



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States
Monthly Message for the Monastic

June 2025
On Forgiveness

“Some labor and struggle hard to earn forgiveness,
but better than these is the man who forgets the wrongs done to him.
Forgive quickly and you will be abundantly forgiven.”¹

The Ladder of Divine Ascent

My beloved brethren, we read in the Holy Scriptures that our Lord Jesus Christ says, “And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. *But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.*”² These words are very serious, and there is no doubt that God will hold us accountable for them. Let us examine what the early monastic Fathers teach us about forgiveness so that we may take heed to these blessed words of our Lord.

Abba Isaiah of Scetis shares the following thoughts on these verses:

This word of the Lord is fearful, for unless you see that your heart is pure toward all, you can ask nothing from God. Instead you offer him insolence, inasmuch as you say to him who searches hearts, ‘Forgive me my sins’, when you are sinful and bear a grudge against your fellow human being. Such a person does not pray with the intellect, but ignorantly with the lips, for one who truly desires to pray with the intellect to God, in the Holy Spirit, and with a pure heart, searches his heart before praying, to see whether he is free from all anxiety before every person or not. If he is not, he deceives himself, because no one is listening to him, since the intellect is not praying but is simply following the habitual routine of daily prayer. However, the person who wishes to pray in a pure manner will first examine what is in his intellect. *Is he saying, ‘Have mercy on me’, and at the same time showing mercy to another who asks for this, or is he saying, ‘Forgive me’, and at the same time forgiving others?* If you say, ‘Do not remember the evils which I have committed, either voluntarily or by force’, you too should not remember those of others. If it is

¹ John Climacus, [John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent](#), ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 154.

² The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Mk 11:25–26.

a matter of force, then, you too should not hold something against another person. Unless you have managed to do these things, then you are praying in vain. *According to all the Scriptures, God is not listening to you. Forgive me!* Again, he said in the prayer of the Gospel according to Matthew, ‘And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors’, and in the Gospel according to Luke, ‘If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you’. I have offered you all the way of love, so that whatever you want God to do to you, you may do first, and then you will be set free according to the measure that you have cleansed your heart toward the whole of creation, so as to remember no injury, then you are obliged to keep this way. God requires exactitude and not simply words. Every person binds himself to Gehenna, and looses himself, for nothing is stronger than the will which leads you either to death or life. Blessed, then, are those who have loved eternal life, for they will not falter. So there is a struggle going on in the toil and hidden sweat of the heart against the thought that stifles you, in order not to allow its arrow to wound your heart, and it will require an effort on your part to heal it, unless your sins are ever before you. If you hear that some evil was done against you by someone, hold up your good will in order not to return the evil in your heart, neither blaming, judging, criticizing, nor even delivering him to the words of others; then you will think to yourself, ‘No evil was done against me’. If you have the fear of Gehenna inside you, then you will triumph over the evils that want you to render evil against your neighbor, for it will say to you, ‘Wretched person, pray for your own sins and God will support you at all times without revealing them, whereas you angrily cast your neighbor into the mouths of others. Therefore, it is clear that your sins are not removed, since no forgiveness has touched you.’ So, if your heart is softened and you guard yourself from evil, you will have mercy from God, but if your evil heart is hardened toward your neighbor, you have not yet become mindful of God.³

St John of the Ladder shares the following on forgiveness and not bearing a grudge:

“Some labor and struggle hard to earn forgiveness, but better than these is the man who forgets the wrongs done to him. *Forgive quickly and you will be abundantly forgiven. To forget wrongs is to prove oneself truly repentant*, but to brood on them and at the same time to imagine one is practicing repentance is to act like the man who is convinced he is running when in fact he is fast asleep.”⁴

We notice here that he makes a connection between forgiving and forgetting the wrongs done to us and our repentance, but what is this connection? When one is focused on their

³ Isaiah of Scetis, Abba Isaiah of Scetis Ascetic Discourses, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 150, Trans. John Chryssavgis and Robert Penkett, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2002), 139–141.

⁴ John Climacus, John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 154.

own sins, they will never have a moment to remember the sins of others. In regards to this, St. Basil tells us to, “Only be attentive to yourself, that you may recognize the strength and illness *of your soul*.”⁵ He also says, “Do not spend time through thoughts scrutinizing the weakness that belongs to another, *but be attentive to yourself, that is, turn the eye of your soul to inquire about things that belong to you*.”⁶ If we obey the words of St. Basil, then we will understand the words of St. John, for how can I repent when my thoughts are dwelling on the sins of my neighbor? And how will God forgive me my sins, if I can not forgive the sins of my brethren?

St. John also shares with us how terrible a sin it is to hold a grudge against anyone by saying, “Remembrance of wrongs comes as the final point of anger. *It is a keeper of sins. It hates a just way of life. It is the ruin of virtues, the poison of the soul, a worm in the mind. It is the shame of prayer, a cutting off of supplication, a turning away from love, a nail piercing the soul*. It is a pleasureless feeling cherished in the sweetness of bitterness. It is a never-ending sin, an unsleeping wrong, rancor by the hour. A dark and loathsome passion, it comes to be but has no offspring, so that one need not say too much about it.”⁷

Many of us have the same question that St. Peter the Apostle had when he said to our Lord Jesus Christ, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”⁸ It is clear from these words that our Lord is essentially saying that there should not be any limit to our forgiveness. In our prayers throughout the day, both personal and communal, we ask God to have mercy upon us and forgive us nearly a thousand times, and how can I say these words honestly if I myself am not willing to forgive my brethren? How can we ask for mercy when we are not willing to be merciful? How can we be pure in our prayers if we are holding grudges? How can we not be fearful of the words of our Lord that our sins will not be forgiven if we do not ourselves forgive others? How can I not fear that I will be condemned for all of my sins because I refused to forgive others? How can one not tremble at this thought? How can one not immediately forgive everyone at the thought of eternal condemnation? Truly, as St. Anthony the Great said, “Our life and death is with our neighbor”⁹!

May God “forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.”¹⁰ Amen.

⁵ Nonna Verna Harrison Sr., “Preface,” in *On the Human Condition*, ed. John Behr and Augustine Casiday, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison, Popular Patristics Series, Number 30 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), 97.

⁶ *Ibid*, 100.

⁷ John Climacus, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 152.

⁸ The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Mt 18:21–22.

⁹ John Behr, ed., [Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers](#), trans. John Wortley, vol. 52, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, Lk 11:4.