

FORGIVENESS IN MATTHEW 6:12 AS AN ANTIDOTE TO HEALTHY CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY: A GREEK-SYNTACTICAL AND CONTEXTUAL STUDY

Ijeudo, Nnamdi Ugochukwu, PhD
Department of Religion and Cultural Studies,
University Of Nigeria, Nsukka
nnamdi.ijeudo@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

*Marriage is central to Christian life and Nigerian society, yet many Christian couples face challenges such as poor communication, infidelity, economic pressure, patriarchal attitudes, extended-family interference, and domestic violence. This article examines forgiveness in Matthew 6:12 as a theological and practical tool for strengthening Christian marriage in Nigeria. The study therefore focuses primarily on Matthew 6:12 while considering its immediate context in Matthew 6:9–13. Using grammatical-syntactical analysis, historical-literary interpretation, and contextual hermeneutics, the study examines the expressions *aphes hēmin ta opheilēmata hēmōn* (“forgive us our debts”) and *hōs kai hēmeis aphēkamen tois opheiletais hēmōn* (“as we also have forgiven our debtors”). The analysis shows that forgiveness is not presented as a choice of Christian lifestyle but as a deeper expression of discipleship. Those whom God has shown mercy are expected to express mercy to others. When forgiveness is properly applied to marriage, it can interrupt cycles of resentment, retaliation, emotional breakdown, and relational crises. Contemporary studies also identify forgiveness with marital satisfaction and healthier relationship patterns. However, forgiveness must not be confused with ignoring wrongdoing, restoring trust immediately, removing consequences, or remaining in an unsafe relationship. This distinction is particularly important in Nigeria, where research has shown that religious approaches to domestic violence can sometimes encourage victims to forgive without receiving adequate protection or accountability. The article argues that Christian marital forgiveness should be accompanied by truth, honesty, repentance, accountability, justice, appropriate boundaries, and reconciliation where possible. Nigerian churches should therefore integrate forgiveness into premarital education, marital counselling, pastoral training, and family ministries. Properly understood, Matthew 6:12 provides a valuable framework for developing marriages characterized by mercy, humility, responsibility, relational restoration and mutual respect for each other among Christian couples.*

Keywords: forgiveness, Matthew 6:12, Lord's Prayer, Christian marriage, Nigerian society, marital conflict, reconciliation, Greek syntax, pastoral theology, contextual

hermeneutics.

Introduction

Marriage is very important in Nigerian social and Christian life. Within Christian theology, it is more than a social arrangement; it is a covenantal relationship characterized by love, faithfulness, mutual service, and commitment to God. Consequently, the health of Christian marriages affects not only couples but also children, churches, and the wider society. Despite its importance, Nigerian Christian marriages face numerous pressures. Studies have identified poor communication, infidelity, poverty, sexual dissatisfaction, patriarchal attitudes, extended-family interference, denominational differences, and inadequate counselling as factors that can contribute to marital conflict and breakdown (Ademiluka, 2021; Uroko & Enobong, 2022; Biwul, 2023).

Domestic violence presents an even more serious challenge. Recent Nigerian research indicates that cultural patriarchy, economic stress, inadequate premarital preparation, and inappropriate religious interpretations can contribute to abuse within marriage. Some studies have also raised concerns about pastoral interventions that emphasize forgiveness without adequately addressing the safety and wellbeing of victims. These realities raise an important theological question: How can Christian forgiveness be taught in a way that promotes healthy marriage without excusing injustice or perpetuating abuse? Matthew 6:12 provides an important starting point. Jesus teaches his disciples to pray: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” The petition occurs within the Lord's Prayer and connects divine forgiveness with the disciple's responsibility to forgive others. The purpose of this article is therefore to examine Matthew 6:12 and consider its implications for healthy Christian marriage in Nigerian society. The argument is that forgiveness can help couples overcome resentment and relational injury, but it must be understood together with repentance, accountability, justice, communication, and appropriate boundaries.

Context of Matthew 6:9-13.

Matthew 6:9–13 forms part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In this section, Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray and contrasts genuine devotion with religious practices performed for human approval. The Lord's Prayer moves from God's concerns to human needs: God's name being honoured; God's kingdom coming; God's will be being done; daily provision; forgiveness; protection from temptation and evil. Forgiveness therefore appears within a broader theology of life under God's kingdom. It is not simply a private emotional exercise but part of the character expected of those who follow Jesus. The relationship between verses 12 and 14–15 is particularly important. Immediately after the prayer, Jesus states that those who forgive others will themselves experience God's forgiveness, while those who refuse to forgive place themselves in serious spiritual contradiction (Matt. 6:14–15).

Greek-Syntactical Analysis of Matthew 6:12

The Greek text reads:

Καὶ φερε μὴ τὰ φειλήματα μὲν,
 ὡς καὶ μετὰ φήκαμεν τοῖς φειλέταις μὲν.
 Ka'aphes hēmin ta opheilēmata hēmōn,
 hōs kai hēmeis aphēkamen tois opheiletais hēmōn.

The verse may be translated literally as:

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

Several words are especially significant.

Aphes — “forgive”

Aphes is the second-person singular aorist active imperative of *aphiēmi*, a verb that can mean “release,” “let go,” or “forgive.” In this context, it expresses a direct request for God to release the petitioner from debt. The image is significant for marriage. Offences can create a sense of relational debt: “You owe me an apology,” “You owe me an explanation,” or “You have hurt me, and I cannot forget it.” Forgiveness does not deny that the debt exists. Rather, it refuses to allow the debt to become a permanent instrument of retaliation.

Ta opheilēmata — “debts”

Matthew uses the word *opheilēmata*, meaning “debts” or “that which is owed.” In the context of the Lord's Prayer, the term functions metaphorically for moral failure and wrongdoing. This language is particularly appropriate to marriage because unresolved offences can create emotional and relational “debts.” When these debts are continually remembered and used against a spouse, resentment can replace intimacy.

Hōs — “as”

The word *hōs* establishes a comparison between divine forgiveness and human forgiveness: “as” or “just as we have forgiven.” The statement does not mean that human beings earn God's forgiveness through their own merit. Rather, Matthew presents forgiveness as evidence that a person has genuinely embraced God's mercy. This principle is reinforced by the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21–35. The Christian logic is therefore not, “I forgive, so God owes me forgiveness,” but rather, “Because I have received God's mercy, I am called to become a merciful person.”

Aphēkamen — “we have forgiven”

Aphēkamen is the first-person plural aorist active indicative of *aphiēmi*. The disciples pray for forgiveness while affirming that they have forgiven others. This creates an important ethical connection between receiving and extending mercy. In marriage, both husband and wife stand in need of God's forgiveness and are therefore called to extend forgiveness to one another.

Forgiveness and Healthy Christian Marriage.

Marriage brings two imperfect people into continuous relationship. Consequently, disagreements, disappointments, misunderstandings, and offences are inevitable. The problem is not simply that offences occur but how couples respond to them. When offences are repeatedly rehearsed, they can produce resentment, suspicion, emotional withdrawal, and hostility. A marriage can gradually become a place where past failures are continually used as weapons.

Forgiveness can interrupt this cycle. Recent research supports this connection. Kaleta and Jaśkiewicz (2024) found positive associations between marital forgiveness and marital satisfaction. Agu and Nwankwo (2019) similarly reported that forgiveness was significantly related to marital satisfaction among married respondents in southeastern Nigeria. Behrens, Kliem, and Kröger (2024) also found an association between doctrine-shaped forgiveness and relationship satisfaction among Christians. These findings do not mean that forgiveness alone guarantees a successful marriage. Rather, they suggest that forgiveness is an important component of healthy relational functioning.

Forgiveness and Communication

Forgiveness cannot replace communication. A couple cannot resolve serious offences simply by saying, “I forgive you,” while leaving the underlying problem unaddressed. Healthy forgiveness should normally involve identifying the offence; communicating the hurt honestly; listening to one another; accepting responsibility; offering a sincere apology; making restitution where necessary; forgiving; establishing appropriate boundaries; and rebuilding trust through consistent behaviour. Research involving couples in Rivers State has emphasized the importance of interpersonal communication in marital conflict resolution (Ukaegbu et al., 2022). Forgiveness without communication can become suppression, while communication without forgiveness can become endless accusation. Christian marriage requires both truth and grace.

Forgiveness, Infidelity, and Trust

Infidelity is among the most serious offences that can occur within marriage. Nigerian research identifies infidelity as one of the factors associated with marital breakdown (Uroko & Enobong, 2022). Matthew 6:12 does not mean that a betrayed spouse must immediately trust an unfaithful partner. Forgiveness and trust are different. Forgiveness releases vengeance; trust develops through consistent behaviour. A spouse may forgive an unfaithful partner while still requiring time and evidence before trust is restored. Repentance, transparency, accountability, and changed behaviour may be necessary before genuine reconciliation can occur. This distinction is important because demanding immediate trust in the name of forgiveness can cause further harm.

Forgiveness, Patriarchy, and Domestic Violence.

The Nigerian context requires particular care. Patriarchal assumptions can sometimes



Restoration

Each stage is important.

Grace: The relationship is grounded in God's mercy.

Truth: The wrongdoing is acknowledged honestly.

Repentance: The offender accepts responsibility and turns away from destructive behaviour.

Forgiveness: The offended person relinquishes the desire for revenge.

Accountability: The offender accepts appropriate consequences and demonstrates change.

Reconciliation: Where appropriate and safe, the relationship begins to experience restored fellowship.

Restoration: Trust and marital wellbeing are rebuilt over time.

This approach is preferable to the simplistic pastoral instruction, "Just forgive and move on." Such advice may overlook serious problems and, in cases of abuse, may place victims at further risk.

Implications for Nigerian Churches

The theology of Matthew 6:12 has several practical implications for Christian marriage ministry in Nigeria. First, churches should teach Matthew 6:12 accurately. Second, premarital counselling should address forgiveness alongside communication, finances, sexuality, conflict management, family expectations, and boundaries. Third, churches should provide continuing marital counselling rather than limiting pastoral support to the period before the wedding. Fourth, pastors and marriage counsellors should receive training in recognizing domestic violence and responding appropriately to victims and perpetrators. Fifth, churches should teach couples the difference between forgiveness, reconciliation, and trust. Finally, pastoral care should work with qualified psychologists, medical professionals, social workers, and legal services when serious marital problems require specialized intervention.

Conclusion

Matthew 6:12 provides a significant theological framework for understanding forgiveness in Christian marriage. The Greek expressions *aphes*, *opheilēmata*, *hōs*, and *aphēkamen* reveal a close relationship between receiving divine mercy and extending mercy to others. Forgiveness is therefore not merely an emotional response but an important expression of Christian discipleship.

For Nigerian Christian couples, forgiveness can help break cycles of resentment, retaliation, suspicion, and emotional withdrawal. Contemporary research also suggests a positive relationship between forgiveness and marital satisfaction.

Nevertheless, biblical forgiveness must never be separated from truth and justice. Forgiving a spouse does not mean denying wrongdoing, abandoning appropriate boundaries, immediately restoring trust, or remaining in an abusive relationship. Where serious harm has occurred, repentance, accountability, safety, and professional

intervention may be necessary. The central message of Matthew 6:12 for Christian marriage may therefore be summarized in this way: Christian spouses are called to extend the mercy they have received from God, but genuine forgiveness must be accompanied by truth, responsibility, justice, and, where possible and safe, reconciliation.

In the Nigerian context, this approach can help the church move beyond simply telling couples to “forgive” toward forming couples who understand why forgiveness matters, how it should be practised, and the ethical boundaries within which it should operate. Such an approach can contribute to marriages characterized not merely by endurance, but by mercy, mutual respect, accountability, healing, and Christian love.

References

- Ademiluka, S. O. (2021). Patriarchy and marital disharmony amongst Nigerian Christians: Ephesians 5:22–33 as a response. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 77(4), a5991.
- Agu, S. A., & Nwankwo, B. E. (2019). Influence of religious commitment, intentionality in marriage and forgiveness on marital satisfaction among married couples. *IFE Psychologia*, 27(2), 121–133.
- Behrens, C., Kliem, S., & Kröger, C. (2024). Doctrine-shaped trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction in people who identify as Christians: A multiple mediation analysis. *International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, 9, 209–230.
- Biwul, J. K. T. (2023). Twenty-first century challenges for sustainable Christian marital relationships in the Nigerian context. Stellenbosch University.
- Brudek, P., & Kaleta, K. (2023). Marital offence-specific forgiveness as mediator in the relationships between personality traits and marital satisfaction among older couples. *Ageing & Society*, 43(1), 161–179.
- Fosu, J. K. (2023). Praying through the Lord's Prayer with meaning and significance: Mother-tongue theological hermeneutical study of Matthew 6:9–13. *Mother Tongue Biblical Theology*, 5(7), 112–124.
- Horowski, J. (2022). Harm, forgiveness and the subjectivity of the victim. *Philosophia*, 50, 1175–1188.
- Javadivala, Z., Allahverdipour, H., Asghari Jafarabadi, M., Azimi, S., Gilani, N., & Chattu, V. K. (2021). Improved couple satisfaction and communication with marriage and relationship programs: Are there gender differences? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Systematic Reviews*, 10, 178.
- Kaleta, K., & Jaśkiewicz, A. (2024). Forgiveness in marriage: From incidents to marital satisfaction. *Journal of Family Issues*, 45(7), 1764–1788.
- Morgan, R. (2024). Difficult texts: Matthew 6.12b—“as we forgive.” *Theology*, 127(2).
- Purnomo, Y., Daliman, M., Sukarna, T., Suparti, H., & Ming, D. (2024). The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9–13: Reconstructing based on Byzantine text. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*.
- Ukaegbu, M. I., Ezeanochie, G., & Okoro, N. T. (2022). The role of interpersonal

communication in the resolution of marital conflict among couples in select churches in RCCG Rivers Province Two. BW Academic Journal.

Uroko, F., & Enobong, S. I. (2022). Divorce amongst Christian couples in Yoruba land: Challenges and implications. HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies, 78(3), a7562.

World Health Organization. (2025). Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2023: Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and non-partner sexual violence against women. World Health Organization.