

VIRTUE THAT COUNTS

Pursuing That Which Touches The Heart Of God

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—Chapter 10—

FORGIVENESS: More Favour To Oneself Than To The One Forgiven

It is easy doing yourself a favour. Did you know that forgiving others, for whatever offence, is doing yourself an enormous favour? Do yourself a favour today—forgive someone!

He Forgave Them but They Still Needed to Repent

Moments before the excruciating pain of crucifixion took life out of Him, Jesus cried out, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk. 23:34). On the surface, we may argue that Jesus’ basis for calling upon the Father to forgive was because of the ignorance of those who were crucifying Him.

There are other reasons for which it can be claimed that these people were not to be held responsible for what they were doing—that they were actually fulfilling the Scripture and purpose of God (Ps. 16:10-11, 22:18; Is. 50:6; 52:14; 53:3-5,7-12; Dan. 9:24-26;). Moreover, Jesus Himself said that He was willing to lay down His life, otherwise no one would take it (Jhn. 10:17-18).

Whatever the case, it is important to note that whether they were fulfilling the Scripture or ignorant of what they were doing, the unfolding of events in the process of crucifixion, resurrection and the final ascension into the heavens ought to have enlightened these people. There was therefore completely no reason that absolved them from repenting. But even after the unfolding of the strange events with the climax of Christ rising from the dead, there are people who were not moved one bit. They still hated the Lord and even schemed to hoax a story against the most spectacular event in the History of mankind. They insisted that the disciples came and stole the body (Matt. 28:11-15).

But look at it again. Did these people really not know what they were doing? Perhaps! There are, however, a number of things that we can establish that these people knew, that this Man (Jesus) was:

- Innocent. Those who bore false testimony against Him knew they were lying;
- Not like any other person around. He was more than they were willing to acknowledge;
- Not a danger to anyone. If anything, He could have been the most cherished friend of the society—a person who could raise our dead loved ones back to life.

If Christ were to rationalise, He could have come up with good reasons for not forgiving His crucifiers. It is difficult to ascertain what these people did not know about what they were doing. Perhaps they didn't know that they were merely being used by the devil; may be they did not know that they were fulfilling the Scripture; perhaps they did not know that they were fighting a losing battle. But whatever the case, any serious consideration of what and who Jesus was, would have made someone know that Jesus didn't deserve to be treated the way He was treated.

Before, during and even after the crucifixion, the theme of forgiveness runs through Jesus' teaching. Forgiveness is not only offered when a wrongdoer does not know what he is doing. It is equally offered when the offender actually knows what he is doing.

The essence of forgiveness is to lighten the spirit of the one offended. Carrying a heart of unforgiveness is bearing a load that weighs down one's spirit. Unforgiveness makes the heart a breeding ground for bitterness and distress. These reflect on our behaviour and countenance.

It shouldn't be a surprise that even after forgiving a person, it may not do him much good if he does not himself repent before God and seek His forgiveness as well. This is why it is not enough to forgive and end there. It is important that we make a follow-up and minister to "the enemy" so that by so doing, we shall have heaped burning coal on his head (Rom. 12:20). And it counts if the motive of heaping the hot coal is not that we may feel good because the person would then burn, but that he may be refined by it. This is the essence of overcoming evil with good.

We must take the next step, that is, after forgiving, we need to show love (remember, love is practical). This is when it would count to help the one who offended us. If we only forgive and stop there, we shall have only helped ourselves, yet our call is to help others.

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a working relationship with God, he must receive God's forgiveness
in exchange with him also forgiving others,
otherwise, why should we expect to get what we are unwilling to give?*

Many Christians think that they do a favour to the offending party when they forgive him. It is only a favour to them when we help them see their position and ask God to forgive them. It would be wrong to think that if we forgave someone who didn't himself accept Christ and ask God to forgive him, he would make it to heaven on the account that we forgave the person.

Any time I feel overwhelmed by circumstances to the extent of giving in to the pressure of trial or temptation, the Lord brings my way the understanding that I am not the only person that is going or would ever go through what I am experiencing. Moreover, He shows me examples of people who have gone through worst experiences than what I would be going through. Most of the times it helps just to know that either we are not alone or there are people who might be going through scathing and more arduous things than what we might be experiencing.

If one is willing to *listen*, God is always reminding us that we are not alone. He is not only doing this to a few. He does it to as many as are willing to listen. When forgiveness seems impossible, remember Jesus who was innocent yet mistreated like a criminal. He ended up being killed. The worst

thing that someone can do to you is to kill you or kill your loved one. Even if someone was to kill us, and this is the worst thing for the physical existence, we must remember that they killed Jesus but He never carried bitterness to the grave. Since then, His servants were/are subjected to untold persecutions and martyrdom. They have, however, sought God to forgive their persecutors. This means that the gravity of the offence done against us is immaterial when a call for forgiveness is made.

Forgiveness—Not an Option But an Obligation for Every Christian

Some people think that some things are unforgivable. Though they profess to be Christians, they hold grudges. They think that since God understands the deep hurt they have gone through, He would wink at their unforgiving heart. Nevertheless, the greater the hurt the higher the quality of the virtue of forgiveness if one decides to forgive.

Forgiveness, like the *agape love*, is not based on feelings. It is based on decision.

The Bible exhorts us to come to God for forgiveness in the words that even if our sin is as red as scarlet we would be washed as white as snow (Is. 1:18). In the same way that He has forgiven and still willing to forgive, He wants us to forgive others as well, regardless of the sin committed against us. The so-called unforgivable hurt that someone put us through is, ironically, a greater opportunity for blessings.

Prompted by Peter's question, the Lord Jesus graphically tells a parable of the unforgiving debtor. Peter had come to Jesus and asked how many times he should forgive his brother when a brother sinned against him. He went ahead to suggest a number—seven times. The Lord Jesus answered him that it is not seven times but seventy times seven (Matt. 18:21-22 NKJV).

It is implicit that Peter had thought that forgiving up to seven times was such a generous gesture. From the answer, it is clear that He *told Peter to forget about keeping the record*.

There are two important components of what the Lord taught on the issue of forgiveness during this occasion. The first, as we have seen, is the repetition of offence with a corresponding repetition of forgiveness. The other component is even more compelling. Jesus gave a parable that shows forgiveness is not optional—at least for those who want to appropriate God's forgiveness.

In the parable, He said that the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he wasn't able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and children and all that he had be sold to pay the debt. This servant fell on his knees before his master and begged him for patience. He promised to pay back everything. The master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. The servant got more than he asked for. He had asked for more time to get himself organised so that he could pay back everything. But he had all his debt cancelled.

But the same servant, still fresh from a benefit of a forgiving grace, found one of his fellow-servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him, demanding that he pays back what he owed him. This fellow-servant did exactly what his molester did when he faced the wrath of the master—he fell on his knees and begged him for more time. He would pay later. He refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

When his master got to know that he refused to show the very mercy that got him out of debt, he was disappointed. He charged him,

You wicked servant, ..., I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow-servant just as I had on you"? In anger, his master turned him over to the jailers not just to confine him but also to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

—Matthew 18:32-34.

The Lord concluded His talk with a chilling assertion: “This is how My heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” (v. 35). The rule is clear: We either forgive or we are not forgiven ourselves.

In fact according to the Lord's prayer, the implication is strong that we should ask God to forgive us *after* we have forgiven those who sin against us: “Forgive us our debts, as we also *have* forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12, italics for emphasis).

According to Christ, there is no sin that we should refuse to forgive. And how many times did He say we must forgive? Well, as we have seen above, He said seventy times seven. But considering this counting against what the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13 about love not keeping a record of wrongs, keeping a record of the number of times one has been sinning against us would be failing the expectation of the Lord. We would not only need to be passionate record-keepers to have those statistics in place but we would also have to be revisiting the records from time to time and meditate on the wrongs committed against us to be able to keep track. In fact, one would have to keep a pen and a journal to record the ills. Four hundred and ninety is a big figure to retain without a written record. Love, which is also *compulsory*, tells us not to keep such a record. The Lord must have been just tantalizing His disciples by talking of seventy times seven. The fact is that we have no business keeping the record.

Was it not deliberate that Jesus didn't even attempt to qualify the types of sins against their possibility of being forgiven?

Those who refuse to forgive have no business to be forgiven, not even by God Himself. The only thing that can exempt a person from the requirements of God's forgiveness is if that person is sinless. We all know that this is impossible. The Bible says that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23) and also that we deceive ourselves if we hold that we are not sinners (1Jhn. 1:8). This makes everyone a candidate of God's forgiveness. For a Christian to live in the full assurance of a working relationship with God, he must receive God's forgiveness in exchange with him also forgiving others, otherwise, why should we expect to get what we are unwilling to give? Why should we receive God's forgiveness but refuse to give a godly forgiveness to those who infringe upon us? Is this not one of the raw excessive self-centredness? The means through which we got bailed out of sin should be the same means we use to bail people out.

Was it not deliberate that Jesus didn't even attempt to qualify the types of sins against their possibility of being forgiven? He did not bother to categorise sin and by so doing show us what should be forgiven and what not to forgive. The question of forgiveness does not therefore vary with the *weight* of the offence. The weight of transgression would only determine the worth of forgiveness rather than the justification for not forgiving. So, instead of looking at the magnitude of an offence as a justification

for not forgiving, look at it as an opportunity to score highly in the value and quality of forgiveness. Put in another way, the deeper the hurt and the greater the offence, the higher the quality of forgiveness if granted.

What we have seen above may look like simplifying difficult things, and that is actually the point. We would realise generally that the more we *take it easy*, the greater the chances of overcoming the circumstances. In fact, throughout the Scripture, and especially in the New Testament, we are called upon to simplify life and by so doing, we would overcome most of the things that could get us worried and distressed (Matt. 6:25-34, 10:28-31; Heb. 13:5; Philipp. 4:11-13; Jam. 1:2-3).

Even for things that are humanly traumatising like hunger, we are told, “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear” (Matt. 6:25); for trials, instead of bemoaning our condition, we are exhorted, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds” (Jam. 1:2). If we make a decision to align our life with the Scripture, God would help us so that the very things that had greater potentiality to destroy us would be turned round. They would instead have even better and greater potentiality to build us. The benefits would not be regretted, here or *There*.

Asked or Not Asked

Many people think that they can only forgive when the offending party asks for it. Forgiveness is to be rendered whether asked for or not. We saw the example of the Lord Himself forgiving His persecutors though they neither asked for nor appreciated it.

Equally, many also think that forgiveness is only rendered when we go to the people who sinned against us and tell them that we forgive them. Though this is the best thing to do and should be pursued as far as it is possible, not all cases provide an opportunity to do this. Another hindrance to telling someone that we have forgiven him is that the person may not have even admitted his fault. Telling him that we have forgiven him may develop into arguments.

Forgiveness that counts is that which is given from the heart. Whether we get an opportunity to talk to the one who hurt us or not, the heart should be kept free from holding a grudge against the person. It is a struggle but we just have to keep our hearts a grudge-free zone.

If we are expected to forgive even if the person that hurt us doesn't acknowledge his fault, how much more are we compelled to forgive those who not only acknowledge their fault but also humble themselves and ask for forgiveness?

It is sad to note that some Christians would still not want to forgive even when they are entreated by those who hurt them, yet forgiveness is not an option. The only option is that we forfeit the forgiveness that we also got from God. This is clearly the conclusion of the parable we saw above (Matt. 18:35). The forgiveness of God would benefit us and be sustained only if we also forgive others.

Do not forget: The deeper the hurt, the higher the quality of the virtue of forgiveness.

Reflections and Questions to Ponder

1. *What is the worst thing that someone has ever done to you? How do you relate with that person now? Have you forgiven the person—from your heart? If not, what reasons do you have not to forgive? Did you realise that there are no scripturally justified reasons for unforgiveness?*

2. *What are some of the things you find difficult to forgive? What are you doing about them?*
3. *Have you ever sinned against someone? Did you ask for forgiveness? How would you feel if the person refuses to forgive you? To what extent is it true that people generally want to be forgiven but would be reluctant to forgive others? Why is this so?*
4. *If you are sure that someone offended you but the person also insists that you were the one who was on the wrong, what are the possible results of this kind of “stand off”? What would you do in a situation like this?*
5. *Do you only forgive people if they acknowledge their fault? Why would this be a tricky attitude in regards to the purpose of forgiveness?*