



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

### July 2025 On Forgiveness - Part 2

*"Therefore, if we wish to be judged mercifully, we must ourselves  
be merciful toward those who have offended us.  
For we shall be forgiven to the degree that we have forgiven those  
who have injured us by any wrongdoing whatsoever."*<sup>1</sup>

**The Conferences - Abba Isaac**

My beloved brethren, let us continue studying the topic of forgiveness, which is very important in the spiritual life in general and especially in the monastic life. In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, when our Lord Jesus Christ taught us to pray, He made a direct connection between us asking God the Father to forgive our sins, and our forgiveness of the sins committed against us by our fellow man. It was such an important clause that when He finished the prayer, it was the only one that He made a further comment on by saying, *"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*<sup>2</sup> St. John Chrysostom comments on this saying, *"Meaning to signify how earnest He is in the matter, He sets it down also in particular, and after the prayer, He makes mention of no other commandment than this."*<sup>3</sup> He also continues by saying that, *"we ourselves have control over the judgment that is to be passed upon us."*<sup>4</sup>

Let us now see how the early Monastic Fathers were able to obey the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. Abba Isaiah of Scetis tells us that *"If you are silent in your cell and recall someone who has harmed you, then rise up and pray to God with all your heart to forgive that person, and the thought of retribution will leave you."*<sup>5</sup>

The first and most important thing to do is to turn to God in prayer. Pray with all your heart for that person, and all negative feelings toward them will disappear. We should beg and plead with God to make our hearts always ready to forgive them, just as He is always ready to forgive us at every moment. As we stand before God, we can recite the words of David the Prophet when he says, *"For You, Lord, are*

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<sup>1</sup> John Cassian, John Cassian: The Conferences, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, John Dillon, and Dennis D. McManus, trans. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 57, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 344.

<sup>2</sup> The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Mt 6:14–15.

<sup>3</sup> John Chrysostom, "Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople on the Gospel according to St. Matthew," in Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. George Prevost and M. B. Riddle, vol. 10, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 136.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah of Scetis, Abba Isaiah of Scetis Ascetic Discourses, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 150, Trans. John Chrysavgis and Robert Penkett, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2002), 56.

good, *and ready to forgive*, and abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You.”<sup>6</sup> St. John Chrysostom says that “*Nothing makes us so like God as our readiness to forgive the wicked and wrongdoer.*”<sup>7</sup> As we grow in our spiritual lives, we should reach a point where we forgive others without them even seeking our forgiveness. We read in the Desert Fathers' sayings that, “An elder was asked: ‘What is humility?’ He replied: *It is if your brother sins against you and you forgive him before he asks your forgiveness.*”<sup>8</sup>

When we pray for the person who wronged us, we should also recall the words of Abba Dorotheos when he said that “*You may well know about the sin, but you do not know about the repentance,*” and also, “*How do you know what tears he has shed about it before God?*”<sup>9</sup> If we truly think this way, it will be much easier for us to forgive our brothers and sisters. Just as we feel terrible when we make any mistake or commit any sin, we have to realize that our brother or sister also feels the same way, and they are in their cell repenting and crying over what they have done. When we think like Abba Dorotheos, we will always be ‘ready to forgive’. We should also recall the words of St. Paul, “And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.*”<sup>10</sup>

In the Conferences, Abba Chaeremon shares that, “When someone has attained to a disposition of goodness and to the imitation of God that we have spoken about, *he has made his own the Lord’s compassion and will also pray for his persecutors in the same way*, saying: ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’”<sup>11</sup>

Abba Isaiah also shares the following advice for a different type of situation that one may face: “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’”.<sup>12</sup>

He also shares a very important point for us to be aware of as well: “If a brother harms you and someone else slanders him in front of you, *guard your heart so that evil is not revived within you.* Instead, remember your own sins before God and that you want him to forgive you these, and do not return evil against your neighbor.”<sup>13</sup> Here we see that turning to God in prayer and the remembrance of our sins is the path by which we will be able to forgive everyone.

The second thing we must do is what our Lord Jesus Christ commanded us: “Moreover if your brother sins against you, *go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.*”<sup>14</sup> He didn’t say that we should wait for our brother or sister to come to us. He *commands* us to go to them, alone at first. You may say, “But they wronged me, why should I go to them?” Simply put, because we should obey our Lord. Many ungodly thoughts may try to prevent you from reaching out to your brother or sister, and almost all of

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<sup>6</sup> The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Ps 86:5.

<sup>7</sup> Manlio Simonetti, ed., Matthew 1–13, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 139.

<sup>8</sup> John Wortley, The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 203.

<sup>9</sup> Dorotheos of Gaza, Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 135.

<sup>10</sup> The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Eph 4:32.

<sup>11</sup> John Cassian, John Cassian: The Conferences, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, John Dillon, and Dennis D. McManus, trans. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 57, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 416.

<sup>12</sup> 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), 140.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>14</sup> The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Mt 18:15.

them are connected to our pride, our ego, but we cannot listen to these thoughts. Our Lord also said to us, “Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. 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.”<sup>15</sup> Once again, our Lord is making it very clear that we should not have a limit to how much we forgive our brothers and sisters.

If we look to the Desert Fathers, we will see how they obeyed and lived according to every word of the Holy Scriptures. Abba Agathon says, “I never went to bed having anything against anybody, nor did I let anybody go to bed with anything against me, insofar as I was able.”<sup>16</sup> He is obeying the words of David the Prophet and of St. Paul to the Ephesians when he taught them saying, “Be angry, and do not sin”: *do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil.*<sup>17</sup>

Another early Desert Father had a unique way of dealing with issues with his brethren, and it was also based on the Holy Scriptures as well: “They used to say of a certain monk that the more somebody insulted and seemed to annoy him, the more he would run to that person, saying: “Such people are the occasion of good deeds for the diligent, whereas those who speak well of them lead the soul astray and trouble it, for it is written: ‘Those who speak well of you lead you astray.’” [Cf. Is 9:15].<sup>18</sup>

In the Conferences, Abba Isaac shares with us the following in his exposition on the Lord’s Prayer:

And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.’ Oh, the unspeakable mercy of God! It has not merely given us a form of prayer and taught us how to act in a manner acceptable to him, uprooting both anger and sadness through the requirements of the formula that he gave, by which he ordered that we should always pray it. It has also conferred on those who pray an opportunity by disclosing to them the way that they may bring upon themselves the merciful and kind judgment of God, and it has conferred a certain power by which we can moderate the sentence of our Judge, persuading him to pardon our sins by the example of our own forgiveness, when we tell him: ‘Forgive us as we forgive.’ ” “Whoever, then, does not from his heart forgive the brother who has offended him will, by this entreaty, be asking not for pardon but for condemnation for himself, and by his own say-so he will be requesting a harsher judgment for himself when he says: Forgive me as I also have forgiven. And when he has been dealt with according to his own petition, what else will the consequence be than that, following his own example, he will be punished with an implacable anger and an irremissible condemnation? Therefore, if we wish to be judged mercifully, we must ourselves be merciful toward those who have offended us. For we shall be forgiven to the degree that we have forgiven those who have injured us by any wrongdoing whatsoever.<sup>19</sup>

“Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; *bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.*”<sup>20</sup> Amen.

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<sup>15</sup> The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Lk 17:3–4.

<sup>16</sup> 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), 54.

<sup>17</sup> The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Eph 4:26–27.

<sup>18</sup> John Wortley, The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 219–221.

<sup>19</sup> John Cassian, John Cassian: The Conferences, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, John Dillon, and Dennis D. McManus, trans. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 57, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 344.

<sup>20</sup> The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Col 3:12–13.