

Chapter 8 - Forgiveness

8.1 Introduction

While there isn't a verse of Scripture which says, "walk in forgiveness", the role of forgiveness in the life of a Christian is so important that we need to devote a chapter to it.

There are many wonderful passages of Scripture, and the following passage is surely one of them. It summarizes much of what we have focused on in this series. Note that the highlighted portion on forgiving one another has a prominent role in the passage.

Col 3:12-17 *Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and **forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.** But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were **called** in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*

8.2 The Forgiveness of God

The focus here is on our forgiveness of others, but we first need to be reminded of God's forgiveness of us, so here's a very short summary:

Ever since the Fall, which condemned all mankind to a sinful nature, and thus to being separated from God and exposed to the wrath of God, man has been striving to correct the situation. But it turns out that there is nothing man can do to be reconciled with God, *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* (Rom 3:23) Only God could bring about reconciliation. He has done this by sending His Son to take on human form, being born of a virgin, to live a perfect, sinless life, and to suffer and die on the cross for our sins. Since the penalty of our sins has been paid by the Lord Jesus Christ, God offers us forgiveness of sins and the free gift of salvation through faith by believing in Jesus and His sacrificial, atoning work on the cross. *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.* (Jn 3:16) God thus enables us to be saved, and to arrive in heaven with our sins forgiven, and to be able to be in God's presence, clothed in the righteousness of Christ. That's the wonderful and incredible gift of God's forgiveness.

8.3 Our Forgiveness of Others.

We come now to the question of our forgiveness of others. A good place to start is to look at the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus taught His disciples to pray:

Matt 6:9-13 ...*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."*

Jesus then went on to elaborate only one portion of this prayer, one aspect of this prayer, namely, vs 12, *And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*. He said:

Matt 6:14-15 *"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*

Note the apparent contradiction with what I have just said about God's forgiveness. God forgives us our sins as a result of the finished, sacrificial work of Christ on the cross. There's nothing we can do, because Christ has done it all. We cannot earn salvation; it is a gift of God. *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God."* (Eph 2:8) But regarding the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says, *"if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."* This seems to be an apparent contradiction, which we need to figure out.

The Lord's Prayer is not the only teaching by Jesus on the question of forgiveness. He also taught the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, recorded in **Matt 18:21-35**:-

Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

*But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So the fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then the master, after he had called him, said to him, '**You wicked servant!** I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.*

So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

Before we focus on the crucial part of this parable, which is about forgiveness, note that Jesus said that the parable is like "*the kingdom of heaven*". We can assume that the king in the parable is a portrayal of God the Father. Secondly, note that Jesus specifically mentions the amounts of the two debts, so we need to take careful note of these amounts. The amount that the servant owed the king was ten thousand talents. Now a talent was not a coin, but a weight of money; a common talent weighed 34 kg, and a royal talent 68 kg. 1 talent was equivalent to 6000 drachmas (the Greek silver coin). So the servant in the parable owed the king a huge amount – ten thousand talents, or about 340 tons of money, or 60 million drachmas. We are told in 1 Kg 10:14 that the weight of gold that came to Solomon yearly was 666 talents of gold. This servant owed ten thousand talents! Consider Jesus' Parable of the Talents; the man travelling to a far country for a long time gave his servants five talents, two talents and one talent. Again, in comparison, ten thousand talents is an enormous amount of money. So the servant owing the king ten thousand talents had no way of ever repaying the king. The king's forgiveness was thus a huge act of forgiveness. Then note that the second servant owed the first servant 100 denarii. A denarius was the basic Roman silver coin. A hundred denarii would have weighed about ½kg. This was about one millionth of what the first servant owed the king! No wonder the king was angered by the first servant's lack of forgiveness.

Let's summarize the clear teaching from the Lord's Prayer and from this parable. First of all, it is abundantly clear that God expects us to forgive those who trespass against us. We can go further and say that God desires that everyone forgives everyone for everything. God describes people who don't forgive as wicked. Those who choose not to forgive, God delivers to torment until we learn to forgive. God clearly has little tolerance for the sin of unforgiveness. These torments are intended to bring about discipline to fully forgive. Forgiving without limit ensures freedom from these torments.

We need to say more about these torments, but first let's first resolve the apparent contradiction.

8.4 The Apparent Contradiction

The explanation of the apparent contradiction is really quite simple. Both views of God's forgiveness are true; one applies after death, in heaven one day, while the other applies before death, here on earth. I said, speaking of God's forgiveness of sin made possible by Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, that our salvation enables us to arrive in heaven with our sins forgiven, and to be able to be in God's presence, clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Yes, our reconciliation with God does affect our lives here on earth, before death, but the full impact of our salvation is only realized after death. In contrast, the consequences of forgiving or of not forgiving others are experienced right here in this life. So a Christian who is unforgiving will experience torment in this life, but will still arrive in heaven fully forgiven. One who is not saved, who never believes in Jesus Christ, may in this life be very forgiving of others, and thus never experience torment for unforgiveness in this life; but in the next life will not go to heaven, but experience torment in hell for eternity.

8.5 The Torment of Unforgiveness

Let's get back to this question of torment in our lives as a result of not forgiving "those that trespass against us". The concept of torment is frequently found in the NT, conveyed by the Greek word *basazino*. Here are three examples:

Matt 8:5,6 *Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully **tormented**."*

The apostle Peter, speaking of Lot living among the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, said,

2 Pet 2:8 *... that righteous man, dwelling among them, **tormented** his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds*

1 Jn 4:18 *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves **torment**. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.*

Each of these torments is in this life, not the life hereafter. So when we do not forgive someone who has wronged us, God allows torment in our lives to bring about discipline, to bring us the place of forgiveness.

This life should be viewed as a time of preparation for the life hereafter. We frequently see in the NT how God shapes and moulds us in this life to get rid of those aspects of our lives which displease Him – how He chips away at the "living stones" – how He prunes the branches of the Vine to make them more fruitful. The Bible frequently speaks of the

correction or discipline which God imposes on us, or the trials we must endure to mould us into likeness of Christ; e.g.,

Prov 3:11,12 *My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor despise His correction; for whom the Lord loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights.*

1 Pet 1:6,7 *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ ...*

1Pet 4:12 *Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you ...*

So God uses chastening and correction and trials and testings in this life to prepare us for the life hereafter. He moulds and shapes and disciplines us to make us more like Jesus. If we are unforgiving, He subjects us to torments in order to make us forgiving.

8.6 Application

So how does all this apply to us? Firstly, it means that we need to check very carefully whether there is anyone in our lives that has done something to us –trespassed against us - whom we have never forgiven. If so, we need to urgently and prayerfully get to the place of genuine forgiveness.

Secondly, we need to see if we are aware of torment in our lives. If so, could it be God tormenting us for something or someone we have not forgiven? Bruce Wilkerson has made a thorough study of this, and is convinced that a great deal of torment in the lives of Christians is the result of our unforgiving spirits.

It is clear that the question of forgiveness is very serious in the life of every Christian. Jesus requires us to make it a daily matter of prayer – *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us*. Regarding the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus tells that *the master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him*. Jesus warns us that our **heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses**. Note also the teaching of Jesus, as recorded in the following verse:

Mk 11:25-26 *“And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”*

“But”, you say, “this person you are expecting me to forgive is really my enemy, who has done terrible things to me.” Listen to the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

Matt 5:43-44 *“You have that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you ...”*

So let us do what Paul tells us each to do:

Eph 4:32 *And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.*

Let’s conclude with the teaching of Jesus, which complements nicely His Parable of the Unforgiving Servant:

Lk 6:37,38 *“Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. **Forgive, and you will be forgiven.** Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.*