

# WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

Jay E. Adams

**T**HE correct answer to the question at the head of this chapter is essential. In any study, a proper understanding of basic issues is important early on as a foundation on which to build structures of truth. That is certainly the case when considering forgiveness. Until this basic question has been satisfactorily addressed, you will address other questions regarding forgiveness either unsatisfactorily or not at all.

*“I’m not so sure I see your point. Doesn’t everyone know what forgiveness is? Why, when someone has wronged me, I expect him to come and apologize. Then I tell him, ‘That’s OK.’ That’s forgiveness isn’t it?”*

No, I’m afraid it isn’t. You see, many wrong ideas go about masquerading as forgiveness that are not biblical forgiveness at all. Indeed, probably most Christians have wrong ideas about forgiveness, just like those in the previous paragraph.

*“Well, I can’t see where there’s anything wrong with the ideas I just expressed. I’m baffled, I always thought forgiveness was one of those areas, unlike baptism and predestination, where there is no argument. You’re going to have to do some pretty fancy talking to convince me that I don’t understand what forgiveness is.”*

I realize that. I also recognize that discussion of forgiveness is commonly neglected because everyone thinks he understands it, when actually he doesn’t. Take, for instance, your notion of “apologizing.” Where do you find that in the Bible? Do biblical writers, like many Christians writing today, ever equate “apologizing” with seeking forgiveness?

*“Well...no. I guess not. But everyone knows that apologizing is what you do when you seek forgiveness.”*

Frankly, I’m afraid that’s what most Christians do think. But, as you will discover later on, apologizing is not only unscriptural, it is the world’s unsatisfactory substitute for forgiveness. I don’t want to discuss apologizing now, but I bring it up because you mentioned it. And what you said is a good example of what I have been talking about—wrong assumptions that are so widespread that few ever think to question them.

*“Well, I guess I can’t think of anything in the Bible that tells us to apologize, so perhaps there is a thing or two that I can learn about forgiveness after all. But I still can’t see where apologizing is a substitute for forgiveness.”*

We’ll come to that in good time, but first, as I said, it is important to build a proper biblical foundation for all such discussions. That’s why, at this point, I want to talk about forgiveness itself. What is forgiveness anyway? There are at least two ways to answer that question.

### ***What Forgiveness Does and Is***

We can talk about what forgiveness *does* (i.e., what it accomplishes). To do so is to speak practically, in terms of its results. In such an answer our response would begin with words like these: “Forgiveness is a process whereby...”

That’s one way to answer the question. Perhaps it is the principal way in which it has been answered by theologians and preachers over the years. As important as that answer is, it is not what I want to consider here.

The other way in which the question “What is forgiveness?” may be answered is to discuss its nature or essence. That is to say, having boiled all else away, what is the irreducible element that is left that makes forgiveness forgiveness?

For many years I read about forgiveness, talked about forgiveness, preached forgiveness. And most of what I said was true. However, there was something missing, something that remained vague, unexplained—something intangible that dogged my steps. Then one day I began to think deeply about forgiveness. In the process I asked myself, “What is forgiveness anyway?” You know, I didn’t have an answer. I simply couldn’t state what, in its essence, forgiveness is. “Is it a feeling?” I wondered. But that didn’t seem right. “Doesn’t God require me to forgive my brother, whether I feel like it or not?” Unlike modern discussions of forgiveness, there is nothing in the Bible about “feelings of forgiveness” or “having forgiving feelings” toward another. No, that is clearly the wrong path to an answer. Well, then, what is forgiveness?

Thinking about the matter, I remembered that Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:32 to “forgive one another just as God, for Christ’s sake, has forgiven” us. “Among other things,” I reasoned, “that means our forgiveness is to be modeled after God’s. In order to find out what forgiveness is I must study God’s forgiveness.” At last I have found the key to unlock the door to the meaning of forgiveness.

Obviously, when God forgives, He does not simply sit in the heavens and emote. So forgiveness isn’t a feeling. If it were, we would never know that we have been forgiven. No, when God forgives, He goes on record. He *says* so. He declares, “I will not remember your sins” (Isa 43:25; see also Jer 31:34). Isn’t that wonderful? When He forgives, God *lets us know* that He will no longer hold our sins against us. If forgiveness were merely an emotional experience, we would not know that we were forgiven. But praise God, we do, because forgiveness is a process at the end of which God declares that the matter of sin has been dealt with once and for all.

Now, what is that declaration? What does God do when He goes on record saying that our sins are forgiven? God makes a promise. Forgiveness is not a feeling; forgiveness is *a promise!*

***Forgiveness Is a Promise***

Never forget that fact. It is one of the most stupendous facts of all time. When our God forgives us, He promises that He will not remember our sins against us anymore! That is wonderful!

*“Yes, I recognize that is what Isaiah and Jeremiah say. But I’ve always had a problem with such statements. How can God, who knows all things past, present, and future—ever forget anything? How can He forget our sins?”*

He doesn’t.

*“But doesn’t it say that He won’t remember our sins?”*

Yes, it does, but that’s not the same thing as *forgetting* them. Obviously, the omniscient God who created and sustains the universe does not forget, but He can “not remember.” You see, forgetting is passive and is something that we human beings, not being omniscient, do. “Not remembering” is active; it is a promise whereby one person (in this case, God) determines not to remember the sins of another *against him*. To “not remember” is simply a graphic way of saying, “I will not bring up these matters to you or others in the future. I will bury them and not exhume the bones to beat you over the head with them. I will never use these sins against you.”

*“So now I see the difference! You have answered a perplexing problem that I have never been able to resolve before. I am certainly glad to have a clear, satisfying explanation of that matter at last. Perhaps there is more to forgiveness than at first meets the eye. Probably I have a lot more to learn than I realized.”*

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# FORGIVENESS

J.C.Ryle (1816-1900)

*“Your sins are forgiven you”—1 John 2:12.*

**T**HERE is a clause near the end of the *Belief*, or *Apostle’s Creed*, which, I fear, is often repeated without thought or consideration. I refer to the clause which contains these words, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” Thousands, I am afraid, never reflect what those words mean. I propose to examine the subject of them in the following paper, and I invite the attention of all who care for their souls and want to be saved. Do we believe in the “Resurrection of our bodies”? Then let us see to it that we know something by experience of the “Forgiveness of our sins.”

## *I. Let me show, first of all, our need of forgiveness.*

All men need forgiveness, because all men are sinners. He that does not know this, knows nothing in religion. It is the very A B C of Christianity that a man should know his right place in the sight of God and understand his deserts.

**We are all great sinners.** “There is none righteous, no, not one”—“All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:10, 23). Sinners we were born, and sinners we have been all our lives. We take to sin naturally from the very first. No child ever needs schooling and education to teach it to do wrong. No devil or bad companion ever leads us into such wickedness as our own hearts. And “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6: 23). We must either be forgiven, or lost eternally.

**We are all guilty sinners in the sight of God.** We have broken His holy law. We have transgressed His precepts. We have not done His will. There is not a commandment in all the ten which does not condemn us. If we have not broken it in deed we have in word; if we have not broken it in word, we have in thought and imagination—and that continually. Tried by the standard of the fifth chapter of St. Matthew, there is not one of us that would be acquitted. All the world is “guilty before God.” And “As it is appointed unto men once to die, so after this comes the judgment.” We must either be forgiven, or perish everlastingly (Rom 3:19; Heb 9: 27).

**And then what is the Lord God, whose eyes are on all our ways, and before whom we have one day to give account?** “Holy, holy, holy,” is the remarkable expression applied to Him by those who are nearest to Him (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8). It sounds as if no one word could express the intensity of His holiness. One of His prophets says, “He is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on iniquity” (Hab 1:13). We think the an-

gels exalted beings, and far above ourselves; but we are told in Scripture, “He charged His angels with folly” (Job 4:18). We admire the moon and stars as glorious and splendid bodies; but we read, “Behold even to the moon, and it shineth not, yea the stars are not pure in His sight” (Job 25:5). We talk of the heavens as the noblest and purest part of creation; but even of them it is written, “The heavens are not clean in His sight” (Job 15:15). What then is any one of us but a miserable sinner in the sight of such a God as this?

Surely we ought all to cease from proud thoughts about ourselves. We ought to lay our hands upon our mouths, and say with Abraham, “I am dust and ashes;” and with Job, “I am vile;” and with Isaiah, “We are all as an unclean thing;” and with John, “If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (Gen 18:27; Job 40:4; Isa 64:6; 1Jo 1:8). Where is the man or woman in the whole catalogue of the Book of Life, that will ever be able to say more than this, “I obtained mercy”? What is the glorious company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, the noble army of martyrs—what are they all but pardoned sinners? Surely there is but one conclusion to be arrived at:—*we are all great sinners, and we all need a great forgiveness.*

See now what just cause I have to say that to know our need of forgiveness is the first thing in true religion. Sin is a burden, and must be taken off. Sin is a defilement, and must be cleansed away. Sin is a mighty debt, and must be paid. Sin is a mountain standing between us and heaven, and must be removed. Happy is that mother’s child amongst us that feels all this! The first step towards heaven is to see clearly that we *deserve hell*. There are but two alternatives before us—we must either be forgiven, or be miserable for ever.

## ***II. Let me point out, in the second place, the way of forgiveness.***

I ask particular attention to this point, for none can be more important. Granting for a moment that you want pardon and forgiveness, what ought you to do? Whither will you go? Which way will you turn? Every thing hinges on the answer you give to this question.

Will you turn to *ministers* and put your trust in them? They cannot give you pardon: they can only tell you where it is to be found. They can set before you the bread of life; but you yourself must eat it. They can show you the path of peace; but you yourself must walk in it. The Jewish priest had no power to cleanse the leper, but only to declare him cleansed. The Christian minister has no power to forgive sins;—he can only declare and pronounce who they are that are forgiven.

Will you turn to *sacraments and ordinances*, and trust in them? They cannot supply you with forgiveness, however diligently you may use them. By sacraments “faith is confirmed and grace increased,” in all who rightly use them (See Article 27). But they cannot justify the sinner.

They cannot put away transgression. You may go to the Lord's Table every Sunday in your life: but unless you look far beyond the sign to the thing signified, you will after all die in your sins. You may attend a daily service regularly, but if you think to establish a righteousness of your own by it, in the slightest degree, you are only getting further away from God every day.

Will you trust in your own *works and endeavours*, your virtues and your good deeds, your prayers and your alms? They will never buy for you an entrance into heaven. They will never pay your debt to God. They are all imperfect in themselves, and only increase your guilt. There is no merit or worthiness in them at the very best. The Lord Jesus Christ says expressly, "When you have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants" (Luk 17:10).

Will you trust in your own *repentance and amendment*? You are very sorry for the past. You hope to do better for time to come. You hope God will be merciful. Alas, if you lean on this, you have nothing beneath you but a broken reed! The judge does not pardon the thief because he is sorry for what he did. Today's sorrow will not wipe off the score of yesterday's sins. It is not an ocean of tears that would ever cleanse an uneasy conscience and give it peace.

Where then must a man go for pardon? Where is forgiveness to be found? There is a way both sure and plain, and into that way I desire to guide every inquirer's feet.

That way is simply to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour. It is to cast your soul, with all its sins, unreservedly on Christ—to cease completely from any dependence on your own works or doings, either in whole or in part—and to rest on no other work but Christ's work, no other righteousness but Christ's righteousness, no other merit but Christ's merit, as your ground of hope. Take this course and you are a pardoned soul. "To Christ," says Peter, "give all the prophets witness, that through His name whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins" (Act 10:43). "Through this Man," says Paul at Antioch, "is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins, and by Him all that believe are justified from all things" (Act 13:38). "In Him," writes Paul to the Colossians, "we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:14).

The Lord Jesus Christ, in great love and compassion, has made a full and complete satisfaction for sin, by suffering death in our place upon the cross. There He offered Himself as a sacrifice for us, and allowed the wrath of God, which we deserved, to fall on His own head. For our sins, as our Substitute, He gave Himself, suffered, and died, the just for the unjust, the innocent for the guilty—that He might deliver us from the curse of a broken law, and provide a complete pardon for all who are willing to receive it. And by so doing, as Isaiah says—He has *borne* our

sins; as John the Baptist says—He has *taken away* sin; as Paul says—He has *purged* our sins, and *put away* sin; and as Daniel says—He has *made an end of sin*, and *finished* transgression (Isa 53:11; Joh 1:29; Heb 1:3, 9:26; Dan 9: 24)

Christ, in one word, has purchased a full forgiveness, if we are only willing to receive it. He has done all, paid all, suffered all that was needful to reconcile us to God. He has provided a garment of righteousness to clothe us. He has opened a fountain of living waters to cleanse us. He has removed every barrier between us and God the Father, taken every obstacle out of the way, and made a road by which the vilest may return. All things are now ready, and the sinner has only to believe and be saved, to eat and be satisfied, to ask and receive, to wash and be clean.

And faith, simple faith, is the only thing required, in order that you and I may be forgiven. That we will come by faith to Jesus as sinners with our sins—trust in Him—rest on Him—lean on Him—confide in Him—commit our souls to Him—and *forsaking all other hope, cleave only to Him*—this is all and everything that God asks for. Let a man only do this, and he shall be saved. His iniquities shall be found completely pardoned, and his transgressions entirely taken away. Every man and woman that so trusts is wholly forgiven, and reckoned perfectly righteous. His sins are clean gone, and his soul is justified in God's sight, however bad and guilty he may have been.

This is the doctrine which is the true strength of any Church on earth at this day. It is not orders, or endowments, or liturgies, or learning, that will keep a Church alive. Let free forgiveness through Christ be faithfully proclaimed in her pulpits, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her. Let it be buried, or kept back, and her candlestick will soon be taken away. A Church is only useful so far as she exalts *free forgiveness through Christ*.

This is the doctrine which, of all others, is the mightiest engine for pulling down the kingdom of Satan. Preach salvation by the sacraments, exalt the Church above Christ, and keep back the doctrine of the Atonement, and the devil cares little—his goods are at peace. But preach a full Christ, and a free pardon by faith in Him, and then Satan will have great wrath, for he knows he has but a short time.

This is the only doctrine which will ever bring peace to an uneasy conscience, and rest to a troubled soul. A man may get on pretty well without it so long as he is asleep about his spiritual condition. But once let him awake from his slumber, and nothing will ever calm him but the blood of Atonement, and the peace which comes by faith in Christ.

You should ask yourself whether you have really received the truth which I have been dwelling on, and know it by experience. Jesus, and faith in Him, is the only way to the Father. He that thinks to climb into Paradise by some other road will find himself fearfully mistaken. Other

foundation can no man lay for an immortal soul than that of which I have been feebly speaking. He that ventures himself here is safe. He that is off this rock has got no standing ground at all.

You should seriously consider what kind of a ministry you are in the habit of attending, supposing you have a choice. You have reason indeed to be careful. It is not *all the same* where you go, whatever people may say. There are many places of worship, I fear, where you might look long for Christ crucified, and never find Him. He is buried under outward ceremonies—thrust behind the baptismal font—lost sight of under the shadow of the Church. “They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him” (Joh 20:13). Take heed where you settle yourself. Try all by this single test, “Is Jesus and free forgiveness proclaimed here?” There may be comfortable pews—there may be good singing—there may be learned sermons. But if Christ’s Gospel is not the sun and centre of the whole place, do not pitch your tent there. Say rather with Isaac, “Here, is the wood and the fire, but where is the lamb?” (Gen 22:7). Be very sure, this is not the place for your soul.

### ***III. Let me, in the third place, encourage all who wish to be forgiven.***

I dare be sure this paper will be read by some one who feels he is not yet a forgiven soul. My heart’s desire and prayer is that such an one may seek his pardon at once. And I would fain<sup>1</sup> help him forward, by showing him the kind of forgiveness offered to him, and the glorious privileges within his reach.

**Consider, then, for one thing, that the forgiveness set before you is a great and broad forgiveness.** Hear what the Prince of Peace Himself declares: “All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies, where with soever they shall blaspheme” (Mar 3:28). “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall become as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isa 1:18). Yes: though your trespasses be more in number than the hairs of your head, the stars in heaven, the leaves of the forest, the blades of grass, the grains of sand on the sea shore, still they can all be pardoned. As the waters of Noah’s flood covered over and hid the tops of the highest hills, so can the blood of Jesus cover over and hide your mightiest sins. His blood “cleanseth us from all sin” (1Jo 1:7). Though to you they seem written with the point of a diamond, they can all be effaced from the book of God’s remembrance by that precious blood. Paul names a long list of abominations which the Corinthians had committed, and then says, “Such were some of you: but ye are washed” (1Co 6:11).

**Furthermore, it is a full and complete forgiveness.** It is not like David’s pardon to Absalom—a permission to return home, but not a full restoration to favour (2Sa 14:24). It is not, as some fancy, a mere letting off, and

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<sup>1</sup> **fain** – gladly

letting alone. It is a pardon so complete that he who has it is reckoned as righteous as if he had never sinned at all! His iniquities are blotted out. They are removed from him as far as the east from the west (Psa 103:12). There remains no condemnation for him. The Father sees him joined to Christ and is well pleased. The Son beholds him clothed with His own righteousness and says, "Thou art all fair, there is no spot in thee" (SoS 4:7). Blessed be God that it is so! I verily believe if the best of us all had only one blot left for himself to wipe out, he would miss eternal life. If the holiest child of Adam were in heaven all but his little *f i n g e r*, and to get in depended on himself, I am sure he would never enter the kingdom. If Noah, Daniel, and Job, had had but one day's sins to wash away, they would never have been saved. Praised be God, that in the matter of our pardon there is nothing left for man to do! Jesus does all, and man has only to hold out an empty hand and to receive.

**Furthermore, it is a *free and unconditional forgiveness*.** It is not burdened with an "if," like Solomon's pardon to Adonijah: "If he will show himself a worthy man" (1Ki 1:52). Nor yet are you obliged to carry a price in your hand, or to bring a character with you to prove yourself deserving of mercy. Jesus requires but one character, and that is that you should feel yourself a sinful, bad man. He invites you to "buy wine and milk without money and without price," and declares, "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Isa 55:1; Rev 22:17). Like David in the cave of Adullam, He receives every one that feels in distress and a debtor, and rejects none (1Sa 22:2). Are you a sinner? Do you want a Saviour? Then come to Jesus just as you are, and your soul shall live.

**Again, it is an *offered forgiveness*.** I have read of earthly Kings who knew not how to show mercy; of Henry the Eighth of England who spared neither man nor woman—of James the Fifth of Scotland, who would never show favour to a Douglas. The King of kings is not like them. He calls on men to come to Him, and be pardoned. "Unto you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of men" (Pro 8:4). "Ho! Every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters" (Isa 55:1). "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink" (Joh 7:37). "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mat 11:28). It ought to be a great comfort to you and me to hear of any pardon at all; but to hear Jesus Himself inviting us, to see Jesus Himself holding out His hand to us—the Saviour seeking the sinner before the sinner seeks the Saviour—this is encouragement, this is strong consolation indeed!

**Again, it is a *willing forgiveness*.** I have heard of pardons granted in reply to long entreaty, and wrung out by much importunity. King Edward the Third of England would not spare the citizens of Calais till they came to him with halters round their necks, and his own Queen interceded for them on her knees. But Jesus is "good and ready to forgive" (Psa 86:5). He "delighteth in mercy" (Mic 7:18). You and I may well

come boldly to the throne of grace. He who sits there is far more willing and ready to give mercy than we are to receive it (Heb 4:16).

**Besides this, it is a *tried forgiveness*.** Thousands and tens of thousands have sought for pardon at the mercy seat of Christ, and not one has ever returned to say that he sought in vain. Sinners of every name and nation—sinners of every sort and description—have knocked at the door of the fold, and none have ever been refused admission. Zacchaeus the extortioner, Magdalen the harlot, Saul the persecutor, Peter the denier of his Lord, the Jews who crucified the Prince of Life, the idolatrous Athenians, the adulterous Corinthians, the ignorant Africans, the blood-thirsty New Zealanders—all have ventured their souls on Christ's promises of pardon, and none have ever found them fail. If the way which the Gospel sets before us were a new and untraveled way, we might well feel faint-hearted. But it is not so. It is an old path. It is a path worn by the feet of many pilgrims, and a path in which the footsteps are all one way. The treasury of Christ's mercies has never been found empty. The well of living waters has never proved dry.

**Besides this, it is a *present forgiveness*.** All that believe in Jesus are at once justified from all things (Act 13:39). The very day the younger son returned to his father's house he was clothed with the best robe, had the ring put on his hand, and the shoes on his feet (Luk 15:22). The very day Zacchaeus received Jesus he heard those comfortable words, "This day is salvation come to this house" (Luk 19:9). The very day that David said, "I have sinned against the Lord," he was told by Nathan, "The Lord also hath put away thy sin" (2Sa 12:13). The very day you first flee to Christ, your sins are all removed. Your pardon is not a thing far away, to be obtained only after many years. It is nigh at hand. It is close to you, within your reach, all ready to be bestowed. Believe, and that very moment it is your own. "He that believeth is not condemned" (Joh 3:18). It is not said, "He shall not be," or "will not be," but "*is not*." From the time of his believing, condemnation is gone. "He that believeth hath everlasting life" (Joh 3:36). It is not said, "He shall have," or "will have," it is "*hath*." It is his own as surely as if he was in heaven, though not so evidently so to his own eyes. You must not think forgiveness will be nearer to a believer in the Day of Judgment than it was in the hour he first believed. His complete salvation from the *power* of sin is every year nearer and nearer to him; but as to his forgiveness and justification, and deliverance from the *guilt* of sin, it is a finished work from the very minute he first commits himself to Christ.

**Last, and best of all, it is an *everlasting forgiveness*.** It is not like Shimei's pardon—a pardon that may some time be revoked and taken away (1Ki 2:9). Once justified, you are justified for ever. Once written down in the book of life, your name shall never be blotted out. The sins of God's children are said to be cast into the depths of the sea—to be sought for and

not found—to be remembered no more—to be cast behind God’s back (Mic 7:19; Jer 50:20; 31:34; Isa 38:17). Some people fancy they may be justified one year and condemned another—children of adoption at one time, and strangers by and by—heirs of the kingdom in the beginning of their days, and yet servants of the devil in their end. I cannot find this in the Bible. It seems to me to overturn the good news of the Gospel altogether, and to tear up its comforts by the roots. I believe the salvation Jesus offers is an everlasting salvation, and a pardon once sealed with His blood shall never be reversed.

I have set before you the nature of the forgiveness offered to you. I have told you but a little of it, for my words are weaker than my will. The half of it remains untold. The greatness of it is far more than any report of mine. But I think I have said enough to show you it is worth the seeking, and I can wish you nothing better than that you may strive to make it your own.

Do you call it nothing to look forward to death without fear, and to judgment without doubtings, and to eternity without a sinking heart? Do you call it nothing to feel the world slipping from your grasp, and to see the grave getting ready for you, and the valley of the shadow of death opening before your eyes, and yet to be not afraid? Do you call it nothing to be able to think of the great day of account, the throne, the books, the Judge, the assembled worlds, the revealing of secrets, the final sentence, and yet to feel, “I am safe”? This is the portion, and this the privilege of a forgiven soul.

Such an one is *on a rock*. When the rain of God’s wrath descends, and the floods come, and the winds blow, his feet shall not slide, his habitation shall be sure.

Such an one is *in an ark*. When the last fiery deluge is sweeping over all things on the surface of the earth, it shall not come nigh him. He shall be caught up, and borne securely above it all.

Such an one is *in an hiding place*. When God arises to judge terribly the earth, and men are calling to rocks and mountains to fall upon them and cover them, the Everlasting Arms shall be thrown around him, and the storm shall pass over his head. He shall “abide under the shadow of the Almighty” (Psa 91:1).

Such an one is *in a city of refuge*. The accuser of the brethren can lay no charge against him. The law cannot condemn him. There is a wall between him and the avenger of blood. The enemies of his soul cannot hurt him. He is in a secure sanctuary.

Such an one is *rich*. He has treasure in heaven which cannot be affected by worldly changes, compared to which Peru and California are nothing at all. He need not envy the richest merchants and bankers. He has a portion that will endure when bank-notes and sovereigns are worth-

less things. He can say, like the Spanish ambassador, when shown the treasury at Venice, “My Master’s treasury has no bottom.” He has Christ.

Such an one *is insured*. He is ready for anything that may happen. Nothing can harm him. Banks may break and governments may be overturned. Famine and pestilence may rage around him. Sickness and sorrow may visit his own fireside. But still he is ready for all—ready for health, ready for disease—ready for tears—ready for joy—ready for poverty, ready for plenty—ready for life, ready for death. He has Christ. He is a pardoned soul. “Blessed” indeed “is he whose transgression is forgiven, and whose sin is covered” (Psa 32:1).

How will any one escape if he neglects so great salvation? Why should you not lay hold on it at once, and say, Pardon me, even me also, O my Saviour! What would you have, if the way I have set before you does not satisfy you? Come while the door is open. Ask, and you shall receive.

***IV. Let me, in the last place, supply the readers of this paper with some marks of having found forgiveness.***

I dare not leave out this point. Too many persons presume they are forgiven, who have no evidence to show. Not a few cannot think it possible they are forgiven, who are plainly in the way to heaven, though they may not see it themselves. I would fain raise hope in some, and self-inquiry in others; and to do this, let me set down in order the leading marks of a forgiven soul.

(a) **Forgiven souls hate sin.** They can enter most fully into the words of our Communion Service: “The remembrance of sin is grievous unto them, and the burden of it is intolerable.” It is the serpent which bit them: how should they not shrink from it with horror? It is the poison which brought them to the brink of eternal death how should they not loathe it with a godly disgust? It is the Egyptian enemy which kept them in hard bondage, how should not the very memory of it be bitter to their hearts? It is the disease of which they carry the marks and scars about them, and from which they have scarcely recovered: well may they dread it, flee from it, and long to be delivered altogether from its power! Remember how the woman in Simon’s house wept over the feet of Jesus (Luk 7:38). Remember how the Ephesians publicly burned their wicked books (Act 19:19). Remember how Paul mourned over his youthful transgressions: “I am not meet to be called an Apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God” (1Co 15:9). If you and sin are friends, you and God are not yet reconciled. You are not meet for heaven; for one main part of heaven’s excellence is the absence of all sin.

(b) **Forgiven souls love Christ.** This is that one thing they can say, if they dare say nothing else—they do love Christ. His person, His offices, His work, His name, His cross, His blood, His words, His example, His day, His ordinances—all, all are precious to forgiven souls. The ministry

which exalts Him most, is that which they *enjoy* most. The books which are most full of Him, are most pleasant to their minds. The people on earth they feel most drawn to, are those in whom they see something of Christ. His name is as ointment poured forth, and comes with a peculiar sweetness to their ears (Sol 1:3). They would tell you they cannot help feeling as they do. He is their Redeemer, their Shepherd, their Physician, their King, their strong Deliverer, their gracious Guide, their hope, their joy, their All. Were it not for Him they would be of all men most miserable. They would as soon consent that you should take the sun out of the sky, as Christ out of their religion. Those people who talk of “the Lord,” and “the Almighty,” and “the Deity,” and so forth, but have not a word to say about Christ, are in anything but a right state of mind. What saith the Scripture? “He that honoureth not the Son, honoureth not the Father which hath sent Him” (Joh 5:23). “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema” (1Co 16:22).

**(c) Forgiven souls are humble.** They cannot forget that they owe all they have and hope for to free grace, and this keeps them lowly. They are brands plucked from the fire—debtors who could not pay for themselves—captives who must have remained in prison for ever, but for undeserved mercy, wandering sheep who were ready to perish when the Shepherd found them; and what right then have they to be proud? I do not deny that there are proud saints. But this I do say—they are of all God’s creatures the most inconsistent, and of all God’s children the most likely to stumble and pierce themselves with many sorrows. Forgiveness more often produces the spirit of Jacob: “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and all the truth which Thou hast showed unto Thy servant” (Gen 32:10); and of Hezekiah:—“I shall go softly all my years” (Isa 38:15); and of the Apostle Paul: “I am less than the least of all saints—chief of sinners” (Eph 3:8; 1Ti 1:15). When you and I have nothing we can call our own but sin and weakness, there is surely no garment that becomes us so well as humility.

**(d) Forgiven souls are holy.** Their chief desire is to please Him who has saved them, to do His will, to glorify Him in body and in Spirit, which are His. “What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits?” (Psa 116:12), is a leading principle in a pardoned heart. It was the remembrance of Jesus showing mercy that made Paul in labours so abundant, and in doing good so unwearied. It was a sense of pardon that made Zaccheus say, “The half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, I restore him four-fold” (Luk 19:8). If any one points out to me believers who are in a carnal, slothful state of soul, I reply in the words of Peter, “They have forgotten they were purged from their old sins” (2Pe 1:9). But if you show me a man deliberately living an unholy and licentious life, and yet boasting that his sins are forgiven, I answer, “He is under a ruinous delusion, and is not forgiven at all.” I would not believe he is forgiven if an angel from

heaven affirmed it, and I charge you not to believe it too. Pardon of sin and love of sin are like oil and water—they will never go together. All that are washed in the blood of Christ are also sanctified by the Spirit of Christ.

**(e) Forgiven souls are forgiving.** They do as they have been done by. They look over the offences of their brethren. They endeavour to “walk in love, as Christ loved them, and gave Himself for them” (Eph 5:2). They remember how God for Christ’s sake forgave them, and endeavour to do the same towards their fellow-creatures. Has He forgiven them pounds<sup>2</sup>, and shall they not forgive a few pence?<sup>3</sup> Doubtless in this, as in every thing else, they come short;—but this is their desire and their aim. A spiteful, quarrelsome Christian is a scandal to his profession. It is very hard to believe that such an one has ever sat at the foot of the cross and has ever considered how he is praying against himself every time he uses the Lord’s Prayer. Is he not saying as it were, “Father, do not forgive me my trespasses at all”? But it is still harder to understand what such a one would do in heaven, if he got there. All ideas of heaven in which forgiveness has not a place, are castles in the air and vain fancies. Forgiveness is the way by which every saved soul enters heaven. Forgiveness is the only title by which he remains in heaven. Forgiveness is the eternal subject of song with all the redeemed who inhabit heaven. Surely an unforgiving soul in heaven would find his heart completely out of tune. Surely we know nothing of Christ’s love to us but the name of it, if we do not love our brethren.

I cannot conceal from you, these marks should raise in many minds great searchings of heart. I must be plain. I fear there are thousands of persons called Christians, who know nothing of these marks. They are baptized. They attend the services of their Church. They would not on any account be reckoned infidels. But as to true repentance and saving faith, union with Christ and sanctification of the Spirit, they are “names and words” of which they know nothing at all.

Now if this paper is read by such persons, it will probably either alarm them, or make them very angry. If it makes them angry I shall be sorry. If it alarms them I shall be glad. I want to alarm them. I want to awaken them from their present state. I want them to take in the great fact, that they are not yet forgiven, that they have not peace with God, and are on the high road to destruction.

I must say this, for I see no alternative. It seems neither Christian faithfulness, nor Christian charity, to keep it back. I see certain marks of pardoned souls laid down in Scripture. I see an utter want of these marks in many men and women around me. How then can I avoid the conclu-

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<sup>2</sup> **pound** – the basic monetary unit of the United Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> **pence** – plural for penny.

sion that they are not yet “forgiven”? And how shall I do the work of a faithful watchman if I do not write it down plainly in so many words? Where is the use of crying Peace! Peace! when there is no peace? Where is the honesty of acting the part of a lying physician, and telling people there is no danger, when in reality they are fast drawing near to eternal death? Surely the blood of souls would be required at my hands if I wrote to you anything less than the truth. “If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” (1Co 14:8).

Examine yourself, then, before this subject is forgotten. Consider of what sort your religion is. Try it by the five marks I have just set before you. I have endeavoured to make them as broad and general as I can, for fear of causing any heart to be sad that God has not made sad. If you know anything of them, though it be but a little, I am thankful, and entreat you to go forward. But if you know nothing of them in your own experience, let me say, in all affection, I stand in doubt of you. I tremble for your soul.

**1. And now, before I conclude, let me put a *home*<sup>4</sup> question to every one who reads this paper.** It shall be short and plain, but it is all important: “Are you forgiven?”

I have told you all I can about forgiveness. Your need of forgiveness—the way of forgiveness—the encouragements to seek forgiveness—the marks of having found it—all have been placed before you. Bring the whole subject to bear upon your own heart, and ask yourself, “Am I forgiven? Either I am, or I am not. Which of the two is it?”

You believe perhaps, there is forgiveness of sins. You believe that Christ died for sinners, and that He offers a pardon to the most ungodly. But are you forgiven *yourself*? Have you yourself laid hold on Christ by faith, and found peace through His blood? What profit is there to you in forgiveness, except you get the benefit of it? Except you lay hold for your own soul, you will be as surely lost as if there was no forgiveness at all.

If ever your sins are to be forgiven, it must be now—now in this life, if ever in the life to come—now in this world, if they are to be found blotted out when Jesus comes again the second time. There must be actual business between you and Christ. Your sins must be laid on Him by faith: His righteousness must be laid on you. His blood must be applied to your conscience, or else your sins will meet you in the Day of Judgment, and sink you into hell.

Oh, how can you trifle when such things are at stake? How can you be content to leave it uncertain whether you are forgiven? Surely that a man can make his will, insure his life, give directions about his funeral, and yet leave his soul’s affairs in uncertainty, is a wonderful<sup>5</sup> thing indeed.

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<sup>4</sup> **home** – close, in the sense of bringing the question close to home or heart.

<sup>5</sup> **wonderful** – strange; astonishing.

**2. Let me next give a solemn warning to every one who reads this paper, and knows in his conscience he is not forgiven.**

Your soul is in awful danger. You may die this year. And if you die as you are, you are lost for ever. If you die without pardon, without pardon you will rise again at the last day. There is a sword over your head which hangs by a single hair. There is but a step between you and death. Oh, I wonder that you can sleep quietly in your bed!

You are *not yet forgiven*. Then what have you got by your religion? You go to church. You have a Bible, you have a Prayer-book, and perhaps a Hymnbook. You hear sermons. You join in services. It may be you go to the Lord's Table. But what have you really got after all? Any hope? Any peace? Any joy? Any comfort? Nothing: literally nothing! You have got nothing but mere temporal things, if you are not a pardoned soul.

You are *not yet forgiven*. But you trust God will be merciful. Yet why should He be merciful if you will not seek Him in His own appointed way? Merciful He doubtless is, wonderfully merciful to all who come to Him in the name of Jesus. But if you choose to despise His directions, and make a road to heaven of your own, you will find to your cost there is no mercy for you.

You are *not yet forgiven*. But you hope you will be some day. I cannot away with<sup>6</sup> that expression. It is like thrusting off the hand of conscience, and seizing it by the throat to stop its voice. Why are you more likely to seek forgiveness at a future time? Why should you not seek it now? Now is the time for gathering the bread of life. The day of the Lord is fast drawing near, and then no man can work (Joh 9:4). The Seventh trumpet will soon sound. The kingdoms of this world will soon become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ (Rev 11:15). Woe to the house which is found without the scarlet line, and without the mark of blood upon the door! (Jos 2:18; Exo 12:13). Well, you may not feel your need of forgiveness now. But a time may come when you will want it. The Lord in mercy grant that it may not then be too late.

**3. Let me next give an earnest invitation to all who read this paper and desire forgiveness.**

I know not who you are, or what you have been in time past, but I say boldly, come to Christ by faith, and you shall have a pardon. High or low, rich or poor, young men and maidens, old men and children—you cannot be worse than Manasseh and Paul before conversion—than David and Peter after conversion: come all of you to Christ, and you shall be freely forgiven.

Think not for a moment that you have some great thing to do before you come to Christ. Such a notion is of the earth, earthy; the Gospel bids you come just as you are. Man's idea is to make his peace with God by

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<sup>6</sup> **away with** – cannot bear or endure.

repentance, and then come to Christ at last: the Gospel way is to receive peace from Christ first of all, and begin with Him. Man's idea is to amend, and turn over a new leaf, and so work his way up to reconciliation and friendship with God. The Gospel way is first to be friends with God through Christ, and then to work. Man's idea is to toil up the hill, and find life at the top: the Gospel way is first to live by faith in Christ, and then to do His will.

Come then, willing to receive, and not thinking how much you can bring. Come, willing to take what Christ offers, and not fancying you can give anything in return. Come with your sins, and no other qualification but a hearty desire for pardon, and, as sure as the Bible is true, you shall be saved.

You may tell me you are not worthy, you are not good enough, you are not elect. I answer, You are a sinner, and you want to be saved, and what more do you want? You are one of those whom Jesus came to save. Come to Him and you shall have life. Take with you words, and He will hear you graciously. Tell Him all your soul's necessities, and I know from the Bible He will give heed. Tell Him you have heard He receiveth sinners, and that you are such. Tell Him you have heard He has the keys of life in his hand, and entreat Him to let you in. Tell Him you come in dependence on His own promises, and ask Him to fulfil His word, and "do as He has said" (2Sa 7:25). Do this in simplicity and sincerity, and, my soul for yours, you shall not ask in vain. Do this and you shall find Him faithful and just to forgive your sins, and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1Jo 1:9).

#### **4. Last of all, let me give a word of exhortation to all forgiven souls.**

You are forgiven. Then know the full extent of your privileges, and learn to rejoice in the Lord. You and I are great sinners, but then we have a great Saviour. You and I have sinned sins that are past man's knowledge, but then we have "the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge," to rest upon (Eph 3:19). You and I feel our hearts to be a bubbling fountain of evil, but then we have another fountain of greater power in Christ's blood, to which we may daily resort. You and I have mighty enemies to contend with, but then the "Captain of our salvation" is mightier still, and is ever with us. Why should our hearts be troubled? Why should we be disquieted and cast down? O men and women of little faith that we are! Wherefore do we doubt?

Let us strive every year to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is sad to be content with a little religion. It is honourable to covet the best gifts. We ought not to be satisfied with the same kind of hearing, and reading, and praying, which satisfied us in years gone by. We ought to labour every year to throw more heart and reality into everything we do in our religion. To love Christ more intensely—to abhor evil more thoroughly—to cleave to what is good more closely—to

watch even our least ways more narrowly, to declare very plainly that we seek a country—to put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and be clothed with Him in every place and company—to see more—to feel more—to know more—to do more—these ought to be our aims and desires every year we begin. Truly there is room for improvement in us all.

Let us try to do good to the souls of others, more than we have done hitherto. Alas, it is poor work indeed to be swallowed up in our own spiritual concerns, and taken up with our own spiritual ailments; and never to think of others! We forget that there is such a thing as religious selfishness. Let us count it a sorrowful thing to go to heaven alone, and let us seek to draw companions with us. We ought never to forget that every man, woman, and child around us, will soon be either in heaven or hell. Let us say to others, as Moses did to Hobab, “Come with us, and we will do thee good” (Num 10:29). Oh, it is indeed a true saying, “He that watereth shall be watered himself” (Pro 11:25). The idle, do-little, selfish Christian has little idea what he is missing.

Finally, let us say to everything in the world that interferes between ourselves and Jesus Christ, “Stand aside;” and let us dread *allowing* ourselves in the least evil habits, lest insensibly they rise up like a mist and hide Him from our eyes. “In His light alone shall we see light” and feel warmth, and separate from Him we shall find the world a dark and cold wilderness (Psa 36:9). We should call to mind the request of the Athenian philosopher, when the mightiest Monarch on earth asked him what he desired most. “I have,” said he, “but one request to make; and that is that you would stand from between me and the sun.” Let this be the spirit in which you and I are found continually. Let us think lightly of the world’s gifts. Let us sit calmly under its cares. Let us care for nothing if we may only ever see the King’s face, if we may only ever abide in Christ.

If our sins are forgiven, our best things are yet to come.

Yet a little time, and we shall “see face to face, and know as we have been known.” We shall “see the King in His beauty,” and “go out no more” (1Co 13:12; Isa 33:17; Rev 3:12). “Blessed then is he whose transgression is forgiven, and whose sins are covered” (Psa 32:1).

This article available as a small booklet from Chapel Library.

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**J.C. Ryle (1816-1900):** Bishop of the Anglican Church. Revered author of *Holiness*, *Knots Untied*, *Old Paths*, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, and others. Born at Macclesfield, Cheshire County, England.



# DIVINE FORGIVENESS ADMIRERD AND IMITATED

C. H. Spurgeon (1834-1892)

*“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.*

**T**O whom is this exhortation addressed? The apostle speaketh thus in the twelfth verse: “Elect of God, holy and beloved.” Here are three particulars. They are, first of all, “elect of God,” that is to say, chosen according to his eternal purpose. They are made choice ones by being thus chosen. Next, they are sanctified by the Spirit of God, and are, therefore, called “holy”: this holiness appertaining to their persons and their pursuits, their calling and their conversation. When the Spirit of God has fully done his work he sheds abroad in their hearts the love of God, so that experimentally they feel themselves to be “beloved.” To abide in the love of God is the fruit of election, and the result of holiness. If any of you can with humble confidence claim these three titles, “elect of God, holy and beloved,” you are among the most favored of all mankind: of you the Father hath made a special choice, in you his Holy Spirit has wrought a special work, and you possess within your souls the special joy of living in the love of God. “Elect of God, holy and beloved”: it is as you enjoy these three things that you will find it easy to carry out the precept which is now set before you, “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.”

**You see your example...COPY IT FOR YOURSELVES.** If the Holy Spirit enables you to write according to this copy, you will have the approval of the Lord resting upon you. See how large and clear the letters! It will be no small success if you can reproduce them. “Even as Christ forgave you”; the imitation should be as exact as possible. Mark the “even,” and the “so,” and endeavor to keep touch with your gracious Lord.

**Notice, however, in the text, that this precept concerning the imitation of Christ in forgiveness is *universally applicable*.** The text is not long, but see how unqualified is its range. “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any.” You see it is not put that superiors are to forgive inferiors; or, on the other hand, that the less are to forgive the greater; but the circle of the command includes the whole: it is, “forbearing one another.” The rich are to be forbearing to the poor, the poor are to be forbearing to the rich; the elderly man is to for-

give the junior for his imprudence,<sup>1</sup> the junior is to bear with the petulance<sup>2</sup> and slowness of the elder. It is an all-round business, implying that one of these days I shall have to forgive you, and you will have to forgive me. Personally, I tax your forbearance to put up with me; and I need not say that sometimes I have need to exercise forbearance towards one and another in so large a church. We have all our own angles and edges, and these are apt to come into contact with others. We are all pieces of one puzzle, and shall fit in with each other one day, and make a complete whole; yet just now we seem misshapen and unfitting. Our corners need to be rounded. Sometimes they are chipped off by collision with somebody else; and that is not comfortable for the person with whom we collide. Like pebbles in the river of the water of life, we are wearing each other round and smooth, as the living current brings us into communion: everybody is polishing and being polished, and in the process it is inevitable that some present inconvenience should be sustained; but nobody must mind it, for it is part of a great process by which we shall all come into proper shape, and be made meet for endless fellowship.

“Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another”: you see it has two sides. “Ah,” says one, “I cannot understand it; people ought to be far more forbearing to me.” Just so; but the first point is that you should be forgiving towards them. What numbers of church members think that the duties of a church are all one-sided. “I was ill, and nobody came to see me.” “Did you send for anybody to see you?” “No, I did not.” Brother, before you find fault, remember your own fault; you have violated the command, “Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church.” “But nobody exhibits Christian love,” says one. Is that true of yourself? I have noticed that the man who says that love is dead is usually rather short of love himself. How very different the church looks to different eyes: one sees a thousand virtues to admire, and another a world of evil to expose. One gratefully cries, “When I was ill, the dear brethren came to see me so often that I had even to ask them not to stay very long.” Another grumbles, “I might have laid there a month, and nobody would ever have come near me.” We understand the reason for this difference: the tone of the speech is the key to the riddle. As a rule, with what measure we mete<sup>3</sup> it is measured to us again. I do not find Christ’s people to be one half so faulty as I am myself. I meet with many Christians whom I think it an honor to know, and commune with; and those of another sort are useful to me as warnings, and as fields for exercising my graces. The forgiveness and the forbearance are needed all round, and we

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<sup>1</sup> **imprudence** – lack of caution.

<sup>2</sup> **petulance** – unreasonable irritability.

<sup>3</sup> **mete** – to measure.

must both give and take. By the sweet love of Jesus, let us not fail in this business.

**Let me say here that this matter is an absolutely essential one—*this forbearance and this forgiveness are vital*.** Be not deceived; God is not mocked: no man is a child of God who has not a likeness to God; and no man is forgiven who will not himself forgive. In the Middle Ages a certain baron had a fend<sup>4</sup> with another nobleman, and determined to avenge himself for some insult, real or imaginary. His enemy was to pass by the castle with a small retinue,<sup>5</sup> and therefore the baron determined to way-lay him and kill him, or, at least, to punish him severely, and exact a ransom. A holy man who lived in the castle begged and entreated the baron to forbear from bloodshed, and make peace; but for some time he pleaded in vain. The baron would not be appeased, but swore that he would be avenged of his adversary. So this godly man begged one favor of him, namely, that he would come with him into the chapel and offer prayer before he sallied<sup>6</sup> forth. They knelt together in prayer, and ere they rose the saintly man said, “My lord, repeat after me the Lord’s Prayer.” He went on saying word by word, as the other did, till he came to that, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us”; but there the good man stopped, and said, “I charge you not to say this unless you really mean it! Do not mock the Lord. You may not go out and fight if you thus speak with God. You will have to appear before God and be judged for your sins, for you will not be forgiven if you do not forgive. Choose, then, either to utter this prayer and forgive, and be saved; or to refuse the prayer, and go forth to battle and be lost.” The baron paused and bit his lip, but at last his better spirit prevailed, and he cried, “I cannot renounce my hope of heaven; I cannot renounce my hope of forgiveness; therefore my enemy shall pass by my castle in safety, and I will say, ‘Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.’” Do not attempt to deceive God. If you must lie and cheat, practice your impositions<sup>7</sup> upon your fellow-men, but do not imagine that you can flatter your Maker or deceive the Omniscient One. If you will not forgive, say so, and expect eternal perdition,<sup>8</sup> but if you profess to be a Christian obey this great and essential precept, and forgive as Christ forgave you. Be honest, be straight with God, for he will be honest and straight with you; but if you cannot and will not forgive, then look forward to a portion with the tormentors; for even the loving Jesus says, “Neither shall my heavenly Father forgive you.”

**In urging you to this copying of Christ, let me notice that this forgiveness of those who offend against us is *gloriously ennobling*.** We are not

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<sup>4</sup> **fend** – struggle.

<sup>5</sup> **retinue** – the attendants accompanying high-ranking person.

<sup>6</sup> **sallied** – rushed out, as a body of troops from a fortified place to attack besiegers.

<sup>7</sup> **impositions** – deception.

<sup>8</sup> **perdition** – eternal loss of the soul; damnation.

asked to perform a duty which will in the least degrade us. Revenge is paltry,<sup>9</sup> forgiveness is great-minded. Was not David infinitely greater than Saul, when he spared his life in the cave, and when he would not smite him as he lay asleep on the battle-field? Did not the king humble himself before David when he perceived his forbearance? If you would be the greatest among men, bear injuries with the greatest gentleness; if you would win the noblest of conquests, subdue yourself: To win a battle is a little thing if it be fought out with sword and gun; but to win it in God's way, with no weapons but love, and patience, and forgiveness, this is the most glorious of victories. Blessed is that man who is more than a conqueror, because he inflicts no wounds in the conflict, but overcomes evil with good. In the process of such a conquest the warrior is himself a gainer. A nation in fighting, even if it wins the campaign, has to suffer great expense and loss of life; but he that overcomes by love, is the better and stronger man through what he has done. He comes out of the conflict not only victor over his adversary, but victor over sin within himself, and all the readier for future war against evil. He glorifies God and himself becomes strong in grace. Nothing is more glorious than love. Your Master, who is King of kings, set you an example of gaining glory by enduring wrong: if you would be knights of his company, imitate his graciousness.

**Notice that this imitation of Christ is *logically appropriate to you all.*** Brothers, if Christ has forgiven you, the parable we read just now shows that it is imperative that you should forgive your fellows. If our Lord has forgiven us our ten thousand talents, how can we take our brother by the throat for the hundred pence, and say, "Pay me what thou owest"? If we are indeed members of Christ, should we not be like our Head? If we profess to be his servants, are we to pretend to a dignity greater than our Master, who washed his disciples' feet? If he forgave so freely, how dare we call ourselves his brethren if our spirit is hard and malice lingers within us?

**I say, to conclude, that this copying of Christ is *most forcibly sustained by the example given in the text.*** We are to forbear and to forgive, "Even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye." I have heard it said "If you pass by every wanton offense, and take no notice of it, you will come to be despised, and regarded as a person of mean<sup>10</sup> spirit: your honor demands vindication." When Christ forgave you, did his honor suffer by that forgiveness? You transgressed most wickedly, and yet he forgave you; do you regard him as less honorable because of that readiness to pass by offenses? Far from it: it is his glory to forgive. The hallelujahs of saints and the songs of angels are sent up to his throne the more heartily because of the richness of his grace, and the freeness of his mercy. Dishonour indeed! What pride it is on the part of such poor creatures as we are to talk

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<sup>9</sup> **paltry** – vile; worthless.

<sup>10</sup> **mean** – lacking dignity; contemptible.

about our honor! Where is the honor of revenge? It is a dishonorable thing to put yourself on the level of him who injures you. A heathen philosopher used to say, "If an ass kicks you, is it necessary for the maintenance of your honor to kick that ass again?" That speech looks like a noble one, but yet it is too much flavoured with contempt. When you speak, or even think, of another who has wronged you as though he were only worthy to be regarded as a beast, you are not right in spirit, a degree of evil remains in your heart. Think of the offender without contempt, as well as without resentment. Believe that he is a brother worth winning. Say, "If he does me an injury, for that very reason I will do him a double service. My only vengeance shall be double love. I will not allow myself even to think hardly of him. I will put the best possible construction on all that he does, and thus show that the spirit of Christ is in me, conquering the spirit of fallen humanity both in me and in him."

Says one, "If we always overlook offenses other people may be tempted to do us wrong also." Our text furnishes us with a ready answer to this also. The Lord Jesus Christ forgave you. Have you met anybody who has been tempted to do wrong because the Lord has forgiven you? He has freely forgiven myriads of poor unworthy sinners, and has that promoted sin? No. Is it not the very groundwork and case of holiness in the world, that Jesus is so gracious as to pardon sin? Why then should your forbearance do harm? Do not you pretend to be so very wise; for therein you censure<sup>11</sup> your Master. You are not the ruler of the world. It is not for you to be refraining from good for fear that evil may come of it: attend to your own ways, forgive every one his brother his trespasses, and leave consequences with God.

"Oh, but," says one, "I know several pious persons who are very unforgiving." You do not know any really good man who is of that character. I make bold to say that no man is really good if he has not a forgiving spirit. Unwillingness to forgive is a grievous flaw in anyone's character. But if there were such good people, what have you to do with them? Is the servant to imitate his fellow-servant, especially in his faults? The example set before you is, "Even as Christ forgave you." You have nothing to do with either saints or sinners in this matter; your Lord says to you, "What is that to thee? Follow thou me." Perhaps you do not know all the story which you think proves that a good man has been unforgiving; and if you do know it, you are no judge of others. Mind your own business, and even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye."

But I hear another one saying, "These persons would not have forgiven *me*." Just so; but then you are a child of God, you are "elect, holy, and beloved." You are not to lower your standard to that of publicans and sinners. Does not Christ continually say, "What do ye more than others?"

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<sup>11</sup> **censure** – to find fault with and condemn as wrong.

Do not even the publicans and the sinners the same?” “If you love them that love you, what thank have ye?” But if ye love them that despitefully use you, then blessed are you when men shall persecute you. In that case you have an opportunity of showing your love to your Lord. When Dr. Duff first read to some young Brahmins<sup>12</sup> in the Government school the precept, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you,” one of the Brahmins cried out with delight, “Beautiful! Beautiful! This must have come from the true God. I have been told to love those that love me, and I have not always done that: but to love my enemies is a divine thought.” That young man became a Christian under the influence of that precept. Do not darken this light, but be sure to display it in your life, that many may be attracted to Christ by its lustre. Let your goodwill go forth even to the worst of men, for Christ’s sake. Forget *their* evil as you behold *his* goodness.

“Well,” says one, “I would forgive the fellow, but he does not deserve it.” That is why you are to forgive him: if he deserved it, you would be bound to do him the justice which he could claim; but as he does not deserve it, you have here an appeal to your Christian love. Does not your heavenly Father give good things to the unthankful and to the evil? Did not Jesus forgive the undeserving when he forgave you? Does he not overlook our wretched characters when he has mercy upon us?

I hear one say, “I cannot forgive!” That is a terrible confession. The apostle of the Gentiles said, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” Is not the same strength available for you? Some persons find forgiving and forgetting to be hard work; but as you are bound to do it or stop out of heaven, you must cry to God for help, and set about it with determination. If you are indeed a child of God you will soon find the difficulty gone; indeed forgiveness will become easy to you. To be forgiven is such sweetness that honey is tasteless in comparison with it; but yet there is one thing sweeter still, and that is to forgive. As it is more blessed to give than to receive, so to forgive rises a stage higher in experience than to be forgiven. To be forgiven is, as it were, the root; to forgive is the flower. That divine Spirit, who bears witness with our spirit when he breathes peace into us because we are pardoned, beareth yet a higher witness with us when he enables us truly to pardon all manner of trespasses against ourselves. Let it never be said in a Christian church, that fellow-members bear a grudge against one another. I do not know that it is so in your case; assuredly it should not be so anywhere. Let it not be said of any Christian man, that he is unloving, ready to take offense, apt to bear malice, or quick to anger. Cultivate forbearance till your heart yields a fine crop of it. Pray for a short memory as to all unkindnesses. I bless God that I know a man who finds it easy to forgive and to forget all

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<sup>12</sup> **Brahmins** – a priest among the Hindus.

offenses against himself. He takes no credit for so doing, for no one ever offends him in a way which is worth remembering. That man has been reminded again and again of the misbehaviour of unreasonable and unkind men, and he has honestly said, "I had quite forgotten it." He does not claim this forgetfulness as a virtue, for as a matter of fact his memory has become weak in that direction, and he has no desire to strengthen it. He has never tried to recollect unkindnesses, and now by long disuse his memory happily fails him upon such matters. That man has often enjoyed exquisite pleasure in doing good to those who have injured him; and he can truly say that at this moment he bears no ill-will to any soul upon this earth. He does not think this to be any singular attainment, for his belief is that every follower of Jesus should be of the same mind.

Do you not think the same? I am sure I do. I heard this man once say of another, "He spoke against me that which was false, but if he had known more of me, he might have said something far worse, and have been nearer the truth. Perhaps my false accuser believed what he said, and thought he was doing a right thing in protesting against what he thought was my fault. At any rate, no one can harm my character, unless I do so myself." It is a wise thing to profit by every accusation, whether true or false, by trying to be better. Let us so live as to be able to say, "I am as much at peace with all men as a child new born." Thus shall we wear the mark of the Spirit of God. In a word, my brethren, "Even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye." Amen.

Excerpted from a sermon delivered on Lord's-day morning, May 17th, 1885,  
at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington.

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**Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892):** Influential Baptist minister in England. *The New Park Street Pulpit* and *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*—the collected sermons of Spurgeon during his ministry with that congregation fill 63 volumes. The sermons' 20–25 million words are equivalent to the 27 volumes of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Born at Kelvedon, Essex.



# CONDITIONAL OR UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS?

John MacArthur, Jr.

## *1. GOD'S FORGIVENESS / OUR FORGIVENESS*

How can forgiveness between fellow sinners be compared to the forgiveness of an offended deity? There must be some similarities, because Scripture instructs us to forgive in the same manner as we have been forgiven. This idea occurs in two verses we have quoted repeatedly: Ephesians 4:32 (“forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”) and Colossians 3:13 (“even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye”).

Some take the position that this teaches forgiveness should always be conditional. Their rationale goes like this: God forgives only those who repent. Therefore, if we are going to forgive in the same manner as we have been forgiven, we should withhold forgiveness from all who are unrepentant. Some fine teachers hold this view. For example, [one author] writes: It should go without saying that since our forgiveness is modeled after God’s (Eph 4:32), it must be conditional.

Forgiveness by God rests on clear, unmistakable conditions. The apostles did not merely announce that God had forgiven men...Paul and the apostles turned away from those who refused to meet the conditions, just as John and Jesus did earlier when the scribes and the Pharisees would not repent.

There is some merit in [this author’s] position. There are times when forgiveness must be conditional. I have great respect for [this author] and have recommended his book on forgiveness as a helpful study of the subject. On this issue, however, I must disagree with the position he takes.

To make conditionality the gist of Christlike forgiving seems to miss the whole point of what Scripture is saying. When Scripture instructs us to forgive in the manner we have been forgiven, what is in view is not the idea of *withholding* forgiveness until the offender expresses repentance.

Listen carefully to what these verses are saying:

*“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.... For 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.”*

*(Mat 6:12, 14-15)*

*“For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.” (Jam 2:13)*

*“So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.” (Mat 18:35)*

*“Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven: Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom.*

*For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.” (Luk 6:36-38)*

The emphasis is on forgiving freely, generously, willingly, eagerly, speedily—and from the heart. The attitude of the forgiver is where the focus of Scripture lies, not the terms of forgiveness.

Most of those who hold that all forgiveness is conditional portray forgiveness as a formal transaction in which the forgiven one must repent and the offended party promises in return never to bring up the sin again. If this transaction has not occurred, they say, real forgiveness has not yet taken place. In some cases the offender may repent and ask forgiveness without prompting, and forgiveness should be granted on the spot. But in most cases, particularly when the offender is ignorant of having committed a wrong, the offended party must first confront the offender and formally solicit repentance before he or she can forgive. In short, no act of forgiveness can occur until the offender asks for forgiveness.

Sadly, I have seen people who hold this opinion become obsessive confronters and ultimately make themselves odious to friend and foe alike. Others nurse grudges, refuse to relinquish bitterness, and even sever friendships over relatively petty offenses, justifying such attitudes because they are convinced they have no duty to forgive until the offender repents.

While it is often true that forgiveness involves a two-way transaction, it is not true of *all* forgiveness. There are times when forgiveness should be unconditional and unilateral,<sup>1</sup> and there are other times when forgiveness must be withheld until the offender repents. The biblical principles governing these different kinds of forgiveness are clear.

## **2. CONDITIONAL / UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS**

It is obvious from Scripture that sometimes forgiveness must be conditional. For example, in certain cases the offender is to be confronted and

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<sup>1</sup> **unilateral** – performed by only one side.

ultimately even excommunicated from the church if he or she refuses to repent (Luk 17:3; Mat 18:15-17).

But does *every* offense call for confrontation, possibly leading to formal church discipline? Is there no place for simply granting unilateral forgiveness for petty offenses? Is there no time when the offended party should simply overlook a transgression, choosing to suffer wrong and forgive without being asked or without formally confronting the offender?

Obviously, these questions have important practical ramifications. If you had a friend who scrupulously tried to confront you every time you committed a petty offense, wouldn't the friendship grow tedious pretty quickly? And if marriage partners saw it as their solemn duty to confront each other for every offense, wouldn't such a mind-set make the marriage relationship practically impossible to endure?

It is a mistake to assume that verses like Luke 17:3 ("If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him") and Matthew 18:15 ("Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault") are absolute prescriptions for every kind of transgression. If we were obligated to confront one another for every paltry misdeed, we would be doing little else.

Indeed, Scripture gives us another principle for dealing with the vast majority of petty infractions: overlook the offense. Forgive unilaterally, unconditionally. Grant pardon freely and unceremoniously. Love demands this. "And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins" (1Pe 4:8). "Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins." (Pro 10:12). "He that covereth a transgression seeketh love" (Pro 17:9). Love "thinketh no evil...[but] beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things" (1Co 13:5-7).

[One author] recognizes the Christian's duty to overlook petty offenses, citing some of these same texts. "But," he writes, "it is not...forgiveness." Having defined forgiveness as a two-way transaction, he has no room in his system for unilateral or unconditional forgiveness. So he draws a distinction between forgiveness and overlooking another's transgression. If true, that would mean all the petty offenses we choose to overlook (or "cover," in biblical terminology) are not really to be regarded as forgiven.

But the Bible itself makes no such distinction. Covering another's transgression is the very essence of forgiveness. Speaking of God's forgiveness, Psalm 32:1 equates the concepts of forgiveness and the covering of sin:

"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." This is a Hebrew parallelism, employing two different expressions to

designate the same concept. To cover someone else's sin is the very essence of forgiveness.

Psalm 85:2 draws the same parallel: "Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of thy people, thou hast covered all their sin. Selah."

James 5:20 also equates forgiveness with the covering of sin: "Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide [cover] a multitude of sins."

So when 1 Peter 4:8 says, "For charity shall cover the multitude of sins," it is describing forgiveness.

Furthermore, Scripture also teaches that forgiveness can be unilateral and unconditional. Mark 11:25-26 clearly speaks of this kind of forgiveness and even makes it a condition for receiving God's forgiveness:

*"And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought<sup>2</sup> 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."*

That describes an immediate forgiveness granted to the offender with no formal meeting or transaction required. It necessarily refers to a pardon that is wholly unilateral, because this forgiveness takes place *while the forgiver stands praying*. "Forgive" is the clear command of that verse, and it is to take place on the spot. There is no mention of confrontation. There is no command to seek the offender's repentance. The forgiveness of Mark 11:25 is therefore different from the forgiveness of Luke 17:3. This forgiveness is to be granted unconditionally and unilaterally.

### **3. UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?**

What does unilateral forgiveness entail? If there's no transaction, no seeking of forgiveness, no formal granting of pardon, no words exchanged between the two parties, then what exactly is accomplished by this sort of forgiveness?

Its chief effects are wrought in the heart of the forgiver. This kind of forgiveness involves a deliberate decision to cover the other person's offense. "Forgive" in Mark 11:25 is an imperative, a command. The forgiveness called for here is necessarily a volitional matter. In other words, it is a choice, not a feeling or an involuntary response.

It is, as Matthew 18:35 suggests, *from the heart*; but even that does not place forgiveness primarily in the realm of feeling. "Heart" in Scripture normally designates the seat of the intellect (cf. Pro 23:7; Luk 9:47). So this speaks of a deliberate and rational decision. It is a choice made by the offended party to set aside the other person's transgression and not permit the offense to cause a breach in the relationship or fester in bitterness.

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<sup>2</sup> **ought** – anything.

In effect, the person who chooses to forgive resolves not to remember the offense, refuses to hold a grudge, relinquishes any claim on recompense, and resists the temptation to brood or retaliate. The offended party simply bears the insult. The offense is set aside, lovingly covered for Christ's sake. For petty and unintentional offenses, this is the proper and loving way to forgive—unilaterally, without confrontation and without stirring any strife.

This, I believe, is what Scripture refers to most often when it calls us to forgive one another. The heavy emphasis on forgiveness in Scripture is not meant to make us more confrontational, but quite the opposite. When Scripture calls us to have an attitude of forgiveness, the emphasis is always on long-suffering, patience, benevolence, forbearance, kindness, and mercy—not confrontation.

To deny that forgiveness can ever be unilateral is in my view a potentially serious mistake. It places too much stress on confrontation. And that tends to produce more conflict than it avoids. People who insist on confronting every wrong often simply stir strife—the antithesis of what Jesus' teaching on forgiveness was intended to produce. Real love should *cover* the vast majority of transgressions, not constantly haul them out in the open for dissection (1Pe 4:8).

#### **4. TO CONFRONT OR NOT TO CONFRONT?**

All of this calls for some careful distinctions. Obviously there are times when confrontation is essential. How do we identify those situations? Are there clear biblical principles that teach us when to confront and when to forgive unilaterally?

I believe there are. Here are some guidelines to help you in drawing the distinction:

***Whenever possible, especially if the offense is petty or unintentional, it is best to forgive unilaterally.*** This is the very essence of a gracious spirit. It is the Christlike attitude called for in Ephesians 4:1-3:

*“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*

That calls for a gracious tolerance (*forbearing*) of others' faults. This is necessary for the sake of maintaining peace.

In other words, believers are supposed to have a sort of mutual immunity to petty offenses. Love “is not easily provoked” (1Co 13:5). If every fault required formal confrontation, the whole of our church life would be spent confronting and resolving conflicts over petty annoyances. So for the sake of peace, to preserve the unity of the Spirit, we are to show tolerance whenever possible.

This, then, is the governing rule: Unless an offense *requires* confrontation, unconditional, unilateral forgiveness should cover the transgression. The offended party, in suffering the offense, is following in the footsteps of Christ (1Pe 2:21-25). This is the very attitude Christ called for in Matthew 5:39-40: “But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.”

***If you are the only injured party, even if the offense was public and flagrant, you may choose to forgive unilaterally.*** Examples of this abound in Scripture. Joseph, for example, was the victim of a grievous wrong at the hands of his brothers. They plotted to kill him, then sold him into slavery.

But he held no grudge. Years later, when famine drove the wicked brothers to Egypt in search of food, Joseph recognized them and freely forgave them, without any expression of repentance on their part. Before they even realized who he was, he was moved to tears with compassion for them. Finally revealing his true identity to them, he said, “I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life.” (Gen 45:4-5). His forgiveness was unconditional, unilateral, not predicated on any expression of remorse from them.

In fact, as far as we know from Scripture, the closest these brothers ever came to formally declaring their repentance was after Jacob died. Once their father was no longer there to stay Joseph’s hand, they imagined their offended brother might unleash vengeance against them. The brothers, knowing the gravity of their sin, were evidently unable to believe that his charity toward them was well-meant. They feared he might still secretly harbor a wish for vengeance. So they told Joseph that it was *their father’s* wish that he grant them forgiveness (Gen 50:16-17). They did not formally admit their wrong and express repentance, though it is quite clear that they were humbled men by now.

But all their pleading was wholly unnecessary. Joseph had forgiven them long before. Having seen undeniable evidence that the hand of Divine Providence was working good in his life through the evil that was done to him, Joseph had long since forgiven his brothers fully, freely, and unconditionally. His perspective? “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good” (Gen 50:20). The knowledge that God had a good purpose for his sufferings made it impossible for Joseph to harbor a grudge.

There are also other examples of unilateral forgiveness in Scripture, even when the offense was public and pronounced. For example, on at

least one significant occasion David unilaterally and unconditionally forgave the most humiliating kind of public insult.

It occurred during Absalom's rebellion against David. David was forced to flee Jerusalem so that his defiant son would not destroy the city in his zeal to overthrow David's throne. During that agonizing and painful exodus from Jerusalem, a worthless character named Shimei publicly taunted the already heartbroken David, trying to humiliate him further. Second Samuel 16:5-8 records what happened:

*"[Shimei] came forth, and cursed still as he came. And he cast stones at David, and at all the servants of king David: and all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left. And thus said Shimei when he cursed, Come out, come out, thou bloody man, and thou man of Belial: The LORD hath returned upon thee all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose stead thou hast reigned; and the LORD hath delivered the kingdom into the hand of Absalom thy son: and, behold, thou art taken in thy mischief, because thou art a bloody man."*

Abishai, one of David's companions, wanted justice on the spot: "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over, I pray thee, and take off his head" (v. 9).

But David's response was a godly forbearance:

*"So let him curse, because the LORD hath said unto him, Curse David. Who shall then say, Wherefore hast thou done so? And David said to Abishai, and to all his servants, Behold, my son, which came forth of my bowels, seeketh my life: how much more now may this Benjamite do it? let him alone, and let him curse; for the LORD hath bidden him. It may be that the LORD will look on mine affliction, and that the LORD will requite<sup>3</sup> me good for his cursing this day."*

Shimei continued to run along the hillside next to David, cursing and throwing rocks and dirt at the king, but David bore the insults with grace and forbearance—though under the circumstances it would have been perfectly appropriate for David, a sitting king, to demand that the mocker be punished.

Later, after David was victorious over the rebels, Shimei made a show of remorse, begging David's mercy. David, still over the protest of his men, reaffirmed his forgiveness to Shimei (2Sa 19:18-23). Having already forgiven the initial offense unilaterally, David now forgave Shimei formally.

Stephen's prayers for those who stoned him are another example of unilateral, unconditional forgiveness. The fact that Stephen prayed for God's mercy for his murderers shows that he had already forgiven them. It is true that *God's* forgiveness was not to be granted apart from their repentance; but Stephen himself had already made a deliberate, con-

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<sup>3</sup> **requite** – repay; reward.

scious choice to relinquish the right to retribution. He had forgiven them in his heart.

This brings up an important point. Even after we have forgiven offenders for their transgressions against us, God Himself may exact justice for their sins against Him. We can forgive an offense against us. But we cannot grant forgiveness for sin against God. “Who can forgive sins, but God alone?” (Luk 5:21). To forgive someone does not convey some priestly absolution, clearing them of sin before God. Those whom we forgive must still give account to God.

For example, Stephen’s forgiving his killers did not assure that their sins would go unpunished if they did not also seek *God’s* forgiveness. In the case of Saul of Tarsus (who stood by the garments of Stephen’s killers, consenting to the martyr’s death, Act 7:58; 8:1), his offense was completely blotted out when he fully repented. We are never told what became of those who threw the stones, but if they never embraced Christ as Lord and Savior, they will suffer the wrath of God for the sin of killing Stephen. Stephen forgave the offense against him; the sin against God still had to be reckoned with.

Shimei is another case in point. David kept his promise not to kill Shimei, but Shimei remained an unregenerate and worthless man to the end of his life. Knowing this, on his deathbed David instructed Solomon how to deal with Shimei: “Now therefore hold him not guiltless: for thou art a wise man, and knowest what thou oughtest to do unto him; but his hoar<sup>4</sup> head bring thou down to the grave with blood” (1Ki 2:9).

This is a difficult command to explain, until we realize that David, as the divinely appointed king, was responsible to see that God’s glory was not besmirched in Israel. He had kept his promise to Shimei: he did not kill him for his insult. As far as David was concerned, the personal offense against him was forgiven. But Shimei’s act also involved the most wretched kind of blasphemy against God. And since Shimei remained in wanton rebellion against God, divine justice still had a claim on him. For the sake of the nation’s purity, this needed to be dealt with. It was now time for the account to be settled—for the sake of *God’s* glory, not David’s. David could overlook a personal transgression against him; he could not ultimately overlook a public act of overt hostility to God. As Puritan commentator Matthew Henry wrote, David’s instructions to Solomon “proceeded not from personal revenge, but a prudent zeal for the honour of the government and the covenant God had made with his family, the contempt of which ought not to go unpunished.” Surely that is why David waited until he was on his deathbed to order that Shimei be punished. This way, no one could say that David did it to preserve his own honor.

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<sup>4</sup> hoar – white with age

And Solomon wisely honored David's forgiveness of Shimei's insult. Instead of summarily executing him for that past offense, Solomon imposed a restriction on Shimei, forbidding him ever to set foot outside the city of Jerusalem. As long as he stayed in the city, under the king's supervision, he could move about freely in perfect safety. But the day he set foot across the Kidron Valley, he would be killed. Shimei agreed to the terms, which were gracious (1Ki 2:36-38). But because he was a wicked man, Shimei broke his word. He left the city in search of some runaway slaves, and when Solomon found out, he summoned him and said:

*"Did I not make thee to swear by the LORD, and protested unto thee, saying, Know for a certain, on the day thou goest out, and walkest abroad any whither, that thou shalt surely die? and thou saidst unto me, The word that I have heard is good. Why then hast thou not kept the oath of the LORD, and the commandment that I have charged thee with? The king said moreover to Shimei, Thou knowest all the wickedness which thine heart is privy to, that thou didst to David my father: **therefore the LORD shall return thy wickedness upon thine own head**"*—*v. 42-44, emphasis added.*

In other words, Shimei's death was the Lord's, not David's, reprisal for Shimei's sin. David forgave the man and kept his promise not to retaliate. But in the end, given Shimei's refusal to repent, God Himself demanded justice.

Our forgiving an offense does not guarantee that the offender will receive judicial forgiveness from God. God, who knows the heart, always judges righteously. Our part is to be gracious, bear the wrong, and pray for the offender's full repentance. God Himself will see to it that justice is done if the offender fails to seek divine forgiveness.

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Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL Used by permission.

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**John MacArthur, Jr.:** Pastor of Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California, well-known Bible teacher, best selling author, conference speaker, and President of The Master's College and Seminary. Prolific author of *The Gospel according to Jesus*, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, and numerous others.



# HOW TO BE FREE FROM BITTERNESS

Jim Wilson

*“Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you. Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour”—Ephesians 4:31-5:2.*

**I**n our text we are instructed to get rid of all bitterness. Before we begin discussing how and why this must be done, it is crucial to realize that the basis for all our actions in this regard must be what Jesus Christ has done for us on the cross. In all our actions, we are to be imitators of God.

In the Old Testament, there was a woman whose name meant Pleasant. Her name was Naomi and she had moved from Israel to another land with her husband and sons. But her husband had died and within the next ten years both of her sons died. She made some comments to her recently widowed daughters-in-law about it.

Ruth 1:13b: “... it grieveth me much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD is gone out against me.” She was comparing in order to determine who had the right to be more bitter.

And in Ruth 1:20-21: “And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?”

Her bitterness was toward God. It was God who had taken away her husband; it was God who had taken away her sons, and she held it against Him. Five times in these three verses she held God accountable for her bitterness.

There are many people like this today. Not only are they bitter, they enjoy being bitter. They somehow like it, and they feed on it. They wouldn’t know what to do if they got rid of it; they wouldn’t have a purpose for living. They like being bitter.

We know people like that in the world, and we know people like that in the church. It is easy to recognize when somebody is bitter. You can see it in the eyes and in the lines of the face—even if the person is young. You can see it in their mouth, you can see it when they’re smiling or laughing. They are bitter and you can see it. You can hear it in the tone

of their voices. You can hear it when they protest that they are not bitter. The bitterness is central and pervades everything.

There are bitter people in the Bible besides Naomi. In fact, there are quite a few. For example, Jonah was a bitter man. The Lord said to him, “Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?” And he said: “I do well to be angry,” he said, “even unto death” (Jon 4:9).

He thought he had a right to his anger. *I like being angry. God, you are wrong to forgive people. I don't want you to forgive people.*

People enjoy holding things against other people. But our text requires us to remove all bitterness and to maintain a tender heart. Here's the question: Is it possible to be kind, compassionate, tenderhearted and yet bitter at the same time? These are all interior attitudes. Tenderheartedness, by definition, involves a tender heart. Bitterness is also on the inside. But it is not possible to have two different, contradictory attitudes on the inside.

Paul says to get rid of all bitterness and to be kind and compassionate one to another. Therefore, the bitterness must go. But before it can be removed, it is necessary to know what it is—and that it is there.

It is relatively easy to see when other people are bitter. But it's not so easy to see it in ourselves. It is therefore important to have a good understanding of the Bible's definition of the problem.

Let us suppose that a Christian commits a sin. He tells a lie, for instance. Now when he tells this lie, does he feel guilty or does he feel bitter? The answer is guilty. When we sin, we feel guilty. It is straightforward. Now let us suppose that someone told a lie about this same Christian and spread it all over town. What does he feel now—guilt or bitterness?

**Guilt is what we feel when we sin, and bitterness is what we feel when others sin against us.** The very definition of bitterness points to the action of another. If we had committed the offense, we would feel guilty and would know that we had to confess and forsake our sin.

We might not confess the sin, but not because we did not know what to do. But what do we do with the guilt of others? Bitterness is always based upon someone else's sin—whether real or imagined.

**Consider the imaginary sin first.** Many times we can be bitter toward someone for what he said, when in reality he did not say it. We heard a false report, and now we are bitter. We wait for an apology which he cannot offer. Shall we remain in bitterness the rest of our lives because he never says he is sorry for something he did not do?

Incidentally, many bitter people cannot imagine the possibility that they are bitter over imaginary sins. As far as bitterness is concerned, the other person's guilt is always real. For such a person trying to be free

from bitterness, it is acceptable for them to assume the real guilt of the other person, *so long* as they get rid of their own bitterness.

**But what about genuine sin?** There are many bitter people who really were mistreated by the offender. So how do we deal with a genuine offense?

Bitterness is based on sin that somehow relates to you. It is not concerned with how big the sin is; it is based upon how close it is. For instance, if some great and gross immorality occurs in Iran, Iraq, El Salvador, or Columbia, what do we do? We read about it, but we will not feel guilty. We read about it, but we will not feel bitter. We might be appalled or amazed, but we do not feel guilty, and we do not feel bitter. Nevertheless, it was an awful sin, and someone actually committed it. So it does not depend on how great the evil is, *it depends on how close the other person is to me*. Bitterness is related to those people who are close.

Who are likely candidates? The answer is simple: fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, children, boyfriends, girlfriends, roommates, immediate superiors, immediate subordinates, co-workers, business partners, and maybe some other relatives—grandparents, uncles, and others. There are even many people who are bitter against God.

We do not get bitter towards evil outside of our own immediate contact. Bitterness is based upon somebody else's sin who is close to us, and who did something to us. It might be minor. It does not have to be great, *it just has to be close*. Does he pick up his socks? No? Can you get bitter over that? Well, no, but what if he does it 5,000 times?

You may think you have a right to be bitter. But the Bible does not grant anyone the right to be bitter. The text says *to get rid of all bitterness*.

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many (Heb 12:15).

Here it describes bitterness as if it were a root. A root is something that is underground and cannot be seen. But there can be visible evidence of its presence, as when sidewalks are lifted.

Roots do other things. The fact that you cannot see roots does not mean they are not there. Neither does it mean you will never see them. They drink in nourishment, and they do not stay roots. Eventually they come up.

The fruit that is born bears a direct relation to the root producing it. The roots of an apple tree provide us with apples. If there is a bitter root, it will bear bitter fruit.

That is what this verse is saying. Beware lest any root of bitterness spring up, cause trouble, and defile many people, which means to make many people filthy. Have you ever seen bitterness go through a church? Bitterness can go through a congregation like a prairie fire. It can go through the work place or a dormitory. Why is this? Somebody decided

to share. He was bitter, let the root come to the surface and bear fruit. He shared it and many people became bitter. The author of Hebrews warns us about this. He says beware of missing the grace of God. When you allow it, bitterness comes up and defiles many people. It makes many people filthy.

**What happens to a person if he keeps bitterness on the inside for many years?** What happens to him physically? Can he get physically sick? Suppose it is bitterness toward some member of the family. He's kept it inside, he has not shared it. He has not defiled many people—he has kept it down inside. When he keeps it inside for some years, he finally begins to hurt. He goes to the doctor and the doctor says, “You are right, you are sick. But your sickness is not the kind I deal with. I am going to send you to the other kind of doctor.”

So he sends him to the psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist agrees. “Yes, you are sick all right. And I know why you are sick. You are sick because of 20 years of bitterness towards your father. You have kept it suppressed all these years and it's just rotted out your insides. You have kept this poison within and this acid on the inside has made you just physically ill. So what I want you to do is I want you to go home and share it with your father. Why keep it in and get sick? Let it out. Get everybody else sick.”

So the world has two solutions. Keep the bitterness in, and make yourself sick, or let it out and spread the sickness around. God's solution is to dig up the root. Get rid of it. *But this takes the grace of God.* A man must know the Lord Jesus Christ to be able to do this. He is the source of grace.

The world's solutions for bitterness shouldn't be used by Christians. When Christians copy the world, they have two poor choices. The Bible says to get rid of all bitterness. You must not keep it in and you must not share it. Surrender it to the Father, through the Son.

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice (Jam 3:14,15).

When I was a young midshipman at the Naval Academy, I thought that the pettiness and jealousy I observed would give way to maturity. I thought the higher you got in rank, the more mature you became, the less this sort of thing occurred. But as I grew older I found out that the jealousy just got more intense. *Bitterness accumulates.* Unless there's a solution to it, people do not get less bitter with maturity. They get more bitter over the years. It gets worse and worse.

And if you harbor bitter envy, evil practice will result. It does not come from heaven. It is straight from the pit and is of the devil. Every

evil practice results from this attitude. As should be obvious, we have a real problem. How do we get rid of bitterness?

Before we can get rid of bitterness, we have to realize that we are bitter.

How can we tell if we are bitter?

**One good rule of thumb is this: Bitterness remembers details.** You have had thousands of conversations in your life, most of which you have forgotten. But this one took place five years ago, and you remember every single word, his intonation and the inflection of every part of his voice. You know exactly what happened—which means you are bitter.

Someone might object and say that it is also possible to have a good memory of a wonderful conversation. Is this possible? Yes, but not likely. Why is this? Because memory is helped by *review, review, and more review*. People do not usually mull over the wonderful things as much. But they do go over and over and over the bad things. I have done quite a bit of counseling with people who are in the process of getting divorced. I have known some since the time they were married, at a happier time in their life. But at the time of the divorce they cannot remember a single happy time. All they can remember is that which they have gone over and over. They are bitter.

This doesn't mean there were not happy times. It just means that they have concentrated on how right they were and how wrong the other person was. If someone has a sharp, detailed memory for things which happened years ago when he was a child, or a young man or woman, and that memory is at all accusative of anyone else, then it is an indication of bitterness. And the solution for bitterness is to get rid of it.

I had a wonderful experience one time in Dallas, Texas. I was speaking on a Saturday night at the home of an old friend. Because I was going to be in Dallas, I wrote notes to several people that I'd known from different parts of the country at other times, and they showed up at this home.

My host asked me to speak on bitterness, which I did. Afterwards, a couple came up to see me. I had known them eight years before in Pullman, Washington. The wife came up to me and said, "We have been married for eight years. The first year of marriage I was so bitter toward my mother that I laid it on my husband every single day. Our first year of marriage was just awful because I kept sharing this bitterness toward my mother with my husband."

She then told me that seven years ago I had spoken on bitterness and she had gotten rid of hers. One day she saw another woman who was really bitter towards her mother. She thought, "I can help that woman. I can share all the common experiences. I went to her to share this, and I couldn't remember any of the details. My detailed memory had gone. All

I could tell her was I used to remember things, and I do not remember them anymore.” The Lord had really taken care of her bitterness.

Another time I was teaching a four-week course on marriage. I had put a notice in the paper and did not know who would show up. A woman came who had been referred to the class by a doctor. She came in and I can honestly say that I have never seen anybody more bitter in appearance in my life. She had forty years of accumulated bitterness. She got rid of it that night and made an appointment to see me the next day at the bookstore where I worked. She came in the store, and I did not know who she was. *She looked so different.* I had just met her the night before, but she was clean inside now.

What is the problem? Why is it we do not get rid of bitterness? If I tell a lie, I can confess it and be forgiven. In order to get rid of it I have to bring it back to my own heart. We need to bring the realization of bitterness back to our own hearts. Instead, the temptation is to look at the offender. Look what he did. That is the nature of bitterness. In order to get rid of it, I need to recognize it is **my** problem before I can confess and forsake it.

But you say, “I am not bitter. I just get hurt easily.” But the symptoms of getting hurt are very close to the symptoms of resentment. Do you know what instant resentment is? You might say. “It is not bitterness—it is just hurt feelings.” But there is a close relationship between being hurt and being resentful. Someone gets hurt and he gets resentful. There is another very close connection between resentment and bitterness. Resentment turns into a deep bitterness.

Bitterness is just resentment that has been held on to. It has become rancid and rotten. It is kept in and it gets worse. The links in the chain continue. There is a connection between bitterness and hatred, and a very clear biblical identification between hatred and murder. What I am saying is that hurt can lead to murder. Some might object that this teaching is too strong. But the strength of it is from the Bible.

**What we want to do is make it apparent how sinful bitterness is.** The bitter person must first recognize that he is bitter, and secondly, that it is a gross evil. Again, the reason people do not deal with this sin is that they think it is the other person’s sin. The devil says, “Well, when he quits lying, or he quits doing this or that, or when he says he’s sorry, then you will feel better.”

But suppose he does not quit? Suppose he never quits? Are you going to be bitter the rest of your life because someone else insists on being in sin? That does not make any sense at all. You may say, “I will forgive him when he says he is sorry, but not until then. I have a right to my bitterness until then. When he says he is sorry, I will forgive him and everything will be fine.” You keep this wall of bitterness up, and one day he comes to you and he says, “I’m sorry.” Can you now forgive him? No,

because bitterness doesn't forgive. In order to forgive this person when he says he is sorry you have to be ready before he says he is sorry. And if you are ready to forgive him before he says he is sorry, then it doesn't depend on whether he says he is sorry or not. In other words, you get rid of bitterness unilaterally. It does not matter what the other person does.

**Earlier the point was made that bitterness seems to stem from the other person's sin—real or imagined.** That is only how it appears. In reality bitterness is a sin that stands alone. The bitter person decides to be bitter independently of the offender.

But you say, "No, he sinned against me, and when he says he is sorry everything will be fine." But this is not true.

I've known situations where an apology was offered and the person is still bitter. Suppose the offender is dead and cannot apologize. I know people who are extremely bitter and the bitterness is toward their parents who died years ago. But the bitterness has not died. Bitterness is the sin of the bitter person alone, unrelated to anybody else.

One time I went to the Walla Walla State Penitentiary to spend the day with the inmates. It was around Christmas. I spent about six hours there. During the afternoon, I was in maximum security, talking about and teaching evangelism. This one fellow asked about reaching the really hard-core criminals. I thought he was really interested in such evangelism and talked to him about it. Then I spent time in minimum security, protective custody and other places. In the evening I was back in maximum security, and thought I'd talk on this subject of bitterness. I figured there were probably some bitter people there.

This same fellow who asked about evangelism in the afternoon asked me another question. He said, "How can you get rid of bitterness towards somebody who beat up your three-year-old son unmercifully?" So I told him how, and then I said, "You know, when you get rid of your bitterness you can help this person so that he won't beat up other little kids."

He said, "No, this guy cannot be helped."

I said, "Sure, he can."

"No, no."

"Why not?"

"He is not with us any more."

This inmate had murdered him. He had murdered him because of what he had done to his three-year-old son—that's why he was in prison. But even though he had killed the man, *he was still bitter*. In other words, expressing it did not get rid of it.

When somebody else says he is sorry, it does not get rid of our bitterness. The only thing that gets rid of it is confession before God because of the Lord Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. *This is the only solution.*

We must not keep it and we must not share it with others. There is only one thing to do and that is to confess it as a great and evil sin. We must be as persistent in the confession as necessary.

Once I was speaking at Monterey, California, at the U.S. Naval Post-Graduate School. There was a man there who had a great reputation as a Bible teacher. He was a line officer in the Navy, but he had been passed over for the command of a submarine. He did not have command of a submarine and he was bitter. I spoke on confession of sin and bitterness, and he was really wiped out. He came and saw me and got rid of this bitterness. The next morning, his wife said to me, "I've got a new husband." He had been bitter toward the Navy. But it was his sin, not the Navy's.

Amy Carmichael has a note in her little book *If*. "For a cup brimful of sweet water cannot spill even one drop of bitter water, however suddenly jolted." If it is full of sweet water and is jolted, what will come out of the cup? Sweet water. If you gave it a harder jolt, what's going to happen? More sweet water. If someone is filled with sweet water and someone else gives him a jolt, what will come out? Sweet water. Jolts do not turn sweet water into bitter water. That is done by something else.

Jolts only bring out of the container what's already in the container. If you're filled with sweetness and light, and you get jolted, you're going to spill sweetness and light. If you're filled with honey, the honey will come out. If vinegar comes out, what does that prove? It shows what was already in the container. In other words, much bitterness is not based upon what the other person did at all. It is the result of what we do and are.

Many years ago, I was working in our bedroom at my desk. My wife, Bessie, was reading in bed. Whatever I was doing wasn't going well. Bessie said something to me and I turned around and let her have it. It was something unChristian. She looked at me in amazement and got up and left the room. I sat there thinking, "She should not have said it. Look what she said. Look, look, look." I did that for around 10 minutes, maybe longer. I was bitter toward Bessie, but all she did was jolt the cup. What was in the cup came out of the cup.

If I had been filled with sweetness and light, it would not have made any difference. I sat there and thought about what she did. I knew better, because I had already learned this truth about bitterness. Still, I thought about her "sin" because there is enjoyment in accusing the other person. Some people do this for years.

I sat there for a while and then got up and went over to my side of the bed, got on my knees and said, "Lord, I was the only one at fault. It was my bitterness and my sin. I am confessing it, forsaking it, and please forgive me."

I got up off my knees and said, "But look what she said." I got back on my knees. "God, I'm sorry for what I did. I accept the responsibility. It was my sin and mine only."

I got up off my knees and said, “God, you and I know who is really at fault.” I knelt back down. I stayed on my knees for 45 minutes until I could get up and not say, “Look what she said.”

I do not remember now what she said, and I do not remember what I was doing at the desk. I do not remember the details. The only thing I remember now is getting up. But I also know that if I had not taken care of the bitterness *I would know to this day exactly what she had said*. That is the nature of bitterness.

In order to get rid of it, I have to see that it is evil and that it is my sin and my sin only. I do not get rid of it through the other person saying he is sorry. I do not get rid of it if the other person quits or dies. I do not get rid of it any other way except calling it sin against the holy God, confessing it and receiving forgiveness.

The difficulty is in getting my eyes off the other person’s sin. But just the fact that I think it is his problem shows that it is not. If it were his problem, and I was filled with sweetness and light, and not bitter, then I would be concerned about the other person.

I could say, “That poor guy! Look what he did. If I did something like that, I would feel awful. He must really feel awful. I think I will go help him.” But if that is not my response then I am bitter, and it is my sin, not his.

I believe that this sin is a major hindrance to revival in this country. When Christians start confessing their sins, they will be able to forgive the sins of others.

This article available as a small booklet from Chapel Library.

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# FATHER, FORGIVE THEM

John Flavel (1630-1691)

*“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do”—Luke 23:34.*

**D**OCTRINE: *That to forgive enemies, and beg forgiveness for them, is the true character and property of the Christian spirit.* Thus did Christ: “Father, forgive them.” And thus did Stephen, in imitation of Christ, “And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge” (Act 7:59, 60). This suits with the rule of Christ, “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 God your Father which is in heaven” (Mat 5:44, 45).

Here I shall first open the nature of this duty, and shew you what a forgiving spirit is; and then the excellency of it, how well it becomes all that call themselves Christians.

**First, Let us enquire what this Christian forgiveness is.** And that the nature of it may the better appear, I shall shew you both what it is not, and what it is.

**First, It consists not in a Stoical insensibility of wrongs and injuries.** God hath not made men as insensible, stupid blocks that have no sense or feeling of what is done to them. Nor hath he made a law inconsistent with their very natures that are to be governed by it: but allows us a tender sense of natural evils, though he will not allow us to revenge them by moral evils: nay, the more deep and tender our resentments of wrongs and injuries are, the more excellent is our forgiveness of them; so that a forgiving spirit doth not exclude sense of injuries, but the sense of injuries graces the forgiveness of them.

**Secondly, Christian forgiveness is not a politic<sup>1</sup> concealment of our wrath and revenge, because it will be a reproach to discover it; or, because we want<sup>2</sup> opportunity to vent it.** This is carnal policy, not Christian meekness. So far from being the mark of a gracious spirit, that it is apparently the sign of a vile nature. It is not Christianity to repose<sup>3</sup>, but depose<sup>4</sup> injuries.

**Thirdly, Nor is it that moral virtue, for which we are beholden to an easier and better nature, and the help of moral rules and documents.** There are cer-

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<sup>1</sup> **politic** – crafty; cunning.

<sup>2</sup> **want** – lack.

<sup>3</sup> **repose** – to lay up; to deposit.

<sup>4</sup> **depose** – to lay down; to take away.

tain virtues attainable without the change of nature, which they call *homilitical*<sup>5</sup> virtues, because they greatly adorn and beautify nature; such as temperance, patience, justice, &c. These are of singular use to conserve peace and order in the world and without them, (as one aptly speaks) the world would soon break up, and its civil societies disband. But yet, though these are the ornaments of nature, they do not argue the change of nature. All graces, in the exercises of them, involve a respect to God: and for the being of them, they are not by natural acquisition, but supernatural infusion.

**Fourthly, and lastly, Christian forgiveness is not an injurious giving up of our rights and properties to the lust of every one that hath, a mind to invade them.** No; these we may lawfully defend and preserve, and are bound so to do; though, if we cannot defend them legally, we must not avenge our wrongs unchristianly: this is not Christian forgiveness. But, then positively,

***It is a Christian lenity, or gentleness of mind, not retaining, but freely passing by the injuries done to us, in obedience to the command of God.***

*It is a lenity, or gentleness of mind.* The grace of God demulces<sup>6</sup> the angry stomach; calms the tumultuous passions; new-moulds our sour spirits, and makes them benign, gentle and easy to be entreated; “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness,” &c. (Gal 5:22).

This gracious lenity inclines the Christian to pass by injuries; so to pass *them by, as neither to retain them revengefully in the mind, or requite them when we have opportunity with the hand:* Yea, and that freely, not by constraint, because we cannot avenge ourselves, but willingly. We abhor to do it when we can. So that as a carnal heart thinks revenge its glory, the gracious heart is content that forgiveness should be his glory. I will be even with him, saith nature: I will be above him, saith grace: it is his glory to pass over transgression (Pro 19:11).

And *this it doth in obedience to the command of God:* Their own nature inclines them another way. “The spirit that is in us lusteth to envy; but he giveth more grace” (Jam 4:5). It lusteth to revenge, but the fear of God represseth those motions. Such considerations as these God hath forbidden me; yea, and God hath forgiven me, as well as forbidden me: they prevail upon him when nature urges to revenge the wrong. “Be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Eph 4:32). This is forgiveness in a Christian sense.

**Secondly, And that this is excellent, and singularly becoming the profession of Christ, is evident;** inasmuch as,

<sup>5</sup> **homilitical** – sociable; agreeable as a companion.

<sup>6</sup> **demulces** – soothes.

*This speaks your religion excellent* that can mould your hearts into that heavenly frame, to which they are so averse, yea, contrarily disposed by nature. It is the glory of Pagan morality, that it can *abscondere vitia*, hide and cover men's lusts and passions. But the glory of Christianity lies in this, that it can *abscindere vitia*, not hide, but destroy, and really mortify the lusts of nature. Would Christians but live up to the excellent principles of their religion, Christianity shall be no more out-vied<sup>7</sup> by heathenish morality. The greatest Christian shall be no more challenged to imitate Socrates, if he can. We shall utterly spoil that proud boast that "the faith of Christians is out-done by the infidelity of Heathens." O Christians yield not to-day to Heathens! Let all the world see the true greatness, heavenliness, and excellency of our represented pattern; and by true mortification of your corrupt natures, enforce an acknowledgment from the world, that a greater than Socrates is here. He that is really a meek, humble, patient, heavenly Christian, wins this glory to his religion, that it can do more than all other principles and rules in the world. In nothing were the most accomplished Heathens more defective than this forgiving of injuries: It was a thing they could not understand, or, if they did, could never bring their hearts to it; witness that rule of their great Tully:<sup>8</sup> "It is the first office of justice, (saith he), to hurt no man, except first provoked by an injury." The addition of that exception spoiled his excellent rule.

But now Christianity teaches, and some Christians have attained it, to receive evil, and return good (1Co 4:12, 13). "Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: being defamed, we intreat." This certainly is that meekness wrought in us by the wisdom that is from above (Jam 3:17). This makes a man sit sure in the consciences of others, who, with Saul, must acknowledge, when they see themselves so outdone, "Thou art more righteous than I," (1Sa 24:16, 17). Had we been so much injured, and had such opportunities to revenge them, we should never have passed them by, as these men did.

This impresses and stamps the very image of God upon the creature, and makes us like our heavenly Father, who doth good to his enemies, and sends down showers of outward blessings upon them, that pour out floods of wickedness daily to provoke him (Mat 5:44, 45). In a word, this Christian temper of spirit gives a man the true possession and enjoyment of himself. So that our breasts shall be as the Pacific sea, smooth and pleasant, when others are as the raging sea, foaming and casting up mire and dirt.

***Inference 1. Hence we clearly infer, That the Christian religion, exalted in its power, is the greatest friend to the peace and tranquillity of states and kingdoms.*** Nothing is more opposite to the true Christian spirit, than impla-

<sup>7</sup> **out-vied** – exceeded; surpassed.

<sup>8</sup> **Cicero (Marcus Tullius)** (106-43 B.C.) – Roman writer, statesman, orator.

cable<sup>9</sup> fierceness, strife, revenge, tumults and uproars. It teaches men to do good and receive evil: to receive evil, and return good. “The wisdom that is from above, is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated; full of mercy and good fruits; without partiality, and without hypocrisy; and the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace” (Jam 3:17, 18).

The church is a dove for meekness (SoS 6:9). When the world grows full of strife, Christians then grow weary of the world and sigh out the Psalmist’s request, “O that I had the wings of a dove! that I might fly away and be at rest.” Strigellius<sup>10</sup> desired to die, that he might be freed *ab implacabilibus odiis theologorum*, “from the implacable strife of contending divines.”

The rule by which they are to walk is, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay it, saith the Lord” (Rom 12:18, 19). It is not religion, but lusts that make the world so unquiet (Jam 4:1, 2). Not godliness, but wickedness, that makes men bite and devour one another. One of the first effects of the gospel is to civilize those places where it comes, and settle order and peace among men. How great a mistake and evil then is it to cry out, when atheism and irreligion have broken the civil peace; this is the fruit of religion! This is the effect of the gospel! Happy would it be if religion did more obtain in all nations. It is the greatest friend in the world to their tranquillity and prosperity.

***Inference 2. How dangerous a thing is it to abuse and wrong meek and forgiving Christians?*** Their patience and easiness to forgive often invites injury, and encourages vile spirits to insult and trample upon them: but if men would seriously consider it, there is nothing in the world should more scare and affright them from such practices than this. You may abuse and wrong them, they must not avenge themselves, nor repay evil for evil: true, but because they do not, the Lord will; even the Lord to whom they commit the matter; and he will do it to purpose, except ye repent.

“Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord” (Jam 5:7). Will ye stand to that issue? Had you rather indeed have to do with God than with men? When the Jews put Christ to death, “He committed himself to him that judgeth righteously” (1Pe 2:22, 23). And did that people get any thing by that: did not the Lord severely avenge the blood of Christ on them and their children? Yea, do not they and their children groan under the doleful effects of it to this day? If God undertakes, (as he always doth) the cause of his abused, meek, and peaceable people, he will

<sup>9</sup> **implacable** – impossible to pacify or make peaceable.

<sup>10</sup> **Victorinus Strigellius (1524-1569)** – A friend of Luther and Melancthon; a man of sound sense and vast learning.

be sure to avenge it seven-fold more than they could. His little finger will be heavier than their loins. You will get nothing by that.

**Inference 3. Lastly, Let us all imitate our pattern Christ, and labour for meek forgiving spirits.** I shall only propose two inducements<sup>11</sup> to it: the *honour of Christ*, and *your own peace*: two dear things indeed to a Christian. His glory is more than your life, and all that you enjoy in this world. O do not expose it to the scorn and derision of his enemies. Let them not say, How is Christ a lamb, when his followers are lions? How is the church a dove, that smites and scratches like a bird of prey? Consult also the quiet of your own spirits. What is life worth, without the comfort of life? What comfort can you have in all that you do possess in the world, as long as you have not the possession of your own souls? If your spirits be full of tumult and revenge, the spirit of Christ will grow a stranger to you: that dove delights in clean and quiet breasts. O then imitate Christ in this excellency also!

Taken from The Fountain of Life Opened, *The Works of John Flavel*,  
vol. 1, Banner of Truth, Carlisle, PA.

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**John Flavel:** (c. 1630-1691) English Presbyterian. Voluminous writer of Evangelical works such as *The Fountain of Life Opened* and *Keeping the Heart*. Born at Bromagrove, Worcester.



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<sup>11</sup> **inducements** – incentives.