ekklesia*, will apologize anymore. The irony is that the world is constantly preaching “tolerance” but is unwilling to say, “I’m sorry.”

Now we need to clarify another aspect of reconciliation. It is not always possible, or even prudent, to *fully* reconcile the relationship between people for every offense. For example, reconciliation does not mean that a relationship should continue between a husband and wife after adultery or abuse (although it might). It is not appropriate for further contact in the case of rape, and a child molester should never be allowed to associate with children.

PRINCIPLE: Serious offenses may, of necessity, result in a relationship that is LIMITED to mutual *agape* love without further contact or association. In other words, full reconciliation may not be possible or prudent.

While God forgives sin completely, there is always a price to be paid for the evil that results from the sin. Sometimes it is small and can be overcome, such as with an unintentional offense. However, major offenses come at great cost. An example would be David’s adultery with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of Uriah the Hittite. Besides the fact that Uriah paid with his life, a very heavy price was exacted from David for his sins even after he was completely forgiven by God. Remember what God said? Because of his adultery, the “sword would never depart from [David’s] house” (2 Sam. 12:10).

Finally, what do we do in cases where contact between the parties of an offense is no longer possible or perhaps one of them has since died? In these situations, we are to have the heart and mind

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such that we would *desire* to reconcile if we could reach out to the other person.

Is reconciliation hard? Yes, very hard. At times, it is just as difficult, if not more so, than asking God to forgive our own sins. However, reconciliation is possible with true humility and God's love.

Up to now, we have discussed the responsibilities of Christians. But how do we deal with those who are unconverted?

Offenses in the World

Those who are unconverted cannot be expected to obey God's Law or to properly deal with offenses. When offenses arise with unconverted people, Jesus Christ tells us that we are to not resist their evil:

MATTHEW 5:38-45 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 "But I [*Jesus Christ*] tell you **not to resist an evil person**. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40 "If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have *your* cloak also. 41 "And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 "Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away. 43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 "But I say to you, **love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you**, 45 "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

These days, an unconverted person is unlikely to repent if they cause an offense or forgive us if we offend them. When this happens, we are to "turn the other [*cheek*] to him"; that is, show our enemies *agape* love, be kind to them, and pray for them. We are not to *resist* or react in kind, against their evil. Jesus Christ said:

LUKE 6:35 "But [*agape*] **love your enemies**, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and **your reward will be**

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great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil.

So, what does it mean to “turn the other cheek” and not resist their evil? Do we allow someone to continue to falsely accuse or abuse us? No! Even Jesus rebuked people or walked away on occasion. However, our first response is to establish peace if at all possible:

ROMANS 12:17-18 Repay no one evil for evil. **Have regard for good things [do what is right]** in the sight of all men. 18 **If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.**

When offenses with unconverted people arise, we are to establish peace if possible (“as much as is depends upon **you**”). One approach is “A soft answer turns away wrath” (Prov. 15:1). If we committed an offense, then an immediate apology is usually appropriate. In effect, we should offer repentance. Simply saying something such as, “I’m sorry I offended you because I value you as a friend / coworker / helper” can sometimes restore peace.

But what if we were the victim of an offense? First, avoid anger and try to defuse the situation by saying with all humility, “I’m sorry you feel that way toward me. Would you tell me why you are upset with me? I would like to try to resolve this.” Failing to pacify the offender, it might be best to just walk away. It may be that the person needs time to calm down so the matter can be addressed later. As much as possible, avoid further upsetting the person. Whenever interaction is required, do “good” unto them. As it says, “do not be overcome by evil, but **overcome evil with good.**” (Rom. 12:21). This means showing them *agape* love.

All who would enter into the Kingdom of God must endure suffering. It is all part of this life for the begotten children of God! Until God calls those of the world, there will be times we must suffer their evil without responding in kind or expecting reconciliation. Jesus Himself set us an example:

1 PETER 2:23 who, **when He [Jesus Christ] was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten,** but committed *Himself* to Him who judges [justly];

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Jesus did not retaliate when He was vilified (reviled) but suffered the evil of His enemies because it is the desire of God to save them at a later time. We cannot expect to deal with unconverted people in the same manner as a true Christian. Instead, we must do all that is prudent and possible to resolve the situation and make peace. In these cases, a believer is sometimes limited to repenting to God if they caused offense or just being willing to forgive. Beyond that, we cannot expect unconverted people to know, much less obey, God's statutes in dealing with offenses.

CHAPTER 3

Prologue to MATTHEW 18

You may have wondered after all the discussion to this point why very little has been said about Matthew 18. First, understand that it is a statute of God that applies only to those who are part of the body of Christ. As such, it is the law that deals with unresolved offenses. Additionally, it is a grave warning to anyone who refuses to try to reconcile with a brother or sister in Christ.

Those who are truly converted will humbly and sincerely seek to reconcile with each other at least to the extent that *agape* love is restored between them as we discussed before. When people reconcile offenses, Matthew 18 becomes unnecessary.

PRINCIPLE: Matthew 18 only applies to **converted** Christians and is a LAST RESORT for dealing with an unresolved offense.

When offenses are not reconciled, Matthew 18 is the applicable statute because it is focused on two situations: 1) how the victim and *ekklesia* deal with an **unrepentant** offender and, 2) how God deals with an **unforgiving** victim.

Part 1: Nature of Offenses (Matt. 18:1-15)

Matthew 18 sets the stage for dealing with unresolved offenses by introducing the serious nature of such offenses—and it does so in an unusual way.

MATTHEW 18:1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is **greatest** in the kingdom of heaven?”

It starts with a question from the disciples of who would be the greatest *in the Kingdom*. The disciples were lusting for power and authority over each other as well as over all of God’s future family. This would come up more than once (even during Passover—Matt. 20:20-24) because it was a serious offense between them (Luke 22:24).

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The Greek word for *greatest* means *larger*, especially in age. An example of this word is in Romans 9:12 where the same word is translated *elder*, meaning *older*. Unlike modern times, people had great respect for their elders, especially older men, because they were expected to be wise leaders and just judges in the community.

The disciples were infected with sinful pride, so they argued for supremacy over one another in the Kingdom. Obviously, all of this changed after their conversion.

Oddly enough, in response to their question, Jesus calls over a little child. The child is very young and, as such, humble, obedient, and respectful of the adults—the antithesis of the prideful disciples.

MATTHEW 18:2-4 Then Jesus called **a little child** to Him, set him in the midst of them, 3 and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, **unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.** 4 “Therefore **whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom** of heaven.

After picking up the little child (Luke 9:47), Jesus told the disciples that they would *not* enter into the Kingdom unless they are converted and become as the little child. This must have shocked the disciples who likely assumed their positions in the Kingdom were assured. Furthermore, the concept that power and authority are given to those who are humble was foreign to their thinking. Jesus was obviously addressing the motive behind their question—pride. They were filled with it and blinded even to the humility required of Jesus Christ to become flesh and die for the sins of mankind:

PHILIPPIANS 2:3-8 3 *Let nothing be done* through selfish ambition or conceit, but **in lowliness of mind [humility] let each esteem others better than himself.** 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 **Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,** 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but **made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant,** and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And

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being found in appearance as a man, **He humbled Himself** and became obedient **to the point of death**, even the death of the cross.

So, Jesus leads into the subject of offenses by establishing humility as the core element in dealing with the disciples. Without it, He said, we will not even be *in* the Kingdom.

PRINCIPLE: **Humility** is foundational to reconciling OFFENSES.

After showing them their lack of humility, Jesus then warned the disciples of the consequences of offenses:

MATTHEW 18:5-7 “Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. 6 “But **whoever causes one of these little ones who believe [trust] in Me to sin**, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. 7 “**Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!**”

Beginning here, Jesus addresses the serious nature of offenses. Continuing to use the child as an example, Jesus said that anyone who offends a little child that believes and trusts in Him would be better off dead. Jesus then pronounced a woe upon all unrepentant offenders. Let this sink in: *it is better to be dead than offend a believer* (unless they repent).

In the Bible, a woe (Greek *ouai*) is the pronouncement of a pending judgment of death (as in the three “woes” of Revelation). Can there be any more somber warning? Notice Jesus’ emphasis in the next two verses:

MATTHEW 18:8-9 “If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast *it* from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. 9 “And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast *it* from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be **cast into hell [gehenna] fire**.

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In no uncertain terms, Jesus said that whoever causes an offense and does not repent will end up in the lake of fire.

DEFINITION: A **woe** (Greek *ouai*) is a pronouncement of a judgment to ETERNAL DEATH (the lake of Gehenna fire) and a grave warning to repent.

But why are offenses so grievous? Read on:

MATTHEW 18:10-14 “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven. 11 **For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.** 12 “What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? 13 “And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that *sheep* than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. 14 “Even so **it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.**

The reason offenses are so serious is plain: they may cause someone to lose eternal life. Anyone who perishes because of an offense on our part puts us in grave danger of the second death unless we truly repent “with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning” (Joel 2:12).

Part 2: The Unrepentant Offender (Matt. 18:15-20)

There are only two possible responses a person can have when they commit an offense: either they repent or they do not. This next part of Matthew 18 is focused on the case where an offender refuses to repent. It describes the roles and responsibilities of the victim and the *ekklesia* and then ends with instructions on dealing with the unrepentant offender.

MATTHEW 18:15 “Moreover if your brother sins against you, **go and tell him his fault between you and him alone [privately].** If he hears you, **you have gained your brother.**

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Jesus sets the stage by describing a situation where a brother in Christ causes an offense but refuses to repent (otherwise, the matter would have already been resolved). The first duty is for the victim to *privately* tell the offender of his or her fault. If the offender had already repented, then this would not be necessary. This ensures the offender is aware that offense occurred.

PRINCIPLE: The **first step** in dealing with an unrepentant offender is for the victim to PRIVATELY tell the offender of the offense.

The word *fault* can be confusing. It does not mean *sin* but is actually a verb that means to *admonish, reprove, rebuke, or convict*. This verse is the only place it was translated *fault* out of the sixteen other places it is used in the Bible. In every other scripture, it is used for rebuking or admonishing someone. For example, in 2 Timothy 4:2 it says, “Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. **Convince [admonish]**, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” Here, the word *convince* is the same as *fault*. Therefore, we could render Matthew 18:15 as, “So then, if your brother offends you, go and **rebuke or admonish him** privately. If he is willing to hear you, you have gained your brother.” Luke also clearly confirms that *fault* is an act of rebuking or admonishing the offender for the offense:

LUKE 17:3 “Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, **rebuke** him ...

Now, take a look at the word *sin* in verse 15. It is actually the same word used in Matthew 27:4 by Judas who said of his betrayal of Jesus, “I have **sinned** by betraying innocent blood.” Therefore, Matthew 18:15 is dealing with an offense that is truly a sin or violation of God’s Law. It is not a simple misunderstanding or minor argument. Real offenses are sins; as such, the offender is in peril of the second death unless they repent. We know this to be true because he needs to be “gained” back; that is, reconciled to God and restored as a brother or sister in Christ (verse 15).

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Finally, the word *hear* in Matthew 18:15 (“if he [*the offender*] **hears** you”) has a much deeper implication in the Greek than in English. It is hearing in the sense of listening to what is said, understanding what is said, and then acting on what is said:

DEFINITION: To **hear** means to LISTEN and OBEY. It requires listening to, understanding, and then acting on what is said.

An offender must truly listen and be willing to accept a rebuke. The words may not be pleasant or comfortable, but God expects us to listen to and hear one another especially when it comes to the serious matter of offenses. Finally, the offender must repent.

The next part of the process deals with an offender who refuses to listen to the victim:

MATTHEW 18:16 “But **if he [*the offender*] will not hear, take with you one or two more**, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’

When the first attempt at talking to the offender fails, the victim is now required to bring one or two others along and, again, try to talk with the offender.

Notice that it says “**one** or **two** more, that ‘by the mouth of **two** or **three** witnesses...” This means the victim and the “one or two more” are now all *witnesses*. At this point, the offender is being subjected to a very specific legal process. The last half of verse 16 is a quote from a statute (commandment) in the Old Testament:

DEUTERONOMY 19:15 “**One witness shall not rise against a man** concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; **by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established**.”

Witnesses are an important part of God’s judicial system because they provide legal testimony that establishes the truth of any matter brought before a judge. In fact, they were still required at the time of the disciples (Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; et al). They are vital to establishing truth. This is why God requires them for all

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judgments, on earth as well as in heaven, including the final judgment (Matthew 12:36). Witnesses were particularly important in death penalty cases:

DEUTERONOMY 17:6 “Whoever is deserving of death **shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness.**

Remember that an offense can be such a grievous sin that Jesus said “woe!” unto anyone who offends. Therefore, in this circumstance, the offender may now be in danger of the death penalty unless he or she repents (Matt. 18:8-9), so two or three witnesses are required. In verse 16, these witnesses should be a clear signal to the offender that the matter is being established on legal grounds.

PRINCIPLE: The **second step** in dealing with an unrepentant offender is for the victim and one or two others to speak with the offender. At this point, they are all WITNESSES.

Their testimony to the offender regarding the offense establishes the situation legally under the Law of God. If the offender *hears* them (by repenting at some point), then the brother or sister is “gained” and the situation resolved. However, if not, the third step is to bring the matter to the *ekklesia*; that is, the *ekklesia*:

MATTHEW 18:17 “And if he [*the offender*] refuses to hear them, **tell it to the ekklesia.** But if he refuses even to hear the *ekklesia*, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

Now the matter is brought to the attention of the *ekklesia*. Many have mistakenly thought that the *ekklesia* means to tell it to an ordained elder. While an elder is a member of the *ekklesia*, the *ekklesia* does not consist solely of elders. The *ekklesia* is the body of Christ, so it includes all baptized members.

Who would that include? Today, we have the means to contact every single member of the *ekklesia* in the world; but is that what

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was intended? No! Remember, the initial meeting was a private one. This is important because privacy gives the offender the best opportunity to repent in the presence of one, or a few, humble fellow saints rather than in front of a large group. It is important to keep the matter private because public knowledge of the sin could potentially hinder the offender from repenting and reconciling. What is the most important characteristic of those involved in dealing with an offense? Humility. How are we to be toward one another? Loving and forgiving, because God has forgiven our sins. Therefore, we will desire the offender to repent and do our best to encourage it.

Understanding *who* of the *ekklesia* should be involved can be seen by knowing *why* the *ekklesia* is involved. In this case, the matter is brought before the *ekklesia* for judgment! Notice the Corinthians:

1 CORINTHIANS 6:1-5 Dare **any of you, having a matter against another**, go to law before the [unjust], and not before the saints? 2 Do you not know that **the saints will judge the world**? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? 3 Do you not know that we shall judge angels? **How much more, things that pertain to this life?** 4 **If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the *ekklesia* to judge?** 5 I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren?

Paul was disappointed that the Corinthians were not dealing with an offense properly. He said that by this time there should be men among them capable of judging matters between brethren. When witnesses bring a matter to the *ekklesia*, it is for the purpose of establishing a judgment by wise, converted, and humble Christians. This is confirmed in the next three verses:

MATTHEW 18:18-20 18 "Assuredly, I say to you, **whatever you bind on earth** will be bound in heaven, and **whatever you loose on earth** will be loosed in heaven. 19 "Again I say to you that **if two of you agree on earth concerning**

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anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. 20 “For where two or three [witnesses] are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

Whatever judgment is rendered by the *ekklesia* is bound or loosed in heaven as long as it is done according to God’s Law and they are gathered together in His name.

PRINCIPLE: The **third step** in dealing with an unrepentant offender is to bring the matter before those in the *ekklesia* who are able to judge the matter.

Given that the reason to involve others in the *ekklesia* is for judgment, does that mean the entire body of Christ needs to hear the matter? No! **The matter should be brought before only those necessary and able to render a judgment.**

PRINCIPLE: Any offense that is brought before the *ekklesia* should only include the victim(s), the one or two additional witnesses, and at least one converted man capable of judging the matter.

A judge might be an elder but he is not required to be one. It could involve more than one judge and, perhaps, others that *need* to know (as determined by the nature and extent of the offense), but no more. It is brought to the *ekklesia* with the hope that the offender will yet repent; therefore, those selected to hear the matter are only the victims, witnesses, and judges. Any more than that and the hearing may not be being conducted decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40). This is important. Again, the desire is always to “gain” back the brother or sister in Christ.

The sincere desire of those involved in judging an offense must be that the offender repent. Otherwise, the hearing becomes strictly a matter of vengeance or condemnation. That prerogative falls under the authority of God alone. If the offender still refuses to repent, only then is the judgment rendered:

MATTHEW 18:17 “And if he [*the offender*] refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the *ekklesia*. But if he refuses even to hear the

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ekklesia, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

The Jews traditionally considered the heathen and tax collectors (*publicans* in the KJV) as undesirables. But what does that mean? Paul sums up what the *ekklesia* must do with unrepentant offenders:

ROMANS 16:17 Now I urge you, brethren, **note those who cause divisions and offenses**, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, **and avoid them.**

Those who cause offenses and do not repent are obviously not serving Jesus Christ and the *ekklesia*. Worse yet, they are causing dissensions and divisions within the body of Christ. Such unrepentant offenders are to be avoided.

PRINCIPLE: If an offender is unrepentant and is causing dissention and division, the **judgment** of the *ekklesia* is to note of the person and AVOID him or her.

Furthermore, an offender must also understand that the penalty for sin is death unless there is repentance.

PRINCIPLE: An **unrepentant** offender is at risk of the SECOND DEATH.

If an offender later shows fruits of true repentance, he or she must be forgiven and welcomed back into the sheepfold. Again, the motive of all those involved in judging an offense is to “gain” back a brother or sister to God.

Part 3: The Unforgiving Victim (Mat. 18:21-35)

Now the focus of Matthew 18 changes from an unrepentant offender to an unforgiving victim. Read the next two verses:

MATTHEW 18:21-22 Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, **how often shall my brother sin [and cause evil] against me, and I forgive him [the offender]**? Up to seven times?” 22 Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

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Here Peter asks a reasonable question—how often are we to forgive an offender? The answer is *every* time the offender truly repents. Luke makes this even clearer:

LUKE 17:3-4 “Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and **if he repents, forgive him [the offender]**. 4 “And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.”

A victim must forgive an offender. This is the beginning of reconciliation. Now, however, a subsequent parable makes it plain what happens if the victim refuses to forgive:

MATTHEW 18:23-35 “Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 “And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 25 “But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. 26 “The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ 27 “Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. 28 “But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took *him* by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ 29 “So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ 30 “And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. 31 “So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. 32 “Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. 33 **Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?**’ 34 “And **his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers** until he should pay all that was due to him. 35 **“So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.”**

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This is an account about someone who was forgiven a huge debt by a king but turns around and refuses to forgive a much smaller debt owed to him by his fellow servant. The king's response was to deliver the man to the torturers "until he should pay all that he **owed** to [the king]." What does every sinner owe God? Their life! Anyone who withholds forgiveness, especially when the offender repents, will not have God's forgiveness of their sins and ultimately end up in the second death (the lake of fire).

PRINCIPLE: An **unforgiving** victim is at risk of the SECOND DEATH.

Repentance and forgiveness are required between people because we are commanded to reconcile with one another. Even if the relationship cannot be *fully* reconciled, we are to restore godly love between us. No one can hope to be in the Kingdom of God without a humble heart toward God *and* our brethren.

Matthew 18 is the statute that applies to offenses between brethren when there is an unrepentant offender or unforgiving victim. Ideally, true Christians will reconcile their offenses without having to invoke this as a last resort. Offenses are extremely serious matters that can result in the loss of eternal life, so repentance and forgiveness are not to be taken lightly.

CHAPTER 4

Betrayal – The Worst of Offenses

There is one last subject to cover—betrayal. It is important to shed some light on this subject because it gives those who have never experienced betrayal a sense of the terrible cost of it. For those who have felt the pain of it (sometimes literally), it is vital to understand the impact and how to deal with it. Lastly, betrayal is the hardest offense to reconcile, as we will see.

A betrayal is a type of offense; however, it is by far the most grievous of offenses because it takes advantage of a relationship based upon a deep bond of trust. So, before going into details let us define it:

DEFINITION: A **betrayal** is an offense against someone with whom there is a COVENANT relationship, meaning there is a bond of trust between them. Someone who betrays a covenant relationship is called a *traitor*.

Because of the covenant relationship, there is *always* a victim with betrayal. While all offenses involve other people, there is not always a real “victim.” This is true when they resist the temptation to sin or there is no significant suffering as a result of the offense (although, reconciliation is still required.) But with a betrayal, there is always a victim because the bond of trust was broken.

PRINCIPLE: There is **always** a victim who SUFFERS as a result of betrayal because it breaks the bond of trust.

While a covenant can be a formal contract, for the purposes of discussing betrayal, *covenant* herein refers to any relationship between two or more people based upon *explicit* or *implicit* **trust** resulting from strong emotional ties. Betrayal breaks the covenant by violating those bonds of trust.

One obvious example is someone who betrays his or her own country of birth or allegiance. The relationship is based upon trust

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that the citizen loves his country and will not violate the loyalty to his or her country by aiding or abetting another country or enemy. Likewise, the government is trusted to ensure the citizen has certain freedoms and protections available under the laws.

On the other hand, the most important covenant is with God. This is between a person who vows to trust, love, and obey God who, in return, forgives the person's sins and promises the gift of eternal life. It is formally established at baptism with the sealing of the Holy Spirit. Our relationship with God is, in fact, a marriage covenant:

2 CORINTHIANS 11:2 For I [*Paul*] am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For **I have betrothed you to one husband,** that I may present *you* as a **chaste virgin to Christ.**

In the marriage covenant with God, the bond of trust necessarily runs deeper than any other covenant because the relationship is not just for this physical life but for all eternity.

The most common covenant is a marriage between a man and woman in which they vow to trust, love, and care for each other in a very special relationship that is only shared with each other. (Even though most marriages require a license from the government, it is their verbal pledge or vow to one another before God that is the basis for the covenant in exactly the same manner as our baptismal covenant with God.) Their relationship is based upon mutual trust that each will remain faithful, love and care for each other throughout their lives while providing for each other's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs.

When children come into a marriage, there is an unspoken covenant because they are helpless and dependent upon their parents for everything. The children trust their parents to care and provide for them. This makes the bond of trust IMPLICIT; that is, the children trust their parents because they have no choice.

A close, personal friendship with someone is obviously another type of covenant because it is also based upon mutual trust and respect. Even though it may not be as formal or emotionally deep

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as marriage or baptism, it is still a covenant relationship. One example of this is the friendship between David and Jonathan:

1 SAMUEL 18:3 Then **Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul.**

Finally, even business relationships can be a covenant, including between co-owners or between owners and employees. The owners trust that their employees will not betray company information or steal from or otherwise harm the business. On the other hand, the employees trust their employers to pay the agreed upon wages, provide certain benefits, and ensure some measure of job security.

What distinguishes a *betrayal* from an *offense* is trust, which is the foundation for all covenant relationships. Furthermore, trust is built upon emotional bonds, so covenant relationships mean there is much more involved than is the case with acquaintances or strangers. An offense between people in a covenant relationship is called a *betrayal* because trust is compromised. The consequence is usually severe, emotional trauma for the victim since trust is built upon powerful feelings of friendship, affection, and/or romantic love.

One of the most common betrayals is of the marriage covenant. It can come as a result of adultery which destroys all, or at least a significant part, of the bonds of trust in the relationship.

NOTE: Adultery is not limited to a physical act but can occur when proper affection for a spouse is intentionally withheld or inappropriately directed toward another person. Affection is not just a reference to sexual love but, rather, of all forms of emotional expression including fondness, tenderness, closeness, endearment, respect, regard, admiration, etc.

Another leading cause is abuse, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual.

NOTE: Abuse of a spouse—be it physical, emotional, or spiritual—is a betrayal because the marriage covenant is

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established upon vows to love, cherish, and care for each other, as God intended in the marriage.

Marriage covenants produce profoundly deep emotions whether they are between people or with God. The depth is a direct reflection of the extent of the trust between them, which normally grows over time. Love develops as the trust builds, whether between people or with God. An offense that occurs in a covenant relationship is elevated to betrayal because it violates the covenant by destroying the bond of trust. This results in pain, heartache, and grief. While a marriage covenant can survive betrayal, the price that is paid is always loss of a significant amount of trust. As a consequence, there is a terrible mental, emotional, and spiritual impact.

The marriage covenant between husband and wife might survive betrayal. But, even after reconciliation, the trust and love between them will never be what it once was or become what it might have been without the betrayal. Betrayals can also result in dissolution of the marriage (divorce). Adultery and abuse are the most common betrayals of the marriage covenant.

In the case of betraying the covenant with God, a repentant person could still reconcile and receive eternal life—but their works might be forfeited with a loss of reward (1 Cor. 3:11-15).

On the other hand, betrayal can be such that the relationship is irreconcilable. Anyone who refuses to repent betrays the sacrifice of Jesus Christ given for his or her sins. This is something that God will not tolerate and is absolutely clear in Hebrews 10:

HEBREWS 10: 26-27, 29-31 For **if we sin willfully** after we have received the knowledge of the truth, **there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins**, 27 but a certain fearful **expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation** which will devour the adversaries [*of God*]. 28 Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ... 29 Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, **counted the blood of the covenant**

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by which he was sanctified **a common [unholy] thing**, and insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. And again, “The LORD will judge His people.” 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Another common betrayal is when an adult offends a child. Because children are completely dependent upon the parents, they trust without reservation. A child develops an implicit bond of trust with the parent. Betrayal of a child usually occurs within a family in the form of physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse. However, these same offenses can involve children outside familial bloodlines. Because children are the most vulnerable members of society, betraying a child is possibly the worst of all offenses both to society and God, which is why Jesus Christ pronounced a “woe!” upon those who offend them (Matt. 18:6).

Beyond the offenses already mentioned, there have been cases involving some in positions of authority within the *ekklesia* who have betrayed both adults and children. This has been the cause of many to leave the body of Christ—because they are consumed with anger and bitterness.

Betrayal also occurs among friends. Many have destroyed friendships by promoting “new truth,” being gossips, or spreading slander and false accusations.

The world is full of offenses and betrayals. It is a very sad situation. Notice what Paul says:

2 TIMOTHY 3:1-5 But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: 2 For men will be **lovers of themselves**, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, 3 **unloving**, unforgiving, **slanderers [false accusers]**, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, 4 **traitors [betrayers]**, headstrong, haughty, **lovers of pleasure** rather than lovers of God, 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. And **from such people turn away!**

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Whatever the covenant, betrayal results in terrible heartache because it misused the love and affection freely given by a person. Worst of all, victims are usually innocent and unaware of the situation, at least in the beginning. The betrayer takes advantage of the victim's trust and love usually with deceit, guile, and malice. Because of this, there is no defense against betrayal; otherwise, there would not be a bond of trust between them. Unlike a "lesser" offense, **a betrayer strikes the very heart of their victim.** The emotional pain can be quite unlike any other, too. When we trust someone, we offer our hearts and become vulnerable.

Betrayal is worse than when someone dear to us dies because we still have the memories of the trust and love for them while they lived. Instead, the betrayer shows absolute contempt and loathing for another person. There is no greater offense.

It is rarely possible or even prudent to *fully* reconcile with a betrayer. There are several reasons behind this. One serious concern is that a person might slip back into the sin that caused the betrayal even if he or she sincerely repented to God. Adultery and abuse are terrible betrayals and there is a risk that the behavior might be repeated even by a converted person. In the case of abuse, a continuing and close relationship could potentially be dangerous. **Once the bond of trust is broken by betrayal, it is all but impossible to regain it.**

There is also the question of how can the relationship ever again have deep trust and love (friendship, affection, or romantic) once betrayal has occurred? A real concern is whether or not the betrayer was capable of being in a covenant relationship. The fact of betrayal suggests an inability to have proper trust and love; otherwise, why did he or she commit the offense?

Think about it. A person who betrays God, a spouse, a friend, a brother or sister, or a child will have to spend a lot of time in prayer and fasting in order to truly repent. Betrayal is not easily repented of or forgiven. Can they repent? Certainly. How long will it take? God only knows, but it absolutely requires time. A betrayer

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is also usually responding to issues in their own life that were never properly dealt with before they entered into a covenant relationship. There could be problems of anger, an abusive childhood, mental problems, or many other conditions that prevent them from having the capacity for expressing proper trust, love, compassion, and kindness.

The point of all this is that serious offenses and betrayals are indicative of a dysfunctional basic emotional and/or mental condition that, at the very least, makes it unwise to expect full reconciliation with such a person. In fact, they are more in need of prayers asking God to forgive and help them than they are of full reconciliation.

Jesus Christ reminds us that betrayals are gravely serious offenses and sins. He was tempted in all points as we are and that includes betrayal. Notice what He said of Judas Iscariot, who secretly betrayed Jesus to the priests to be crucified:

MATTHEW 26:24 “The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but **woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.**”

How serious is it that Judas is singled out in the Bible with a pronouncement of “woe!” upon him? While Jesus knew what was in the heart of Judas even before he betrayed Him, He truly loved all the disciples. Knowing what Judas would do did not take away the pain of his betrayal. In fact, Judas was a *close* friend of Jesus in whom He *trusted*! Notice:

PSALM 41:9 Even **my own familiar friend [Judas Iscariot] in whom I [Jesus Christ] trusted,** Who ate my bread, **has lifted up his heel against me.**

When Judas betrayed Jesus to the priests and Levites, it was unimaginably painful. Judas not only broke the covenant bonds of trust with Jesus but also trampled on His love for him. Because of his betrayal, Jesus said it would have been better if he had *never been born*. This is even more serious than the warning in Matthew

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18 where Jesus said that unrepentant offenders are better off dead. Appropriately, Judas is called a traitor (Luke 6:16). Above all other offenses, betrayal is the worst of all!

Betrayers – Repentance & Reconciliation

While there is only one “unpardonable” sin (Matt. 12:31), the burden of repentance that falls upon a betrayer is heavy. It requires the deepest sorrow, the greatest humility, and the sincerest of hearts—and can only be achieved through much fasting and many tearful prayers. Overcoming adultery or abuse of any kind requires God’s Holy Spirit, because these are truly evils of Satan the devil. Still, it is possible.

However, reconciliation with the victim or even his or her friends is difficult beyond having the minimum of godly *agape* love and respect. The victim may offer forgiveness as required by God but the betrayer cannot expect that full restoration of the relationship is possible or prudent. There is always a price that must be paid for betrayals, so it is important to recognize that the effects can extend well beyond the victim to mutual friends, brethren, children, etc. While it is always possible to reconcile, once a covenant is broken it is the victim (and others) who will determine any future relationship with the betrayer.

Victims of Betrayal – The Temptation to Sin

Since a betrayal is the most serious type of offense, how might betrayal tempt or entice a victim to also sin? Exactly the same way as with any offense. Most often it occurs when the victim becomes resentful, angry, and bitter—which are all barriers to forgiveness. While the initial betrayal usually produces extreme and terrible pain and heartache, these can later turn to resentment, anger, and bitterness. All are powerful emotions that can grieve the Holy Spirit:

EPHESIANS 4:30-31 30 And **do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God**, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.
31 Let all **bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor /cry of grief**,

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and evil speaking [slander or blasphemy] be put away from you, with all malice [desire to injure].

Betrayal causes such deep, heartfelt pain that grief can turn into resentment, resentment into anger, and then anger into bitterness; thus suppressing the Holy Spirit. Bitterness is consuming. It grows over time, filling the mind and heart. Eventually, it will smother the *agape* love of God. Without that, the victim might even start offending others (“malice”, in verse 31, means to have a *desire to injure*) and, if repentance is not sought, loss of salvation will result! Notice what Paul said:

HEBREWS 12:15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble [lit. “crowd in upon you”], and by this many become defiled;

Bitterness is a brooding anger, and the longer it remains, the more insidious it will become—and harder to remove. It is one of the leading causes for people to “fall from the grace of God” (Gal. 5:4); so it must be avoided or removed at all costs.

While betrayal is deliberately done to someone, the harm of betrayal can only be overcome by the victim through God. In other words, those who have been betrayed must resist and overcome anger and bitterness. How? Through *much* fasting and *fervent* prayer “so that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” from God (Heb. 4:16).

While this is probably obvious to everyone, actually doing it is hard because the pain of a broken heart does not heal quickly and, even though healed, it may well leave an emotional scar. Even so, we have the *promise* of Jesus Christ to heal the brokenhearted:

ISAIAH 61:1 “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He [God] has sent Me [Jesus Christ] to heal the brokenhearted ...

Asking God to heal a broken heart and remove anger and bitterness is a prayer that He *will* respect and answer. But there is one more

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thing that must be done: *forgive* the betrayer. This is terribly difficult, but God will again provide the means. Victims must ask God to heal their mind and heart of the betrayal so that they *can* forgive. Jesus Christ gave us the example that all things are possible through God when He asked the Father to forgive those who crucified Him.

Does this sound hard? Yes! Beyond words! In fact, the difficulty of this was not lost on the disciples. Notice what the disciples said immediately after hearing that they must forgive everyone who repents of their offenses:

LUKE 17:5 And the apostles said to the Lord, “**Increase our faith.**”

Dealing with offenses, especially betrayals, requires *much* faith and *agape* love. Both only come from God. His love gives us the strength to bear all things, hope all things, and endure all things (1 Cor. 13:7). No one bears or endures **good** things. *Agape* love is the means to endure hardships and sufferings, much of which is the result of the evil caused by the sins of offenses. It is through God’s love that we are able to forgive others, including our enemies and those who betray us, because everything that is good and right comes from God. Faith gives us the means to trust in God’s promises to help us. We all live only by God’s mercy, grace, and love. Those who have been betrayed know the pain of offenses like few others—but it is through love, humility, and faith in God that they can overcome.

CHAPTER 5

What If I Am the Offender?

By now, the responsibilities of an offender should be plain. Repent to God and, in all humility, acknowledge the offense to the victim and ask for forgiveness. In all respects, have humility, remorse, and a desire to reconcile. Remember, reconciliation is, at the very least, reestablishing *agape* love and respect in the relationship.

But what if the victim is unwilling to hear or refuses to forgive? When this happens, it is not a ticket to walk away and wash our hands of the matter. In fact, it means that the situation requires additional prayer and effort. When we cause an offense, we have a responsibility to promote reconciliation where possible.

PRINCIPLE: An **offender** must always be WILLING to ask for forgiveness and to reconcile, even if the victim is unwilling to listen.

An unforgiving victim does not give the offender a free pass to give up. Many victims need time to overcome the suffering and hurt. An offender has an obligation under God's Law to seek every opportunity to show *agape* love and encourage reconciliation. However, under all circumstances, an offender must avoid obstructing or interfering with the victim's healing or making the situation worse. It is often prudent to give those who have been hurt space and time to heal. In other situations, it may be appropriate for more immediate and direct contact. Each person reacts differently so the approach requires sensitivity to the particular needs. Importantly, when we are the cause of someone else's suffering, we cannot give up even if the only option available is to continuously pray that God heals them. Causing an offense is a serious matter to God and He expects us to do everything we possibly can to reconcile, *especially* when we are the offender.

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But what about when someone gets angry without cause? In other words, some will become offended over an innocent word or a matter of God's truth. Are we responsible every time someone becomes upset or angry when there was no sin? No! If we speak the truth with *agape* love and humility, then it is never a sin. However, we must take into account the spiritual and emotional maturity of our listeners. This is also godly love. The burden of all Christians is "For everyone to whom much is given, from him **much will be required**; and to whom much has been committed, **of him they will ask the more.**" (Luke 12:48). Avoiding situations that can potentially become offenses is our responsibility.

It is also important to realize that if the offense was a betrayal, everything becomes more difficult. It requires more humility, love, prayer, fasting, and more time to achieve reconciliation, if it is possible. In other words, the burden of a betrayer is very heavy indeed.

One last word—be quick to recognize when an offense occurs. Many are the times that an offense arose because nothing was said when it occurred. Sometimes, a sincere apology can diffuse a situation. In Matthew 5:25 it says, "**Agree with your adversary quickly**, while you are on the way with him." The word *agree* means to be *well-minded* toward your adversary—so it might be best to attempt to deal with the situation immediately. Otherwise, it may be that the "adversary" will brood over the matter and "you will by no means get out of there til you have paid the last penny" (verse 26). In other words, by waiting, you may have to pay the full "price"—both in terms of time and effort—to reconcile the offense.

What If I Am the Victim?

Perhaps the biggest surprise for many has been the fact that an offense can cause the VICTIM to lose out on salvation. It usually happens because of anger that leads to bitterness; so much so that they are no longer willing to forgive the offender. Yet our eternal salvation depends upon it because God will not forgive the sins of

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anyone who is unforgiving to others. We must forgive the offender with the intent of reconciling as much as possible or prudent.

While we sometimes need time to overcome the hurt of an offense, an offender may also need time to admit their guilt and express their remorse for the suffering and hurt they caused. Pride affects everyone, some more than others, but we are to be long-suffering, patient, and kind with one another.

But victims have another responsibility—that is, not to be *easily* offended! Too many are so sensitive that they react to every small thing. How do we avoid this? First, by recognizing that God will deal with all unrepentant offenders and, second, by understanding that God will hold us accountable if we become angry without cause (Matt. 5:22).

Offenses Between Husband and Wife

Finally, let us discuss the relationship of a husband and wife, because many marriages are destroyed by *unresolved* offenses. Even if they do not lead to divorce, problems between a husband and wife are often never resolved and end up causing a lifetime of division and discord. Why? More than with any other relationship, issues in a marriage tend to compound one upon another when they are not resolved as they arise. In fact, many times they are not offenses in the beginning; but, by not addressing them, they *become* offenses.

In a marriage covenant, the responsibility to reconcile offenses is even more vital—not just for the sake of the marriage, but also for the individuals' relationships with God. Unlike any other covenant between people, marriage is instituted by vows before God to trust, love, and care for each other in a special relationship. This relationship not only requires emotional and physical love, but also demands fully exercising godly love.

There are two main categories of offenses between a husband and wife. The first is uncommunicated expectations; in other words, one spouse expects the other to say or do things, but never actually

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makes it clear what they need from the other spouse. The other is caused by unhealthy emotional attachments or relationships. Some examples of both include:

- 1) Spouses who do not put God first in their lives. Each should be an example to the other of their love for, and obedience to, God. A spouse who strives to be a true child of God is highly respected and valued. Without God first in their relationship, it is open to the influences of Satan.
- 2) Spouses who are controlling. Husbands who are domineering and demanding fail to “love your wives, just **as Christ also loved the *ekklesia*.**” (Eph. 5:25). A controlling husband is not willing to sacrifice for his wife as Jesus Christ gave us the example. Likewise, wives can be controlling of a husband, usually through manipulation by guilt (“*If you loved me, you would...*” or “*You must not love me because you never...*”). Controlling spouses suppress both *agape* and marital love in the marriage.
- 3) Spouses who talk about their problems with people outside of the marriage. It is very common for a spouse to use others, especially parents or mutual friends, to air grievances about the other. Solutions never come by complaining to others outside the marriage but only through discussing them with the other spouse.
- 4) Spouses who are “best friends” with their children instead of being parents to them. Many do not recognize that today’s standards for raising children is completely misguided. Parents should never be friends with their children because parents lose their authority. In turn, children never learn discipline and have no respect for their parents. It also means the friendship between the husband and wife is on the same level as with the children! There cannot be a proper relationship

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between a husband and wife unless their roles are properly established as husband and wife where *both* are parents to their children.

- 5) Spouses who put anyone or anything, whether it be children, parents, friends, career, or activities (especially with children), ahead of the emotional, mental, and physical needs of the other spouse. This is a major cause of resentment.
- 6) Spouses who criticize rather than encourage or build up the other. This prevents discussing their problems so that their relationship becomes nothing more than gripe sessions. Spouses who establish their relationship upon respect and love can discuss problems because they are not perceived as complaining but communicating the needs of one to the other.
- 7) Spouses who do not discuss the logistical matters of life—finances (budgeting and spending priorities), children (especially their discipline and upbringing or when they leave home), retirement planning, etc. This leads to unspoken expectations that can cause much resentment.
- 8) A husband who expects the wife to satisfy unhealthy sexual fantasies. Many times this manifested in the form of complaints that the wife is overweight or is not fulfilling and exciting as a sexual partner. This is not loving, cherishing, and caring for the wife. Instead, it is discouraging and can cause resentment.
- 9) A wife who believes that the husband is responsible for making and keeping her happy and content instead of seeking these things from God. A converted husband will be much more responsive and sensitive to a wife who is filled with the peace of God.

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Reconciling offenses *should* be easier in a marriage than any other relationship because each knows the strengths and weaknesses of the other. This allows them to build upon the former and strengthen the latter. Instead, too many husbands and wives let offenses linger and build to the point where there is enmity between them.

The reality is that, aside from adultery, fornication, and abuse, there should be nothing that causes more than a brief disruption in an otherwise loving marriage. Having the joy in marriage requires effort, but it is very simple in principle.

First, their relationship with God must be their top priority. When that happens, each spouse has the love of God upon which their relationship can be built. Love always considers the needs of other spouse, which makes it all but impossible for offenses to occur.

Communication is the second key. A wife who expects her husband to guess her every mood or desire is completely unreasonable. Similarly, a husband who does not regularly make opportunities to spend time with his wife is pushing her away.

Most important, no spouse should *ever* talk about the other spouse to anyone outside of the marriage unless they both consent to it and/or are present together. While there are exceptions where one spouse might need to discuss a personal issue that does not involve the other spouse, matters should never be discussed outside the marriage without including the other spouse. Examples where it might be fitting to have a discussion without the other spouse include seeking help with something personal such as a spiritual problem or health issues (menopause, etc.).

It is also very appropriate to seek help outside the marriage when the other spouse has committed adultery, fornication, or abuse. These should be taken quite seriously and the guilty spouse is certainly not in the best position to offer advice to the victim. Seeking outside help without the other spouse in these cases is usually highly recommended.

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The remaining two points apply to all offenses. Be quick to recognize and address every minor issue to prevent them from even becoming an offense. Also remember that offenses will occur in every marriage, but those that are dealt with promptly will also be quickly forgotten. Relationships founded upon *agape* love and accompanied by proper marital love will have little time for, or need to, reflect on past offenses. Husbands and wives who put God first and spend time building their emotional, mental, and physical relationship are not only blessed, but have the best defense against offenses.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

Offenses are serious matters to God. Dealing with them has been one of the most overlooked and often ignored responsibilities of God's children. People are generally very reluctant to speak with someone who has caused an offense because many, even converted saints, may be too filled with self to tolerate a rebuke. What does that say about us? How can anyone claim to be a child of God if we refuse to humbly hear someone tell us that we offended them? How can there be repentance without the humility to acknowledge an offense to God and others? Without repentance, there is no forgiveness from God and our eternal life is at stake.

On the other hand, how many victims of offenses are able to approach someone in true humility and meekness? Many react with anger to the offense, whether it was intentional or not, and use the status of a "victim" to justify refusing to forgive the offender or betrayer. Again, what does it say about us if we are angry and unwilling to forgive? Beware, because God will not forgive our sins if we are unforgiving, which could be grounds for the second death. While the memory of an offense or betrayal usually remains with us in this life, God desires to heal our hearts so that we are able to forgive others.

Repentance and forgiveness are critical to our relationship with God and our brothers and sisters in Christ. Anyone who does not have a humble and contrite heart and strive to show *agape* love to others will not be in the Kingdom. While it may not be possible for relationships to continue between people as they were before a serious offense or betrayal, we must strive to reconcile as much as possible or prudent.

Remember the popular saying, "What would Jesus do?" That has always been the wrong question—because God's thoughts and ways are so much higher than ours (Isa. 55:9) that we cannot easily answer that question. The right question a true Christian should ask

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is, “How can I show *agape* love to others?” There is nothing more difficult than dealing with offenses, but the reward is eternal. The trials and sufferings of this life are nothing compared to the day of our redemption when we will hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant! Because you were faithful and **loved much**, enter into the JOY of your Lord” (paraphrased from Matt. 25:23 and Luke 7:47).

