

In my three previous articles on this great subject of forgiveness, I shared some thoughts on the forgiveness we receive from God through the wonderful atoning work, resurrection and exaltation of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is, however, a further very important aspect that I want to consider now.

A very clear message, especially in the New Testament, is that those who are forgiven must be forgivers! It is the whole point of the parable 'The Unforgiving Servant' in Matthew 18. This man was initially forgiven an enormous debt but would not then forgive a fellow servant a paltry sum. He ended up in prison "*until he should pay all his debt*", which for him would have been utterly impossible. Jesus concluded the parable with the emphatic statement: "*So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*" (Mt 18:34,35)

This vitally important truth was also strongly emphasised by Jesus at the end of His teaching on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. He said, "*if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*" (Mt 6:14,15) These are profoundly serious statements that need to be taken to heart by us all. Being forgiven by God and being a forgiver of others are inextricably tied together.

FORGIVING FORGIVEN OTHERS

Being forgiven by God, we then have to be forgivers of others. But who are the others? In our Lord's conclusion to the parable of the unforgiving servant, the one to be forgiven is described as "*your brother*" (Mt 18:35). Jesus clearly had in mind all who would become Christians, because He put His teaching in the context of "*the church*" (Mt 18:17).

As Peter listened to the Lord's words, a very important question arose in his mind, and probably in the minds of at least some of his fellow disciples: "*Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?*" (Mt 18:21) Peter's concern seemed to be with the limits of his forgiving. I suggest that Peter was thinking that it would be all well and good to forgive some wrong done him by a fellow disciple, but what if he were to do it again? Or what if he then committed another offence against me – "*how often*" could this go on for? Surely there had to be a limit?!

Peter could have put forward the suggestion of forgiving "*seven times*" because it may have been the Jewish culture of the day. It seems that to forgive the same person seven times was thought to be the full extent to which God would expect someone to go! The thing about such an idea is that it implies that the one doing the forgiving is 'ticking off' the number of times of forgiving, which suggests at least a degree of reluctance to forgive. "OK; I've forgiven him six times now and if he does it again, I'm only going to forgive once more. Then, that's it!"

Jesus's response must have come as a bit of a shock. "*Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*" (Mt 18:21,22) In effect, Jesus's answer is, "if you belong to me, stop counting!" Such a reply ought not to have been a surprise, because He had already taught His disciples to pray, "*forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*" (Mt 6:12) What a great thing it is that God doesn't count, but just goes on forgiving every day. This really does mean that, if we are truly Christian, we must be willing to forgive others as regularly and often as we expect our God and Saviour to forgive us.

At the end of the parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus taught His disciples to "*forgive your brother from your heart.*" (Mt 18:35) This takes the challenge to a much deeper level, showing that true Christian forgiveness must be heartfelt. It is not only a matter of making a deliberate decision to forgive and go on forgiving others, but wanting to do so! We may well recognise that we have a duty to forgive a brother or sister in Christ, but still harbour feelings of resentment, which very often are the most difficult to deal with. Yet that is what Christians are called to do – and that is some challenge, don't you think?

Paul must have had this 'heartfelt' aspect of forgiveness in mind when he was inspired to write that Christians must "*Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*" (Eph 4:32) Is it not wonderful that our God and Saviour forgives us from His heart? It is what He loves to do, and He calls His people to reflect that in their behaviour towards each other. I find it very interesting that this last verse in Ephesians 4 is followed immediately by the first two verses of chapter 5 – "*be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us*" – which include our imitating Christ's attitude of heart in the way in which we are expected to forgive others!

However, a question which may come to our minds is, "Are we to forgive brothers and sisters who sin against us but do not repent?" So what about:

FORGIVING THE NON-FORGIVERS

Going back to Matthew 18 and the run-up to the parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus instructed His disciples how to deal with "*your brother who sins against you*", teaching them that the first step had to be to "*go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone*", with the hope and intention of gaining the person concerned (Mt 18:15). This clearly implies a forgiving attitude on the part of the one sinned against.

If the offender “*does not listen*” and rebuffs a genuine approach, further steps are then to be taken (v.16). If all approaches meet with the same response, the offender is to be treated “*as a Gentile and tax collector*” by the whole church (vv.16,17)! A hard-hearted and blatantly-offending church member is a blight on the whole local body of believers, and in the context of Jesus’ day, to view someone as a Gentile or tax collector was to consider them as not wishing to belong to the church. Therefore the other members must treat such a person accordingly.

Paul was inspired to give similar instruction to the church at Thessalonica. “*If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.*” (2 Thess 2:13,14) The Christians in the church in Corinth were told that they ought to mourn because they were tolerating the immoral behaviour of a member, and were warned “*not to associate ... [or] even to eat with such a one*” (1 Cor 5:1–11). In those days, and in that society, sharing a meal implied an acceptance of the life-style of fellow diners. It is very clear that a local church must not turn a blind eye to the deliberate and persistent sin of an unrepentant member.

The point I want to make here, however, is that the censure of such a person must always be based on a heartfelt willingness to forgive when the offender repents. Regarding the disobedient person at Thessalonica, the church was told: “*Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.*” (2 Thess 3:15) Paul followed up his censure of the immoral brother in his first letter to the church at Corinth with a plea to the believers there “*to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow*” (2 Cor 2:7) – assuming, of course, that the man concerned had repented and discarded his immorality. That a heart-felt forgiving attitude should be the default position of a Christian is illustrated by the instruction: “*if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.*” (Gal 6:1)

We must seek always to hold a strong desire to forgive, even if those who sin against us refuse to repent. Yet, there is another question that comes to mind regarding forgiving people who sin against us and are not Christians:

FORGIVING THE UNFORGIVEN

We can expect people to sin against us because, even as Christians, we have often done it to others. So we Christians should not be surprised when non-Christians sin against us. But what then should be our attitude towards them? Although not dealing with the matter of forgiveness as such, Jesus did say, “*You have heard it said ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Mt 5:43,44). Jesus is the ‘exemplar par excellence’ of this when, though nailed to the cross, his prayer for the Roman soldiers was, “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*” (Luke 23:34) Jesus longed for the forgiveness of His unrepentant persecutors. Looking back on the crucifixion, the apostle Peter remembered that, when Jesus suffered, “*He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten*” (1 Peter 2:22,23).

That heart of Jesus was exemplified in the dying words of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. When being stoned to death, he prayed for his persecutors “*with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’*” (Acts 7:60) Someone who has a cleansed heart, together with the mind of Christ, will be like the person referred to in Proverbs: “*Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offence.*” (Prov 19:11). In His forgiving grace, our Saviour is the epitome of that – and how lovely to be just like Him! If this is how our Lord and Saviour could treat His enemies, we too should hold a forgiving attitude to non-Christian people who may be against us. Then surely we can pray for, and exercise forgiveness towards, brothers and sisters who belong with us to the same family of God.

FORGIVING AND THE FUTURE

It is worth asking how it was that Stephen was able to pray for his murderers in such a powerful way? The first answer is that he, being “*full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*” (Acts 7:55) Stephen was enabled to look beyond the wicked sin being committed against him and see his Saviour, standing in glory, ready to welcome him into his future eternal reward.

Joseph is another example. He was able to forgive his brothers for selling him into slavery because he came to see that, although they “*meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*” (Gen 50:20) Joseph realised that God worked, even through the sin of his brothers, to bring about great blessing!

When the Israelites, almost to a man, refused to trust God and enter the Promised Land, they “*grumbled against Moses and Aaron... [and] all the congregation said to stone them*” (Num 14:1–10). Yet Moses turned to God in heartfelt prayer, beseeching Him to forgive the nation so that God’s name would not be besmirched (Num 14:13–19). In other words, he prayed for forgiveness for the sin of the people, against him and Aaron, so that God’s name would be glorified.

There are many other Bible examples of this nature, as when Paul viewed his unjust imprisonment, writing “*I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel... that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.*” (Phil 1:12–18) He too looked beyond the sin committed against him and rejoiced in how much blessing God was bringing about as a result!

A great support in a godly, heartfelt, forgiving attitude is to know that even sins committed against us can lead to much blessing to others and for ourselves. When sinned against, we need to look beyond the immediate distress caused and think about what the Lord may be doing through it for His glory. Even when sinned against, “*we know that for those who love God all things work together for good*” (Rom 8:28).
