

FORGIVENESS

A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH FOR CHRISTIANS

Forgiveness is a matter of life or death for Christians. It is not an option – if Christians do not forgive those who trespass against them, neither will God forgive their trespasses. Without God's forgiveness one cannot be redeemed. Jesus clearly teaches this in His parable of the unmerciful, or unforgiving servant (CP Mt 18:23-35). Jesus told this parable in response to Peter's question in V21-22, as to how many times he had to forgive someone who sinned against him (CP V21-22). When Jesus told Peter he had to forgive the offender four hundred and ninety times – “Seventy times seven” – He was simply underlining the fact that Christians cannot ever afford not to forgive others, regardless of how often they offend against them (CP Lu 17:3-4). Jesus is dealing here with offenders who apologize, but He also teaches that Christians must forgive those who offend against them regardless of whether they apologize or not. Forgiveness has to be a constant attitude with Christians if they want to be forgiven themselves (CP Mt 6:14-15; Mk 11:25-26; Lu 6:37). Throughout scripture Jesus teaches that the forgiveness of God though freely given to Christians nevertheless remains conditional according to Christians' willingness to forgive others. If they do not forgive, they will be punished like the unforgiving servant in the parable “... *so likewise will my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses*” (CP Mt 18:35).

The judgement the king pronounced on the unforgiving servant in the parable is the equivalent of eternal damnation for unforgiving Christians, because just as the unforgiving servant could never repay his debt to the king, unforgiving Christians can never repay their debt to God (CP Ro 3:23; Ga 3:10, Jas 2:10). Christians' debt to God is His forgiveness of their sins, so in return they are obligated to forgive those who sin against them (CP Lu 6:27-36). These sayings of Jesus are commonly called the beatitudes. They are the principles upon which the kingdom of God is built, and it is incumbent upon Christians to live out these principles in their Christian walk (CP 1Pe 3:8-9). Here Peter teaches that the calling of everyone who has received mercy and forgiveness from God is to bless others with the same mercy and forgiveness, in order to inherit a blessing. The blessing is the inheritance to which Christians are called – everlasting life. Now let us look at Lu 6:37 again (CP Lu 6:37). Apart from teaching that the forgiveness of God remains conditional according to Christians' willingness to forgive others, we also learn from this that every action and attitude of Christians toward others will eventually reflect back on them. This is the spiritual law of sowing and reaping. It applies to every aspect of the Christian walk (CP Ga 6:7-10).

Paul is defining the law of sowing and reaping here. Just as surely as everything in nature reproduces after its kind, harvests being as sure as sowings, so everyone will reap what they sow in this life, and be solely responsible for their destiny in eternity. V8

clearly teaches that anyone who claims to be born again by the spirit of God while consciously sowing to the flesh – harbouring unforgiveness is sowing to the flesh – deceive themselves believing that they are saved. It is folly for them to think that they will reap eternal life while they sow to the flesh something that will eternally damn them (CP Jas 2:13). James teaches here that those who show no mercy or forgiveness toward others, after having received God's mercy and forgiveness themselves, demonstrate that they do not fully appreciate what God has done for them. God will treat them as being unredeemed, which we learned earlier in Mt 6:14-15 and Mk 11:25-26. Let us look at those passages again (CP Mt 6:14-15; Mk 11:25-27). If God will not forgive unforgiving Christians their trespasses, that means they will forfeit their place in His eternal kingdom. Entry into God's kingdom is conditional upon obeying His word (CP Rev 22:14).

Forgiveness is the key to answered prayer (CP Mt 6:9-15). In V9-13 here Jesus is teaching the disciples how to pray, and in V14-15, He stresses the importance of forgiveness for prayers to be answered. Jesus repeatedly stresses the need for forgiveness as a condition of answered prayer (CP Mk 11:22-26). This is essentially the same teaching as Mt 6:9-15. There is absolutely no limit whatsoever on what Christians can ask God for in prayer. Providing they ask in faith, and are not harbouring unforgiveness toward others, God will give it to them “...*he shall have whatsoever he saith*” (CP Lu 11:5-10; 1 Jn 5:14-15). Conditional upon their forgiveness of others, Christians can ask for anything they desire in prayer in line with God's word, and God will give it to them. As we noted at the commencement of this study, forgiveness is not an option for Christians. God will not even receive worship from Christians who are not on speaking terms with others (CP Mt 5:23-24). Although Jesus spoke this in a Jewish context, it also applies to an unforgiving attitude among Christians in the contemporary church (CP Eph 4:31-32; Col 3:13). There is no greater incentive to forgive than is commanded here. As God and Christ both have forgiven Christians, so too they must forgive others (CP Ps 103:10-12 with He 8:12).

Here we learn that God not only forgives trespasses against Him, but He forgets them too. Forgiving and forgetting are mutually inclusive in God's order, and it must be the same for Christians. Christians cannot say they have forgiven someone if they keep bringing to remembrance their trespass against them. It must be forgotten completely. Christians have to follow God's example (CP Mic 7:18-19). Whoever claims to be a child of God must have God's disposition to forgive, even their enemies (CP Lu 6:27-36; Ro 12:19-20).

Now let us have a look at a classic example in scripture of man's unforgiving spirit as opposed to God's love and compassion (CP Lu 15:11-24). This is called the parable of the lost son. This parable proclaims the good news of the Gospel. All that is taught throughout scripture, from Genesis to Revelation is a running commentary on this parable. The father's heart of compassion toward his repentant son portrays the father heart of God and His infinite love and

forgiveness toward every sinner who repents. And as the father in the parable joyfully celebrated his son's return and restored him to his position of sonship in the family, so too God rejoices over every sinner who repents, regardless of how much they sinned against Him. Let us look now at the elder brother's attitude (CP Lu 15:25-32). What a contrast the elder son's attitude is to his father's. He is angry, bitter, unforgiving and loveless toward his brother, and is resentful and self-righteously indignant toward his father. The elder son portrays unforgiving Christians who are not responsive to God's mercy and forgiveness toward them. They too are loveless toward those they will not forgive, and directly contravene God's law of love in scripture (CP 1Cor 13:1-7). Anger, bitterness, unforgiveness can never be reconciled with what God's word teaches us here. Whoever does not love like this will suffer the same punishment as the unforgiving servant in the parable of the unmerciful servant we studied earlier.

Let us now look at another example of unforgiveness in scripture (CP 2Cor 2:5-11). The Corinthian church had been disciplining a sinning member by disfellowshipping him, which had resulted in him becoming truly repentant. But the church had not yet forgiven him. They were needlessly prolonging his punishment. Here Paul urges the church to immediately forgive him and restore him to fellowship with them, lest he despair about his salvation and Satan overwhelm him with overmuch sorrow. Satan would thus gain and advantage over the church, for the man would be lost to eternity. This translates to Christians in the contemporary church quickly forgiving those who trespass against them lest Satan gain an advantage over them (CP Lu 23:34). This is the example of forgiveness that Jesus left for Christians to follow. He forgave those who killed him while he was dying. So did Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He forgave his killers while they were stoning him to death (CP Ac 7: 58-60).