

CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS

"If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you."

CHRISTIAN love and Christian forgiveness are two of the basic principles of the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. A true Christian has a spirit of love and longsuffering in his heart toward his fellowman.

"Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7).

A so-called Christian sometimes finds it difficult to have enough love in his heart to forgive a brother when he does something amiss against him — but the Bible teaches us to have love, forbearance and forgiveness even for our enemies. If we cannot forgive our brother we certainly cannot forgive our enemies.

An old Spanish proverb says: "To return evil for good is devilish; to return good for good is human; but to return good for evil is godlike."

From the lips of Jesus came these words:

"Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.

"But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

"That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

"For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?

"And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?

"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:43-48).

That is a portion of the Sermon on the Mount which is one of the masterpieces of religious literature. No man's wisdom ever superseded in any way the principles laid down in the Sermon on the Mount, the standard of Christianity. The Christian life is measured by the standards set forth by Jesus Christ.

Some people carry grudges for years. It may be against a member of their own family, a business associate, or a competitor in business. A man in our congregation testifies that before he was saved he had such hatred in his heart toward a certain man that he would cross the street rather than meet him face to face. He hated him worse than a rattlesnake. The other man felt the same toward him. They had had lawsuits and fought it out in court, and still were bitter enemies. But when Jesus came into this man's heart, the first thing he wanted to do was to go to his enemy and make things right. And he did! He made restitution and confession, and God honoured him. He has had a victorious life and a testimony for Jesus through the years.

No Valid Excuses

The Scriptures give no excuse for resentment, ill will or unforgiveness, no matter what the provocation may be. Perhaps you have been wronged; perhaps you were falsely accused or have been mistreated. You may have good grounds, you think, for the feelings that are down in your heart, but the Bible says that he who refuses to forgive is no better than the publicans and sinners.

"If ye 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).

Jesus also said: "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea . . . woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" (Matthew 18:6, 7). But regardless of the offence, we must forgive those who trespass against us.

How Often Shall We Forgive?

Peter asked the Lord: "How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?" Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21, 22).

Four hundred and ninety times! Somebody may come and ask your forgiveness once; and you may say, "I will forgive you, but. . . God does not want any "buts" in forgiveness. Some who have been wronged, and restitution has been made to them, never seem to be able to forgive the one who sinned against them. They may be confident that they are Christians but if they have no forgiveness in their heart they have slipped a long way; and until they are able to forgive, they are not ready to meet the Lord.

Until seventy times seven! It is good to be forgiven; but it is greater to be possessed with a forgiving spirit. That is the most important thing. If you forgive your enemies, those who despitefully use you and persecute you, you have reward of your Father which is in Heaven. If you love and befriend only those who love and befriend you, you are no better than the sinners for they do that.

Forgiveness is a glorious part in the plan of salvation. It is wonderful to know that God has forgiven us — not because we are worthy but because His heart is full of grace and full of love.

Prayers Hindered

Jesus gave warning of something that can hinder our prayers just as a person is hindered with some physical handicap in speech, hearing, eyesight, or in his walking.

"When ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

"But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses" (Mark 11:25, 26).

You must extend forgiveness to others if you expect to get your prayers through. God will not have mercy on you or show leniency to you so long as you have an unforgiving spirit toward someone else. That is an impossibility according to the standards of God's Word. There are certain physical impossibilities in the world — and here is a spiritual impossibility: If you have ought in your heart against anyone, your Father which is in Heaven will not forgive you your transgressions. There is no such thing as being right with God and wrong with your fellowmen.

You cannot injure someone, then get right with God without making amends for your wrongs. You cannot get into Heaven through a side door. No, when you get God's salvation you will come His way, your face upward and your hands wide open, making confession, asking forgiveness and straightening things out with your fellowman.

Reconciliation Necessary

The Word of God informs us what to do even though we may not have ought against our brother, but he may have ought against us.

"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.

"Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison.

"Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing" (Matthew 5:23-26).

The Bible does not tell us to question who is right and who is wrong. The all-important thing, according to the Word of God, is getting wrongs made right. The Word demands reconciliation and restitution at any cost. You say, "It is not my affair; it is not my doings." Yes, it is, if you are a party to it, and if you are involved in it.

You say, "I have done what I could. I have made restitution and confession, but I have never been forgiven, so I cannot restore friendship and fellowship." If you have done all in your power to make things right and have done what God told you to do, then there is no more you can do, and the books are clean so far as you are concerned. If you cannot effect reconciliation' after you have humbled yourself and made confession, then leave it in God's hands. He will handle the results. God pity the soul who does not extend forgiveness to one who has done all he could to bring about reconciliation!

One never can maintain any fellowship with God without having fellowship with his brother.

"Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother" (Matthew 18:15).

If someone has trespassed against you, done some wrong to you, do not be telling it around. Go directly to that person, and have the matter cleared up between you and him alone. Too many people start gossiping — and gossip is deadly; it is devilish. God wants men and women to walk circumspectly before Him, keep themselves unspotted from the world, not lending their ear or their tongue to gossip in any manner.

Forbearance and Long-suffering

The Apostle Paul emphasizes the necessity of our returning good for evil:

"Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not."

"Recompense to no man evil for evil."

"No man" — friend or foe, saved or unsaved!

"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

"Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.

"Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:14, 17, 19-21).

Let the Word govern our lives and direct our feet into the paths of righteousness.

"Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way" (Romans 14: 13).

It takes the love of God in the heart to do that. Everyone's personality is not alike. Each one's makeup is different. Some are difficult to get along with. There are many things to contend with. Let us overlook others' mistakes and their shortcomings. We all have something that others have to tolerate in us, no doubt, and it is perhaps as hard as what we have to tolerate in someone else. God will honour us if we have the spirit of forbearance, love, and long-suffering, and in no wise cast a stumbling block of offence in the way of someone else.

David said, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1). It is like the oil that was poured upon the head of Aaron, the high priest, that anointed him for the priesthood. If we have that holy anointing over our souls it will be easy for us to dwell together in unity.

Sometimes a person misjudges another, attributing what he says or does to his having a wrong motive, and then holds something in his heart against that one. Let us put the best possible construction on the deeds of others, and do all we can to maintain unbroken Christian fellowship.

Our Great Example

Jesus, the divine Son of God, sinless and holy, is our great example. He was falsely accused nailed to the cross, crucified, because of those who hated Him, but in His dying agony came forth these words: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

God's people are told to consider Him who "endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin" (Hebrews 12:3, 4). The Word warns of letting any grievance enter our hearts against anyone:

"Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled" (Hebrews 12:14, 15).

How important it is to keep the love of God in our hearts and have a forgiving spirit continually! That is made possible through loving others as Christ loved us, continuing to walk with the Lord in lowliness, with long-suffering, "forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:2, 3),