

CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS

*Preached by Rev. Forrest Damron
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IT is inspiring to talk about prayers God has answered, but sometimes we like to know what has hindered some of our prayers so that the answer has not come. We can learn some valuable lessons if we consider the reasons for not getting what we have prayed for, and we learn patience through it.

It is not always our fault when we do not get the answer. The Prophet Daniel was known for his effectual prayers. But there was one time when he prayed for three weeks before he received the answer. The Lord sent an angel to tell him that his prayers had been heard from the first day he had prayed, but the enemy had hindered the answer from coming (Daniel 10:12,13). So we should not become discouraged if our prayers are not answered the first time we pray.

The Apostle Paul had a "thorn in the flesh." He prayed three times that it might be taken away, but the Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (II Corinthians 12:9). Paul realized that because of the abundant revelations he had had, he must be careful lest he become exalted above measure; lest he glory in the special concessions that God had made to him, or think that God was more devoted to him than to others. God is good to all of us, and He loves all His children. And sometimes He knows it is better for us not to get what we pray for.

Sometimes people pray to be seen of men, to appear especially pious. But Jesus said:

"When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (Matthew 6:6).

So far as other people are concerned, let all your prayers be like a closet prayer. Shut yourself in with the Lord. Some people refer to this text and refuse to come to an altar of prayer. They say' they prefer to pray in their closets at home. It is good to pray in our closet, but God blesses our public prayers, too.

When the disciples prayed in the Upper Room, the Lord sent the Holy Ghost and surely blessed them. They were not in a closet when the Holy Ghost was poured out. They were in a public prayer meeting where they had been praying for ten days. They were praying from pure hearts, in one accord. If there had been any differences among them at the beginning, they had all been cleared away when the Day of Pentecost came.

Some people's prayers are just words, no heart behind them. They may be saying, "I praise You Jesus, I praise You Jesus," but be looking around to see what others are doing. Sometimes people pray by the clock, more concerned about the length of time they spend in prayer — if indeed it is praying — than in putting their heart into it. Jesus said that is the way the heathen do it.

"Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him" (Matthew 6:8).

Although the Father knows what you need, He is expecting you to ask, ask from the heart. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Luke 11:9). Each phrase seems more in earnest than the one before.

Reconciliation with Your Brother

But after we have prayed as the Lord taught us, and we still do not receive an answer, we should check ourselves and see if we are in any way to blame. Jesus said:

"Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy

brother hath ought against thee;

"Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matthew 5:23,24).

To be reconciled with thy brother is not always easy. But we must be of one accord if we want our prayers to go through to the Throne of God.

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He told them to say:

"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).

Jesus wants forgiveness that lays the matter down and forgets it. What kind of forgiveness is it when one says, "Yes I forgive, but" "I'll forgive him, but he really did me wrong. He did many things he should not have done."

When we forgive, the situation should be to us as though it had never happened. When we meet the man whom we have forgiven, he should be to us the same as any other brother. That something which made us feel uncomfortable when we passed him is gone. There is more to forgiveness than just embracing him and telling him we forgive, and then wish he would go away. A clear spirit deep inside says, "I love you." That is genuine forgiveness.

It means much to have a conscience as the Apostle Paul had. He could say:

"And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men" (Acts 24:16).

In other words, he was working at it. He wanted his conscience to be clear before God and men. He wanted to forgive and love everybody. He could pray, "Forgive me, Lord, even as I forgive those who trespass against me. If I don't forgive, Lord; let me know about it so I can get that out of the way." Genuine forgiveness solves more problems than anything else.

Stephen's Stoning

Luke, who was Paul's companion after he was converted, wrote the Book of Acts. It may be that the information Luke got about Stephen came from Paul. We do not know how many of the Christians were present at the stoning of Stephen; but we do know that few were present when Jesus was crucified, as only the Apostle John and the women are mentioned.

But there was someone present before Stephen's stoning who heard his sermon and "wrote it in his heart and transcribed it on paper."

At the close of that sermon, the people were cut to the heart and gnashed on Stephen with their teeth. Saul saw the anger that was on the faces of those council members who had seen the face of Stephen "as it had been the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). They cried with a loud voice, stopping their ears, running upon him in a frenzy.

The men of the council cast Stephen out of the city and stoned him. The Apostle Paul later wrote of it:

"When the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him" (Acts 22:20).

No doubt Paul heard those words when Stephen called upon God and said: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he added, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:59,60).

That is what we are talking about when we talk about forgiveness — not "Who is guilty?" Oh, to have that spirit that Stephen had when they gnashed on him with their teeth, and when the stones were pelting him! When his life was ebbing out, he could muster enough strength to cry out, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." That's forgiveness!

If you have a quarrel against someone, forgive even as Christ forgave you. If we have that spirit, the ministers

will not need to counsel people so much. The problems between brothers and sisters would soon go away.

Christ Our Example

When wicked men were crucifying Jesus, as they drove the nails through His hands and feet, what was His attitude? "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

In Isaiah, the 53rd chapter we read: "He was taken from prison and from judgment." The trial they had for Jesus was a farce. Two false witnesses were called to witness against Him, but even they could not agree. He was crucified between two thieves. He made His grave with the wicked.

Jesus was counted worthy of death, though He was the innocent Son of God! Through it all, He manifested the spirit He wants us to have: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

The Apostle Paul admonished the Colossians:

"Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye" (Colossians 3:13).

It is so easy to talk about a brother or a sister! Perhaps you want some sympathy for a wound you received. You were miffed about something spoken against you. You may have said, "There's not a word of truth in it." It always hurts to hear someone imply that another in the church is a liar. All liars are going to have their part in the lake of fire. I would sooner think that my brother or sister was mistaken. Perhaps he just didn't know the facts. "Oh, but he did know full well!" you say: and you have animosity toward him. Forgive him! Forgive as Jesus forgave! That is brotherly love.

Jesus said:

"By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

That means to love everybody and have that spirit that helps all to be of one mind Exercise yourself along that line every day. That is what the Apostle Paul did. He worked at it faithfully. It does not come automatically. God puts a spirit of forgiveness in your heart when He saves you. Can you remember how, you loved everybody when you were first saved? Oh, to keep that first love! We must walk in the Light as Jesus is in the Light if we are to retain that spirit.

The Armor of God

God has an armor for us whereby we can overcome every power of the enemy. We are told that "the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds; casting down imaginations" (II Corinthians 10:4,5): We need an armor that will-shield us from evil surmisings, suggestions of Satan.

I wonder if 90 percent of church troubles do not have their roots in the imagination. In other words, 90 percent are the work of the devil, and ten percent are of man's doing. The Lord wants us to fight against those imaginations with the weapons He provides. "Casting down imaginations . . . and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (II Corinthians 10:5). We must keep our thoughts in captivity.

Evil speaking is one of the great evils mentioned in God's Word. We are warned against it again and again. If you love your brother, you will not say anything evil against him, anything that will degrade him. If you know something bad, suppress it. Get rid of that which causes evil thoughts. Bring every thought into captivity and obedience to the will of Christ.

Among the seven things mentioned in Proverbs 6, that God hates, are "A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among the brethren."

An Example of Forgiveness

The power of the Gospel to change the human heart and plant into it the spirit of forgiveness is wonderfully

exemplified in the life story of an ex-convict known as "Forty-five." There are few who have had to forgive in the degree this man did.

When just a boy, "Forty-five" had gone from his home in Providence, Rhode Island, to Tacoma, Washington, on a freight train. Just as he arrived, a man was shot and killed. The real murderer got away, but this young boy was charged with the crime. He was sentenced to 25 years of hard labor in the penitentiary. Because of infraction of rules, he was treated as a desperate criminal for 18 of those years.

One day, after having hung by his wrists from eight in the morning until five in the afternoon for three days, he called upon the Lord, promising Him that if he could be freed he would read the Bible to other prisoners. Finally the warden's daughter took an interest in him, and she prevailed upon her father to transfer him to work in the hospital, as he had a bad heart condition.

When he began his work in the hospital, he fulfilled his promise made to the Lord, and faithfully read the Bible to others. Finally he was released and given a railroad ticket to Portland, Oregon, where he walked the streets without work — no food, no place to sleep except in the lumber yards.

One day as he walked across the Burnside Bridge, he decided to jump into the river. But the gatekeeper pulled him off the rail, telling him he must not commit suicide. He walked on across the bridge to Front and Burnside where he saw the sign, "The Apostolic Faith." Something compelled him to go in. He heard the Gospel story of Jesus Christ; he prayed and was saved. The next Sunday he was sanctified, and a week later he received the baptism of the Holy Ghost. He began testifying to what the Lord had done for him.

Two years later, a man came into the church and heard his testimony. Tears filled his eyes as he listened. Someone told Forty-five, "That man knows something about you." He traced the man to San Francisco where he found him in a hospital. Through a series of strange circumstances, he was finally told, "I am the man who committed the murder in Tacoma. I am the one who caused you to spend all those years in the penitentiary. Will you forgive me?"

He could not at the moment say Yes, but he locked himself in a closet and prayed for hours. The Lord said to him, "Forgive him for My sake." So he went back and told the man, "I forgive you, but you must ask God to forgive you, too." And he did. The man was saved, and later Forty-five baptized the new convert in a bathtub filled with water. Soon the man died, freely forgiven by the one he had caused to suffer so long, and forgiven by the Lord Jesus Christ. What an illustration of Christian forgiveness!

Is there anything lacking in, your Christian experience? Can you forgive those who trespass against you? Remember what Jesus said: "If you 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" (Matthew 6:14,15). The Lord wants to give you a free spirit toward all men, with perfect love for everyone. — F.D.