THE NEW SHOFAR

…it is utterly inappropriate for one who knows the joy and release of being forgiven to refuse to share that blessing with another. Second, it is highly presumptuous to refuse to forgive one whom Christ Himself has already forgiven. (NT Wright)

We will never forgive anyone more than God has already forgiven us

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Do Christians have to both forgive ***and*** forget? I mostly cringe when I hear sermons on the need for Christians to forgive, mostly because modern reflections tend to be more tainted by psychobabble than biblical teaching. We see this clearly in Jesus when he declares to the sick man: *Your sins are forgiven*. No internal struggle is narrated. Forgiveness is pronounced as a verdict, a status change, and a public declaration of release. The paralytic does not feel forgiven—he is forgiven (**Mark 2:5**). To read the New Testament faithfully, forgiveness is about debt cancellation, release from judgment, and restoration to covenant allegiance.

The Dominant Greek Vocabulary of Forgiveness

To Send Away… The primary New Testament verb translated "forgive" (**aphiēmi**) occurs over 130 times across the New Testament. Its basic meaning is straightforward and concrete: *to send away, release, dismiss, let go, cancel, or remit***.** Thus, forgiveness is not the internal processing of pain but the external removal of a claim. Something that once stood against a person is now dismissed. **Aphesis…** The corresponding noun denotes: *Release* from captivity, *Remission* of debt, *Pardon* in a legal sense, *Restoration* of standing. It refers to a change in legal or covenantal condition, our status before God.

Forgiveness as Debt Cancellation in the Greco-Roman World

In everyday Greek, ***aphiemi*** was commonly used in financial contexts. Creditors forgave debts not by feeling kindly toward debtors, but by cancelling the obligation recorded against them. This background illuminates key New Testament texts: *Forgive us our* ***debts*** **(opheilemata}** — **Matthew 6:12**. Jesus does not spiritualize the metaphor. He chooses a word that belongs to accounting ledgers. Forgiveness is the removal of a liability. The parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21—35) reinforces this meaning. The servant's debt is forgiven—**(aphēken)**—meaning the obligation is erased. The master clears the account.

Cultic and Temple Background: Forgiveness as Purification

In the Greek Old Testament **aphesis** is the standard term for forgiveness in worship and sacrificial contexts (Leviticus 16). On the **Day of Atonement** (Yom Kippur), forgiveness did not mean Israel felt better. It meant: Guilt was removed from the sanctuary; Sin was symbolically carried away by the scapegoat; The community was restored to ritual and covenantal purity. Forgiveness was objective before it was subjective. Tru0e forgiveness does something to us. What we find with Jesus is how he explicitly claims this language of atonement in his own teaching**.** In **Luke 4:18:** *He has sent me to proclaim ắphesıs to the captives.* This is not metaphorical self-help language. It is Jubilee proclamation. Forgiveness means release from oppressive claims—spiritual, social, and covenantal. Imagine what it must have been like to have had the burden of debt removed, or the great joy in having the gates opened and being allowed to walk home, free at last. Mark introduces John the

Baptist's ministry in a similar way as *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness (**aphesin**) of sins"* **Mark 1:4.** *The* coming of the Messiah will mean nothing to those of us who do not implement significant changes to the way we live in the land. Repentance is not mere remorse. In Jewish thought, it denotes a change of allegiance, a turning back to covenant faithfulness. Forgiveness, therefore, is not the reward for feeling sorry but ***the release granted*** when one iis invited back into a covenant love. Forgiveness is about restoration.

Jesus and the Authority to Forgive

When Jesus forgives sins in Mark 2, the scribes object not because forgiveness is emotional, but because it is judicial: *Who can forgive sins but God alone?"* They understand forgiveness correctly. Forgiveness belongs to God because God alone has authority over the covenant ledger of sins. Jesus' act is a claim to divine authority over this "ledger".

In a similar manner, Paul frames forgiveness using the same accounting language**:** *Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will not count against them." — Romans 4:8* Forgiveness is not just about saying sorry, although that is important. For Christians, it is the refusal to assign liability. And what does that mean? It means *The debt exists, but it is no longer calculated, or recorded*. This is why Paul can say forgiveness occurs **"in Christ" (Ephesians 1:7)**— Christ absorbs covenant judgment so that believers are released from it.

Why Modern Definitions Miss the Point: Forgiveness ≠ Emotional Reconciliation

The New Testament never requires emotional resolution ***before*** forgiveness can occur. Forgiveness can be: ***Declared*** before reconciliation, ***Granted*** without restored trust, ***Applied*** corporately rather than individually. The duty to forgive always rests with me, no matter what, without exception. God's forgiveness does not imply divine amnesia. It means sins are no longer held against the forgiven party within the covenant relationship (**Jer 31:34**).

In the Judaism of Jesus' time, forgiveness is inseparable from kingdom allegiance. To be forgiven is to be released from rebellion and restored under God's reign. This aligns naturally with Jesus' gospel proclamation: *"Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand."* Forgiveness is not merely personal relief; it is release from rival powers and restoration to the rule of Yahweh. Forgiveness is not primarily about how we feel but about where we stand. It is the cancellation of debt, the lifting of judgment, and the restoration of covenant belonging. It does not hide the sin; pretend it did not happen or ignore it for the sake of peace. The Christian carries the burden of forgiving the other, restoring them to a right relationship and "doing" the Christ-like thing of embracing the sinner – even before any other exchanges take place. It is only from a position of us being restored to God that all of the other mechanics of reconciliation can take place. This is what makes the forgiveness of sins so difficulty, so painful, so dependent on grace and humility and the need to bear the slings and arrows of others: I restore them to me in a right relationship, in the covenant of discipleship, of baptismal fellowship. It is on this level of love hang all of the laws of God and the divine expectations on which our own judgment will be based. For Christians it is an all or nothing expectation with no exceptions allowed! **A question for the week**: who is it "out there", the person, group I have refused to restore to full fellowship with me?