

FORGIVENESS

By Denver Cheddie

INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness is an important topic in the New Testament. Jesus taught that if we didn't forgive others, God would not forgive us. He taught us to forgive others as we ourselves obtained forgiveness from God. He also spoke highly of those who are merciful. What exactly is required of us? Are there instances when we should not forgive? Does forgiving someone mean that you still have to trust them? This article discusses the relevant scriptures which pertain to forgiveness.

There are various situations that the Bible discusses concerning forgiveness: 1) when we offend others, 2) when others sin against us, 3) when others are unrepentant. For each case, the specific "rules" differ, but as we will see, the underlying principles remain the same.

THE OFFENDED BROTHER

Matt. 5:21-26 speaks of cases where we sin against our brother, and he/she has a grievance against us. In such a case, the onus is on us to go to the one we offended and seek to make reconciliation. Jesus taught that offences must come, but woe to the person through whom they come. If the person

forgives you, great, all is well. However if the person refuses to forgive, then there is nothing that can be done about that. He becomes like the unforgiving servant in Matt. 18. He will have to pay for his own unforgiveness. Having said that, our attitude in approaching our offended brother is not to be one of arrogance, but deep contrite humility. The main idea in Matt 5 is that we should do just about whatever it takes. Go the extra mile, turn the extra cheek.

THE SINNING BROTHER

Matt. 18:15-17 speaks of cases where someone sins against us. Our response in such cases is two-fold. The first step is to forgive the person in our heart (Matt 18:25). Forgiveness means releasing the debt. Even though they wronged us, we treat them as if they never did any wrong. This is something between us and God. It actually has nothing to do with the other person. When we pray, we should forgive the other person (Mark 11:25). Between us and God, we must release all resentment against the other person...in our heart.

The second step is going to the other person and letting him/her know their fault (Matt 18:15-17). But when we have already forgiven that person in our heart, our perspective in approaching them changes. It is not one of an offended person lashing out, but rather a forgiving person offering reconciliation. Then we are to let that person know their fault in a humble way. There are tactful ways of doing this e.g. saying, "Forgive me for holding resentment against you for doing such and such." But however it is

done, it must be in a humble way. There is also nothing wrong with being very firm that the other person has sinned against you. If that person is a man/woman of God, they will respect that. (Read 1 Samuel 24:9-15 to see how firmly David addressed Saul.) Matt 18:15-17 says that if he does not repent, take 2 or 3 others, then take the whole church. The last resort is to consider that person an infidel. But this is a last resort. It is not a "3 strikes you're out" situation. The idea is that we should do just about whatever it takes.

We could draw a parallel between this and what Jesus did for us. Jesus paid for all our sins when he died on the cross. This is the equivalent to us releasing the resentment against our offending brothers in our heart. But Jesus didn't stop at that. He didn't just say, "Well I paid for your sins, now if YOU come to ME, I'll forgive you." He goes one step further. He draws us to himself (John 6:37,44,65). He gives us grace to come to him. Anyone who thinks that they came to Jesus on their own is sadly mistaken. Jesus goes after the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7). In the parable of the prodigal son, the father ran out to meet his lost son when he saw him in the distance (Luke 15:20). I believe the only reason the father didn't go looking for him is because he didn't know where he was. All he could do was look for him daily.

In the same way, we are to go after our erring brothers and sisters and seek reconciliation. Even though they may be the ones in the wrong, it is our job to go after them. Christianity is not about who is right and who is wrong. God has given us a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18). Anyone who

insists that they are right, and refuse to humble themselves enough to go after an erring brother, is someone who doesn't really understand grace.

The reason God is intolerant of unforgiveness is because unforgiveness is indicative of a poor understanding of grace. If someone understands what God forgave them of, and the extent that God went to to seek after them, it would be impossible for them to adopt an arrogant attitude to other people's offences. The fact that someone refuses to forgive indicates that they don't understand what they were forgiven of. Also, the fact that someone would not go out of their way to make reconciliation indicates that they think they came to Jesus on their own. They don't understand that it was God who came after them to draw them to himself, to give them grace to accept his reconciliation.

It is only in the absolute worst case scenario, that we have to just give up on someone. God will try all he could to draw someone, but if that person refuses to come, then God cannot even save them against their will. He still loves them and longs for them to come home. But he cannot make reconciliation unless they respond positively to his call. Note that God does not call us 3 times, and if we don't respond by then, we're OUT. It's not like that. God consistently calls and draws us. But when we become stiff-necked and hard, then God has no choice but to give up on us. Giving up on someone is a last resort. Oftentimes, we are too quick to jump to that phase. "They didn't repent, so forget them." Beware of pride!

FORGIVENESS AND TRUST

The last issue I wish to discuss is that of forgiveness vs. trust. Does forgiving someone mean that you must trust them as if they never sinned against you? Let's ask a more specific question. Suppose you lend someone your car, and they wreck it. The insurance won't cover it because they were not authorized drivers, so you have to pay to repair it. Sure you could forgive them. It certainly helps if they pay the bill. But will you lend them your car again? You have to be crazy to do something like that. Forgiveness is commanded. Trust is earned.

When God saves us, he forgives us and wipes our slate clean...as if we never sinned. However he does not "promote" us just quite yet. It takes time for him to build character in us. He starts off by giving us a small number of talents. Depending on how faithful we are, he gives us more (Matt 25:14-30). And so on. Little by little he builds character in us, until we get to the point where God could trust us with big things. The forgiveness was automatic. The trust had to be earned. Similarly, we must be quick to forgive and seek reconciliation, slow to give up on people. However trusting them takes time. Trust is not automatic.

I wouldn't want a serial rapist working around my house with my wife and kids anywhere nearby. I don't care how radically saved he is. He has to earn that trust. If someone's spouse cheats on them, it is their job, however hard it is, to forgive the person. However, if they feel they can no longer trust the unfaithful spouse, they are no longer bound to salvage the marriage. Marital

unfaithfulness is an adequate grounds for divorce as far as God is concerned. If they feel, however, that they could work with the unfaithful spouse and build back the trust, that is also in order. But it is the forgiveness we are commanded to offer, not trust.

CONCLUSION

So in conclusion, our attitude should be one of seeking reconciliation at just about any cost. Whether we are right or wrong, we should take it upon ourselves to make wrongs right. We should deal with any resentment between us and God. Then deal with offending or offended brothers in love and humility. Christianity is not about right and wrong. It is about extending God's arm on earth. He has given us a ministry of reconciliation.

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