

Forgiveness

A few years ago there was a terrible case in the UK of a five year old boy who was kidnapped and raped by a teenager. Now that is wicked enough, but the teenager had only been released a few days earlier by a judge at his previous trial, for raping a seven year old boy.

The judge, apparently, had been influenced by the parents of the seven year old boy, who claimed to be Christians, who had forgiven the rapist and asked that their forgiveness be taken into account. They had told the judge: “We are committed Christians and forgive, so we hope that the court will adopt a corrective rather than a punitive approach to sentencing.”

The resulting tragedy was caused by a misunderstanding of a Christian’s responsibility to forgive, and it is quite common to hear such pronouncements of “forgiveness” after court hearings – even involving murder!

So, what is a Christian’s responsibility, when we are offended against? Should we always forgive? Does our forgiveness take away the penalty for sin? Was the judge right to take their “forgiveness” into account? Let’s see what the Bible has to say!

The problem is that many who claim to be Christians do not spend enough time with their noses in the Bible. Read Isaiah 28:9-10, *‘Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little.’* This is talking about serious Bible study – deep contemplative research which looks at the whole Bible, not just a passing acquaintance with some New Testament scriptures, for then we may go seriously astray. So, let’s see how such mistakes are made! Mark 11:25, *‘And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.’*

At a first superficial glance that seems quite clear. There are many similar scriptures in the New Testament which tell us we must forgive if we hope to be forgiven – Ephesians 4:32, *‘And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.’* But it’s not quite so simple as that, because to fully understand any biblical subject we need to take **all** the relevant scriptures into account.

There is another principle relative to forgiveness which Jesus expounded in Matthew 5:23-24. The offender has the responsibility to seek reconciliation with the one he has offended. *‘Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.’*

We see this illustrated by Christ in Matthew 18. In verse 21 we read that the Apostle Peter came to Jesus with a question --- and the answer given was verse 22. *‘Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.’*

Once again, taken out of context that seems explicit, but, just a few verses earlier, Jesus had explained: verses 15-17 *‘Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not*

hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.'

The forgiveness referred to in verses 21-22 must be sanctioned and permitted by the successful conclusion of the Biblical process of reconciliation in verses 5-17.

That is, the offender must recognise his fault, admit his error, and repent. Without that repentance he remains personally unforgiven by the one he has offended, who is correct to distance himself from the offender.

Jesus goes on to illustrate our need to have mercy if we wish to receive mercy, in the parable which directly follows – read verses 23-35.

Notice here that both servants do recognise and accept their fault before asking for mercy – their forgiveness would not come without repentance (verses 26, 29)

Jesus makes this requirement very clear in Luke 17:3-4. This statement cannot be clearer and reveals the mistake those parents made after the trial.

Christ tells both parties to attempt reconciliation so that the offender can be rebuked and given his chance to repent. With sincere repentance, we are to forgive, so that bitterness and resentment can be removed. Such emotions are a curse which can consume our health, as the Bible reveals elsewhere.

Human forgiveness then, is to be strictly analogous, or equal to our forgiveness by God, as the Lord's prayer tells us in Matthew 6:12, *'And forgive us our debts [sins], as we forgive our debtors.[people who have sinned against us]'*

We well know that we need to repent before God will forgive us, Acts 2:38, *'Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.'*

So we see that in like manner our debtors – those who sin against us, must repent before we can forgive them. Confusion and guilt arise when those who do not understand this, demand that Christians do what God does **not** do – pardon everyone for everything!

An article in the 'Daily Telegraph' some time ago illustrates this. It carried the headline 'Vicar Who Can't Forgive Steps Down from Pulpit'. The vicar's daughter (Jenny) was killed by Mohammed Sidique Khan in the London bombings that left 50 people dead. The vicar said "Forgiving another human being for violating your child is almost beyond human capabilities. It is very difficult for me to stand behind an altar and celebrate the Eucharist and lead people in words of peace and reconciliation and forgiveness when I feel very far from that myself."

This vicar did not recognise that reconciliation was impossible because the murderous bomber never repented. The Bible does not demand his forgiveness of the bomber.

God does not forgive everyone. He forgives just a special few who have accepted the sacrifice of Christ on their behalf, having shown God by their actions that they repent their sin, and have turned from doing it, and claimed forgiveness in Jesus Christ's name. The majority of mankind remains unforgiven.

Psalm 86:5, *'For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.'* Like God, we should be full of mercy to those who call upon us. But what if the offender refuses to repent? Its straightforward if the brother asks our forgiveness, but what about that bomber?

The word 'charity' enters here. We can learn something of the attitude we should have then, from Romans 9:9-13, *'For this is the word of promise, At this time will I come, and Sara shall have a son. And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac; (For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;) It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.'*

At first glance it seems that God hated Esau even before he was born. Actually God does not dwell in time as we do. He knows how the nation descended from Esau would behave in the future – they would retain the faults of Esau's character. The word 'hatred' here is the Greek word 'miseo' which means that God preferred one over another – He would love Esau less and bestow fewer blessings on him in comparison to Jacob and his descendants, the nations of Israel, because of Jacob's righteous character.

That gives us a good clue as to how we should behave towards the unrepentant offender. Like God towards Esau, we are not bound to be free or familiar as we would be if he repented. Just like God sends rain upon both the just and the unjust we must still love even our enemies by refusing to hate them, seek revenge against them or despise them, though, like God, we may not love them like the righteous. *'But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.'* (Matthew 5:44)

Remember also Matthew 18:17. *'And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.'* These are Jesus Christ's own words. As we know Christ loves all men, including the heathen, and tried to reach even the publicans with the gospel. We strive to convert all men to Christ by our efforts, but murderers and bombers forfeit our friendship and familiarity. By cooling our relationship with our debtors we give them an opportunity to recognise their need to repent of their wrongdoing, which is in itself an act of love.

Romans 12:18-20 adds extra guidance. *'If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.'* With the help of God's Holy Spirit we can put aside our anger and leave it to God to dispense justice. He has given over to the state the responsibility to punish the wicked according to the law: Romans 13:1-4, *'Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.'* Even if the conditions are fulfilled for us to forgive, the State must still provide the penalty for sin. God alone knows if the sinner was truly repentant – and only He can truly and finally remit sin. Isaiah 43:25, *'I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.'*

If we individuals had the ability to forgive sin willy-nilly, justice would suffer and sin would triumph with no visible penalty. That was what caused the 2nd rape by the teenager that the Judge let go free.

We have learned though, that as we seek perfection, we must allow love and mercy to overcome our baser human nature, Galatians 5:22, *'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith.'*

In the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-24 the father loved his foolish son even before he knew he was repentant, though that son never regained equality with his brother, verses 30-31, *'But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. 31 And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.'*

So we see that there is a distinction between forgiveness and the relinquishing of resentment. The father's love enabled him to overcome bitterness and anger at his son's gross foolishness, and love can help us remove these negative emotions even in the face of unrepentance, Colossians 3:13-14, *'Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.'* We have seen that God forgives the repentant few, but in the sense of relinquishing resentment He has mercy towards all. God never feels bitterness or ill will against anyone.

Love can conquer all, Luke 23:34,36, *'Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots... And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar.'* Many who called for Christ's crucifixion later recognised their sin, Acts 2:36-37,44, *'Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? ...44 And all that believed were together, and had all things common.'* They repented and were forgiven and the rest will need to repent finally before their sin is remitted.

However in horrific cases such as that which I mentioned at the start, it was foolish for the father to say they had forgiven, without any evidence of remorse or repentance, and his request to the Judge should have been ignored for it brought about the rape of another child. The Judge should not have been influenced to leniency and should have handed out the punitive prison sentence the law permits. He failed in his duty.

God says that sin should be rebuked, 1 Timothy 5:20, *'Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.'* Of course, this here refers to God's ministers but even some converted Christians take offence at that. Maybe they are unaware of this instruction.

We can learn more about this from the case of incest in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, *'It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. 2 And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. 3 For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, 4 In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 5 To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.'*

The man was put out by the whole church, and the story carries on in 2 Corinthians 2:5-10, *'But if any have caused grief, he hath not grieved me, but in part: that I may not overcharge you all.'*

Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him. For to this end also did I write, that I might know the proof of you, whether ye be obedient in all things. To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ.’ The church was to forgive him, that is, to release him from the censure of the church and restore him to fellowship, for the man had repented, verse 7. That forgiveness did not remit the guilt or offence against God however, for that judgment remains in God’s hands to finally decide.

In conclusion then, we have seen that there are laid down in the Bible conditions for forgiveness, and these can only be achieved through the acceptance of the sacrifice of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and sincere heartfelt repentance, which God alone can judge. We however, can only believe when an offender claims to be repentant, and then we should forgive. Without any sign of repentance we cannot forgive and reconciliation is not possible but we can still extend love and mercy with the help of God’s Holy Spirit.

Thankfully, for us, with those conditions fulfilled, we can be truly forgiven! Psalm 103:10-12, *‘He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.* Glory be to God!