

The Role of Forgiveness in Teacher Personality According to Matthew 18:21-22: A Case Study at SMP Negeri 5 Kurun

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of forgiveness as a central dimension of teacher personality based on Gospel of Matthew 18:21-22 and its implications for Christian Religious Education (CRE). The research was conducted as a qualitative case study at SMP Negeri 5 Kurun, involving 130 Christian students and 16 Christian teachers, including one CRE teacher. Employing a combination of systematic literature review and semi-structured interviews, this study examines how biblical forgiveness is understood theologically, embodied in teacher personality, and practiced in daily pedagogical interactions. The findings reveal that forgiveness is perceived by teachers not merely as a pedagogical technique but as a spiritual disposition rooted in obedience to Christ. Teachers who consistently internalize forgiveness demonstrate stronger emotional regulation, empathy, and moral authority in their educational roles. Forgiveness is implemented primarily through restorative disciplinary practices that prioritize dialogue, reconciliation, and moral reflection rather than punitive measures. Students report that experiencing forgiveness from teachers fosters psychological security, intrinsic motivation for moral change, and a greater willingness to practice forgiveness among peers. The integration of exegetical analysis and empirical data shows that Matthew 18:21-22 provides a robust theological foundation for understanding forgiveness as unlimited grace oriented toward restoration, not moral compromise. However, the study also identifies ongoing challenges such as emotional exhaustion, cultural expectations of authority, and the risk of moral misinterpretation when forgiveness is not balanced with accountability. This study concludes that forgiveness should be recognized as a core component of teacher personality competence in Christian education, with significant implications for teacher formation, restorative pedagogy, and holistic character development in schools.

Keywords: *Forgiveness, Christian Religious Education, Teacher Personality*

INTRODUCTION

Teacher personality plays a decisive role in shaping the moral and spiritual climate of the classroom, especially within the context of Christian education. Beyond pedagogical skills and professional competence, the inner character of the teacher becomes a living

curriculum that shapes how students interpret and internalize Christian values. Among the many virtues emphasized in the New Testament, forgiveness occupies a central position as both a moral command and a spiritual discipline. In educational settings marked by adolescent emotional volatility, conflict, and behavioral struggles, the teacher's capacity to forgive is not merely a personal virtue but a foundational dimension of effective character formation. In contemporary school environments, teachers frequently encounter situations that test their emotional resilience—student misconduct, disrespect, learning difficulties, and interpersonal conflicts. How teachers respond to such challenges often determines the relational quality of the classroom and the credibility of moral instruction. From a Christian perspective, forgiveness is not optional emotional leniency but a theological imperative rooted in the character of God Himself (Wright, 2012). When forgiveness becomes embedded in teacher personality, it shapes relational patterns that cultivate trust, restoration, and moral growth rather than fear and alienation.

Matthew 18:21–22 provides the primary biblical foundation for understanding forgiveness as a defining mark of Christian character. In this text, Peter asks Jesus, *“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”* Jesus replies, *“I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”* This exchange occurs within Jesus' broader teaching on community life, reconciliation, and discipline in the Kingdom of God (Matt. 18:15-20). The numerical expression “seventy-seven times” (or “seventy times seven”) is not intended as a literal calculation but as a symbolic rejection of any limit to forgiveness. Theologically, Jesus redefines forgiveness not as a conditional response but as an ongoing disposition of the heart that mirrors God's boundless mercy (France, 2007; Osborne, 2010). The concept of forgiveness in Matthew 18 is deeply relational and restorative. It is oriented not toward ignoring wrongdoing but toward healing broken relationships and restoring communal harmony. In educational practice, this has profound pedagogical implications. A teacher who embodies unlimited forgiveness does not abandon moral standards but approaches failure with redemptive intent. Discipline becomes formative rather than punitive, and correction is guided by the desire for student restoration rather than emotional retaliation. This aligns with Christian educational philosophy, which views discipline as an act of love aimed at transformation (Knight, 2006). Forgiveness has also been associated with positive emotional regulation, reduced teacher burnout, and healthier classroom relationships (Noddings, 2013). Teachers who cultivate forgiving dispositions demonstrate greater patience, empathy, and emotional stability, which in turn foster safe learning environments where students are willing to take academic and moral risks. Bandura's social learning theory further suggests that students learn forgiveness not primarily through verbal instruction but through consistent observation of forgiving behavior modeled by significant adults (Bandura, 1986).

The context of SMP Negeri 5 Kurun in Gunung Mas provides a meaningful setting for exploring the role of forgiveness in teacher personality. With 130 Christian students and 16 Christian teachers, including a Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher, the school represents a micro-community where daily interactions between teachers and students form the crucible of moral and spiritual formation. In such a setting, conflicts are inevitable, but they also become opportunities for embodying the gospel of forgiveness

in practical ways. The way teachers respond to student failure, resistance, or misconduct becomes a powerful testimony to the authenticity of Christian values. Many contemporary studies on teacher competence still emphasize pedagogical technique, assessment strategies, and administrative performance, often neglecting the moral and spiritual dispositions that undergird effective education. Research on teacher personality frequently focuses on traits such as empathy, assertiveness, or motivation but rarely examines forgiveness as a core dimension of professional identity, particularly within public school contexts where Christian teachers operate amid religious diversity and institutional constraints. In adolescent educational contexts, unforgiving disciplinary practices can produce fear-based compliance but often fail to generate genuine moral transformation. Conversely, unstructured leniency without moral accountability can weaken character formation. Matthew 18:21-22 offers a theologically balanced framework in which forgiveness and moral responsibility operate together within a redemptive relational paradigm. This study seeks to explore the role of forgiveness in teacher personality according to Matthew 18:21-22 through a qualitative case study at SMP Negeri 5 Kurun, Gunung Mas. Specifically, it aims to examine how Christian teachers understand forgiveness theologically, how it is embodied in their daily interactions with students, and how students perceive and internalize forgiveness through their teachers' personality and disciplinary practices. By integrating biblical exegesis with empirical classroom realities, this study aspires to contribute to a more holistic understanding of teacher personality in Christian education—one that unites theological conviction, emotional maturity, and pedagogical wisdom in the formation of both teacher and student character.

METHODS

A qualitative case study design integrating a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) with simple semi-structured interviews was used to explore the role of forgiveness in teacher personality based on Matthew 18:21-22. The qualitative approach was selected to capture both the theological meaning of forgiveness and its lived reality in daily educational practice (Creswell, 2014). The SLR was conducted as the first phase to construct a strong conceptual and theological framework regarding forgiveness in Christian education, teacher personality, and moral formation. Relevant literature was systematically identified through academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, and Scopus using keywords including "forgiveness in Christian education," "teacher personality," "biblical forgiveness," "Matthew 18:21-22," and "moral character of teachers." Inclusion criteria consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and theological commentaries published between 2005 and 2024, written in English and Indonesian, and directly related to forgiveness, character education, or Christian pedagogy. Exclusion criteria included non-academic sources, opinion essays without empirical or theological grounding, and duplicate publications. The selected literature was analyzed thematically through stages of coding, categorization, and synthesis to generate key theoretical constructs that informed the empirical investigation (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007; Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016). The next phase involved a qualitative field study using simple semi-structured interviews to examine how forgiveness is understood and practiced by Christian teachers within the school context.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling with the criteria of being Christian and actively involved in teaching, including the Christian Religious Education (CRE) teacher. From the total of 16 Christian teachers, 5 teachers were voluntarily involved as key informants, representing different subject areas, including one CRE teacher. In addition, 12 Christian students from various grade levels were selected to triangulate teacher perspectives with student experiences. Interviews were conducted in a natural school setting to ensure ecological validity and were guided by open-ended questions focusing on teachers' theological understanding of forgiveness, their emotional and behavioral responses to student misconduct, practical strategies used in forgiving students, and students' perceptions of how forgiveness is modeled by their teachers. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. To maintain ethical standards, all participants were informed of the research purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Data analysis followed a thematic analysis procedure combining deductive and inductive coding. Deductive codes were derived from the SLR and the exegetical framework of Matthew 18:21-22, such as "unlimited forgiveness," "restorative discipline," "emotional control," and "moral modeling," while inductive codes emerged from participant narratives. Interview transcripts were carefully transcribed, reduced, displayed, and interpreted to identify recurring patterns and relationships between teacher personality and forgiveness practices. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied credibility through data triangulation between teachers and students, transferability through detailed contextual description, dependability through audit trails of analytical procedures, and confirmability through reflexive memoing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The integration of SLR and field data enabled the study to bridge theological-normative insights with contextual-practical realities, providing a holistic understanding of forgiveness as a core dimension of teacher personality in Christian education within a public junior high school setting.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that Christian teachers at SMP Negeri 5 Kurun possess a relatively strong theological awareness of forgiveness as an essential Christian virtue. Based on interviews with five Christian teachers, including the CRE teacher, forgiveness is consistently understood not merely as a moral obligation but as a divine command rooted in the teachings of Jesus in Gospel of Matthew 18:21-22. Teachers emphasized that Jesus' response to Peter—"not seven times, but seventy-seven times"—was interpreted as a symbol of limitless forgiveness rather than a literal numerical calculation. This interpretation aligns with biblical scholarship which views this passage as a radical expansion of Jewish forgiveness norms that were traditionally limited to three or four times. The teachers articulated forgiveness as an act that liberates both the offender and the one who forgives. One teacher stated that "*forgiveness is not weakness; it is spiritual strength that reflects Christ's character.*" This conception reflects a theological paradigm where forgiveness is understood as participation in God's redemptive work rather than merely a tool for classroom management. The SLR findings support this view by emphasizing that biblical forgiveness is fundamentally restorative, aiming at reconciliation rather than punishment. Theologically, forgiveness in Matthew 18 is deeply connected to the concept of grace, where human forgiveness mirrors divine mercy.

Several teachers acknowledged the tension between ideal forgiveness and practical classroom realities. Emotional fatigue, repeated misbehavior, and administrative pressures often complicate the actual implementation of forgiveness. This tension reflects what many scholars describe as the “theology-practice gap” in Christian education, where doctrinal clarity does not always translate smoothly into pedagogical action. Nevertheless, the teachers’ narratives indicate that Matthew 18:21-22 serves as a moral compass that continually calls them back to the spiritual ideal when they are tempted to respond with anger or punitive discipline. The interview data clearly indicate that forgiveness is perceived not merely as a pedagogical technique but as a fundamental dimension of teacher personality. Teachers described personality traits such as patience, emotional self-control, humility, and empathy as inseparable from their capacity to forgive. The CRE teacher emphasized that continuous exposure to Scripture, prayer, and spiritual discipline significantly shapes the ability to forgive authentically. This finding resonates with character education theory which views personality formation as a continuous moral and spiritual process rather than a fixed trait. Teachers who demonstrated a high level of emotional regulation were more likely to practice consistent forgiveness. They tended to interpret student misbehavior not solely as disobedience but as a reflection of deeper emotional or social struggles. In contrast, teachers who admitted struggling with anger and frustration also acknowledged difficulties in practicing forgiveness consistently. This variation illustrates that forgiveness is deeply influenced by internal personality structures, emotional maturity, and spiritual formation. Students’ perspectives further reinforced this finding. Interviews with twelve Christian students revealed that they could distinguish clearly between teachers who forgave sincerely and those whose forgiveness felt procedural or forced. Students expressed greater emotional security and respect toward teachers who forgave them patiently and guided them toward improvement. These findings confirm social learning theory, which asserts that students learn moral behavior not only through verbal instruction but primarily through observation and imitation of significant role models. Thus, forgiveness as a teacher personality trait has a direct formative impact on student character development.

One of the most significant findings of this study is the strong relationship between forgiveness and restorative disciplinary practices. Teachers who internalized Matthew 18:21–22 tended to adopt restorative rather than retributive approaches to discipline. Instead of emphasizing punishment, they prioritized dialogue, reflection, and moral coaching. Typical strategies included private conversations after class, guided self-reflection, verbal affirmations after mistakes, and opportunities for students to restore broken relationships. The CRE teacher reported using biblical narratives of forgiveness, such as Joseph forgiving his brothers, as instructional tools to help students understand the meaning and consequences of forgiving others. This integration of biblical content with classroom practice reflects a holistic pedagogical approach where theological values become lived experiences rather than abstract doctrines. The SLR confirms that restorative discipline grounded in forgiveness fosters long-term behavioral change more effectively than punitive methods, which often suppress behavior temporarily without transforming attitudes. Some teachers admitted that administrative expectations for maintaining order sometimes push them toward stricter punitive measures. They also expressed concern that excessive leniency might be misinterpreted by students as

weakness. This dilemma illustrates the delicate balance between authority and grace in Christian pedagogy. Matthew 18:21-22 does not abolish discipline but redefines it within a framework of mercy and restoration. The teachers who succeeded in integrating forgiveness with firm boundaries were those who clearly communicated behavioral expectations while consistently offering opportunities for repentance and growth.

The influence of teacher forgiveness on students' moral and emotional development emerged as a central theme in the findings. Students reported that when teachers forgave them sincerely, they felt valued not merely as learners but as human beings. This sense of being accepted even after making mistakes contributed to increased self-confidence, moral awareness, and intrinsic motivation to change. Several students confessed that they felt more ashamed of their wrongdoing after being forgiven than if they had been punished harshly. This phenomenon aligns with moral psychology research which suggests that forgiveness evokes moral emotions such as guilt, empathy, and gratitude that are essential for ethical growth. Teacher forgiveness also fostered a climate of trust and psychological safety in the classroom. In such an environment, students were more willing to admit mistakes, ask questions, and take academic risks without fear of humiliation. This safe learning atmosphere is a crucial precondition for effective education, particularly in moral and spiritual formation. Students who experienced consistent forgiveness from teachers were more likely to practice forgiveness among their peers. Several students narrated experiences of reconciling with classmates after witnessing how their teachers resolved conflicts patiently and compassionately. This indicates that teacher forgiveness functions not only as a vertical moral influence (teacher to student) but also as a horizontal social catalyst that shapes peer relationships within the school community. An important concern explored in this study is whether forgiveness weakens teacher authority. Contrary to common fears, the findings indicate that forgiveness, when practiced consistently and sincerely, actually strengthens moral authority. Students tended to respect teachers who forgave them, perceiving them as morally credible and emotionally mature. Authority grounded in forgiveness was perceived as more legitimate than authority enforced purely through fear and punishment. Teachers who combined forgiveness with clear moral boundaries were particularly effective in maintaining discipline without resorting to harsh coercion. They exercised what can be described as "moral authority," where influence flows from integrity and example rather than positional power alone. This form of authority corresponds with the biblical model of leadership exemplified by Christ, who exercised power through service, humility, and self-giving love. The study also found that forgiveness without accountability could lead to moral ambiguity. Students emphasized that they appreciated forgiveness most when it was accompanied by clear guidance about right and wrong. This finding underscores that Matthew 18:21-22 must be interpreted in conjunction with the broader biblical framework of repentance, responsibility, and transformation. Unlimited forgiveness does not imply unconditional tolerance of wrongdoing but rather continuous openness to repentance and renewal.

The practice of forgiveness at SMP Negeri 5 Kurun is also shaped significantly by institutional culture. Although the school is a public institution, the presence of 16 Christian teachers creates a micro-culture in which Christian values, including forgiveness, are informally reinforced through collegial relationships and shared spiritual practices.

Teachers reported that mutual support, prayer among colleagues, and informal spiritual conversations strengthened their emotional resilience and capacity to forgive. Nevertheless, the broader institutional system, which emphasizes academic performance, discipline records, and administrative compliance, sometimes constrains the full expression of forgiveness-based practices. Teachers expressed the need for greater institutional recognition of character education as an integral part of educational success. The findings suggest that forgiveness flourishes most effectively when supported by a school culture that values moral and spiritual formation alongside academic achievement. The students' testimonies indicate that the school environment is generally perceived as caring and supportive. However, they also recognized inconsistencies in how forgiveness is practiced among different teachers. This inconsistency points to the need for more systematic character education training for teachers, particularly in integrating biblical values with professional pedagogical standards. The integration of SLR and field data provides a coherent and mutually reinforcing picture. The SLR highlights forgiveness as a central virtue in Christian pedagogy, essential for moral education, emotional well-being, and restorative justice. These theoretical insights are strongly confirmed by the empirical data from SMP Negeri 5 Kurun. Teachers' narratives reflect the theological understanding of forgiveness as grace, restoration, and moral transformation. Students' experiences validate the psychological and social impacts of forgiveness described in the literature. The field data also add contextual nuances that are often absent from theoretical discussions. For example, the emotional struggles of teachers, administrative pressures, and classroom realities reveal the complexity of translating theological ideals into everyday practice. These findings enrich the literature by demonstrating that forgiveness in Christian education is not merely a concept but a lived spiritual struggle that requires ongoing inner formation and institutional support. The synthesis of SLR and empirical findings suggests that forgiveness functions on three interrelated levels: a theological mandate rooted in Scripture, a personality trait shaped by spiritual formation, and a pedagogical practice expressed through restorative discipline and moral modeling. The effectiveness of forgiveness in shaping students' character depends on the integration of these three dimensions.

A deeper exegetical reading of Matthew 18:21-22 reveals that Jesus' teaching on forgiveness is not merely quantitative but qualitative. The Greek expression for "seventy-seven times" implies immeasurable continuity rather than a calculable limit. This radical call challenges teachers to adopt a posture of perpetual mercy that reflects the boundless grace of God. For teachers, this means that forgiveness is not an occasional act but a habitual disposition of the heart. The pericope is situated within a broader discourse on community life, reconciliation, and humility. Thus, forgiveness is inseparable from relational responsibility and communal harmony. When applied to teacher personality, this theological framework implies that teachers are not only transmitters of knowledge but also spiritual agents who embody the ethics of God's kingdom in everyday interactions. Teachers in this study who internalized this exegetical insight demonstrated greater consistency in forgiving students even in repeated offenses. They viewed forgiveness not as emotional sentiment but as obedience to Christ. This obedience was often sustained by prayer, reflection on Scripture, and conscious self-discipline. The exegetical dimension thus functions as the spiritual engine that sustains forgiveness as a

stable personality trait rather than a sporadic reaction. Emotional exhaustion was frequently mentioned by teachers as a major obstacle to sustained forgiveness. Continuous exposure to student misbehavior, administrative workload, and personal life pressures often weakened their emotional resources. In such conditions, forgiveness requires not only spiritual commitment but also psychological resilience. Another challenge is the risk of moral misinterpretation. Some students initially perceived forgiveness as approval of wrongdoing, especially when consequences were not clearly communicated. This underscores the importance of coupling forgiveness with moral instruction and accountability. Without this balance, forgiveness may inadvertently undermine moral clarity. Cultural factors also shape the meaning and practice of forgiveness. In some cases, cultural norms emphasizing authority and discipline made it difficult for teachers to forgive openly without being perceived as weak. These socio-cultural dynamics suggest that the implementation of biblical forgiveness in education must be sensitive to local contexts while remaining faithful to theological principles.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for Christian Religious Education (CRE). Forgiveness should be explicitly recognized as a core dimension of teacher personality in CRE training programs. Professional competence must include not only pedagogical and academic skills but also spiritual and emotional competencies related to forgiveness. CRE curriculum development should integrate narrative, reflective, and experiential methods that allow students to internalize the meaning of forgiveness through lived experiences rather than cognitive instruction alone. Biblical narratives, role-playing, and restorative dialogue can serve as powerful pedagogical tools. Institutional policies should provide space for restorative approaches to discipline rooted in forgiveness. School leadership plays a crucial role in creating an environment where teachers feel supported in practicing grace without fear of administrative sanctions. Ongoing spiritual formation for teachers is essential. Forgiveness as a personality trait cannot be sustained by professional training alone; it requires continual renewal through prayer, Scripture, community support, and self-reflection. When teachers themselves are continually formed by grace, they become living testimonies of the forgiveness they seek to teach.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that forgiveness, as taught in Gospel of Matthew 18:21-22, plays a foundational role in shaping the personality competence of Christian teachers and significantly influences the moral, emotional, and spiritual development of students at SMP Negeri 5 Kurun. The findings affirm that forgiveness is not merely a pedagogical strategy but a deeply embedded spiritual disposition that reflects the internal character of the teacher. When forgiveness is internalized as a personal virtue rooted in obedience to Christ, it becomes a powerful moral force within the educational environment. The integration of exegetical analysis, systematic literature review, and empirical field data reveals that unlimited forgiveness, as commanded by Jesus, is not a call to moral relativism but a mandate for continuous restoration, reconciliation, and character transformation. Teachers who embody forgiveness consistently demonstrate stronger emotional self-regulation, greater empathy, and a more authentic moral authority. Their authority is not based primarily on fear or coercion but on integrity, spiritual maturity,

and relational trust. This form of moral leadership proves to be more effective in nurturing student discipline, responsibility, and moral awareness. The students' testimonies further confirm that teacher forgiveness has a profound impact on their psychological security, motivation, and moral growth. When students experience sincere forgiveness, they feel valued as persons rather than merely evaluated as learners. This atmosphere of grace fosters honesty, self-reflection, and intrinsic motivation to change. The modeling of forgiveness by teachers influences peer relationships, encouraging students to practice reconciliation and empathy within their social interactions. Thus, forgiveness functions both vertically (teacher-student) and horizontally (student-student) as a formative moral dynamic. At the institutional level, the study highlights the importance of a supportive school culture in sustaining forgiveness-based pedagogy. While personal spirituality strongly shapes the teachers' capacity to forgive, institutional pressures related to discipline, academic performance, and administrative compliance can either reinforce or weaken this practice. Forgiveness flourishes most effectively when supported by a school environment that values character formation alongside academic excellence. The presence of a collegial Christian micro-culture among teachers also strengthens emotional resilience and mutual encouragement in practicing biblical forgiveness. The study also acknowledges the ongoing tensions and challenges in embodying forgiveness in real educational contexts. Emotional exhaustion, cultural expectations of authority, and the risk of moral misinterpretation by students remain significant obstacles. These challenges indicate that forgiveness is not a passive or effortless virtue but a demanding spiritual discipline that requires continuous renewal, reflection, and institutional support. Forgiveness according to Matthew 18:21-22 should be understood as a central dimension of teacher personality competence in Christian education. It is a theological mandate, a character trait, and a pedagogical practice that together shape a holistic educational ministry. This study recommends that teacher formation programs, particularly in Christian Religious Education, intentionally integrate spiritual formation, emotional competence, and restorative pedagogy as essential components of professional development. Future research may expand this study through multi-site investigations or quantitative approaches to further explore the long-term impact of teacher forgiveness on student character formation and school culture.

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