

Forgiveness

3. Forgiveness depends on forgiving others

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In the [previous article](#) we considered the fact that forgiveness must be sought from God in repentance. In this third and final article, our forgiveness is shown to be conditional on our forgiveness of others.

ONE ASPECT in which we are called upon to manifest and reflect the Divine character is in the matter of forgiveness. Our God is “merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth” (Ex. 34:6), and on that basis He is willing to forgive. He wants us likewise to be gracious and merciful, and to forgive those who transgress against us. This comes out very clearly in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5–7).

Jesus’ challenging teaching

In the Sermon on the Mount our Lord Jesus Christ introduces many challenging concepts. None of them is more challenging than his teaching on forbearance and forgiveness. God intended that man should live in communities, but communal living inevitably brings tension and conflict. Animals have a natural instinct for self-preservation, so it is entirely natural for men, when threatened, to retaliate. Even in the most civilised of societies the law of the land provides individuals with a right to a degree of self-defence, or at least a right to seek redress at law if they are wronged in some way. There is an element of justice in such provisions, yet in Matthew 5 our Lord challenges this culture and says his followers should not retaliate when they are wronged:

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from

him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away” (vv. 38-42).

For followers of Christ the only right path is non-resistance. If someone wishes to abuse us in some way we are not to retaliate. In fact, rather than retaliating, we are called upon to respond to hostility with love:

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. 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 . . .” (vv. 43,44).

We must love our enemies. We must do good to those who abuse us. This is a radical concept indeed. And why must we act in this way? So we can manifest the character and lofty ways of our heavenly Father:

“... that ye may be the children of your Father Which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father Which is in heaven is perfect” (vv. 45-48).

It is possible, perhaps even likely, that those who abuse us do not deserve to be forgiven. So what! The mercy extended to us from God is completely unmerited. God offers us forgiveness not because we are sinless but because we acknowledge our sins and confess our need for forgiveness.

Difficult to forgive others

Sometimes we find it easy to ask God to forgive us, yet hard to forgive others who have offended against us. We should not despair if we struggle with the Lord’s command to forgive others. The apostles themselves struggled to come to grips with the mercy and grace Jesus exhorted them to manifest in their lives. In Matthew 18 the Apostle Peter, no doubt guilelessly giving voice to the thoughts of all of the disciples, tried to set a limit on the graciousness they should manifest to others: “Then came Peter to him [Jesus], and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?” (v. 21).

To a natural man this would seem reasonable. If a person lets us down repeatedly, it is only natural that this should have an influence on how we deal with him. Surely we do not have to forgive even repeat offenders every time. Peter suggests that seven times might be gracious enough; if he still offends after seven times surely we may regard him as a recidivist and beyond the pale. Our Lord rejected this suggestion unreservedly: "Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven" (v. 22). Obviously "seventy times seven" is not meant to be taken literally as 490. The Lord is saying that we must be willing to forgive and forgive and forgive, unreservedly, and repeatedly if necessary.

Paul's teaching

Paul exhorted the followers of Christ to reflect the example of Christ in their lives. The Lord Jesus Christ was Emmanuel, "God with us". Paul told the Corinthians that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). Reconciliation is a work that involves forgiveness. In all his works our Lord manifested the character of his heavenly Father. Paul told the Colossians that they must do likewise, using language that harks back to Exodus 34: "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye" (Col. 3:12,13).

Merciful, kind, longsuffering and forbearing; these are all quintessential characteristics of Almighty God. Recognition of the forgiveness extended to each of us must influence how we deal with others. Christ forgave us, so we must forgive others, without exception. Note the words used by Paul, for they are inclusive: "if *any* man have a quarrel against *any*". There are no exceptions.

The Lord's Prayer

A willingness to forgive is a moral imperative imposed on the followers of Christ. In the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 we see just how vital a willingness to forgive is in the life of a believer. Paul said we should imitate the Divine example of forgiveness by exercising forgiveness towards others. Our Lord goes a step further, and says that our willingness to forgive will determine the exercise of Divine forgiveness towards us:

"Our Father Which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will

be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen" (vv. 9-13).

The prayer commences with an ascription of praise to God. In verse 10 the first petition is an expression of our desire that Christ would return to re-establish God's Kingdom on earth. But "Thy kingdom come" is also an expression of our recognition of God's supremacy even now. Hence the verse goes on to speak of our desire that God's will might be done "in earth", or in our earthly bodies. We are made of the dust; as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:47, we are "of the earth, earthy". In spite of that fact, we desire to manifest God's will in our lives. "Thy will be done in earth" is first and foremost an expression of our aspiration to live as God would have us live, manifesting His character in daily life in our earthy body.

As we saw in Colossians, one manifestation of our desire to reflect God's character in our life must be a willingness to exercise forgiveness. Verse 12 of Matthew 6 homes in on this fact: "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors". The word rendered "debts"¹ in this verse is used only twice in the New Testament. Its other use is in Romans 4:4, where Paul compares the grace available from God with the concept of salvation by works. Thayer says it literally means 'that which is justly or legally due, a debt'. The idea is of a penalty that is due. The petition is an appeal to God not to deal with us as we deserve because of our sins. The sentiment is similar to that of the psalmist in Psalm 130:3: "If Thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?"

The Lord recognised the fact that sin alienates us from God. This prayer reminds us that acknowledging our sin and the seriousness of the consequences of sin is vital if we are to obtain forgiveness. The graciousness God extends to us, however, must also be extended by us to those who transgress against us.

Verse 12 establishes a clear link between our forgiveness by God and our willingness to forgive others. The word translated "debtors"² in this verse is related to the word for "debts". Thayer says its literal meaning is 'one who owes another, a debtor', and makes the point that it properly

1. Gk. *opheilēma*. Strong 3783.

2. Gk. *opheiletēs*. Strong 3781.

refers to owing money. In this case he suggests it carries the meaning of 'one who has not yet made amends to one whom he has injured'.

This is an important principle. The forgiveness we seek from God is undeserved. We ask Him not to treat us as we deserve. The same must apply in our dealings with others. We cannot wait until someone earns our forgiveness. It is right and proper that a repentant thief should wish to restore that which he has taken, but whether or not he does, if we are the one he has wronged that cannot be taken into account when we forgive him.

Forgive as God forgives us

If we do not forgive others we ought not to expect God to forgive us. So vital is this truth that the Lord repeated it immediately after the prayer: "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (vv. 14,15).

You will note the Lord uses a different word, "trespasses", when reiterating this principle from the prayer.³ The basic idea of that word is 'a fall', and Thayer says that in the New Testament it means 'a lapse or deviation from truth or uprightness; a sin, misdeed'. Vine says it means 'a false step, a blunder'. It would seem that the Lord deliberately seeks to extend the principle from the concept of debt to any lapse or blunder committed against us. Perhaps conscious of man's inherent capacity for legalism, the Lord wanted to ensure we applied forgiveness on as a broad a basis as possible.

If we do not forgive others we ought not to expect God to forgive us. This is a solemn truth. Yet it is hard sometimes to forgive. We can feel sorely wounded by the actions of others. At times we might be the victim of repeated infringements that really test our resolve to forgive. But the unambiguous message of this passage, and the implicit message of the doctrine of the atonement, is that we must be like Almighty God, merciful, gracious and longsuffering. Seventy times seven

was our Lord's prescription for forgiveness. Again and again and again and again we must be willing to forgive.

We have in Matthew 6:12-15 the Divine model. As we forgive others, so God will forgive us. Dare we wait until others deserve forgiveness before extending forgiveness to them? Not unless we want our Lord to treat us the same way and wait for us to earn our forgiveness. This principle is illustrated in the dramatic parable of the unforgiving creditor in Matthew 18:23-35. This is a sober reminder of the need for us to forgive. It follows on immediately from the discussion with Peter about the importance of abundant mercy and forgiveness, which we have already considered.

The forgiveness extended to us is far in excess of anything we could earn through our own merit. In the parable a king—a man with supreme authority—extended mercy to a servant who owed him more than any man could hope to repay. The word translated "which owed" in verse 24 is that translated "debtors" in the Lord's Prayer. In verse 25 we see there was a penalty for which the servant should by rights have been liable, but in verse 27 compassion and mercy were extended to the servant and he was forgiven.

The forgiven creditor should have been imbued with kindness and grace in response to the mercy extended to him. Instead, when another man sought his mercy for a much smaller debt, the first creditor responded harshly and refused to be compassionate (v. 30). This incited the king to revoke the mercy he had previously extended.

The lesson is clear, and it is summed up in verse 35, where the word "trespasses" is the word used in Matthew 6:14 to refer to any lapse. God will not be merciful towards us unless we are merciful towards others. The forgiveness of God is not unconditional. Our God is a forgiving God, but only if we ourselves are forgiving people.

Our challenge is to put into practice in our daily life the moral truth of the doctrine of the atonement. In the matter of forgiveness let us have the wisdom to heed Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 5:1: "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children".

(Concluded)

3. Gk. *paraptōma*. Strong 3900.