

The Blessing of Forgiveness

Rathmines Bible School – December 2012

God's character – the basis of forgiveness

1. The special need for forgiveness in the last days

Declining moral conditions are a prophetic warning for believers living at Christ's return; further deterioration can be expected. Not only must ecclesias and individuals living under such circumstances devote themselves to holiness, they must also learn how to forgive one another and to encourage those who stumble to be reconciled to God.

Failings by members and young people will likely escalate prior to Christ's return; how we respond to the failings personally, ecclesially, as the sinners and as those sinned against, will determine whether sin prevails or God's principles prevail.

There are clear divine principles that govern how, why and when God forgives and commands us to forgive each other.

When these principles are followed, even after severe sin, the outcome is marvelous: recovery, renewal, rejoicing, reconciliation. But when these principles are ignored, the outcome is disastrous: devastation, destruction, division; God's Word is dishonoured, brethren fail to reconcile to God or to each other, and Sin is the only victor.

There is great wisdom in God's provision for forgiveness; if we embrace it, it can save us from Sin and teach us to forsake Sin.

2. Why does God forgive?

Sin arises from man disregarding the two great commandments: either disobeying God or failing to do right to his fellow man.

Sin separates us from God (Isa 59:2); our sins burden and weary Him (43:24); yet God forgives for His own sake (v25).

God is a forgiving God! Forgiving is what He does; it's how He lives; it's what He lives for; it's what He delights in doing.

He doesn't forgive reluctantly or begrudgingly; forgiving is part of his core character; it's part of His moral nature.

He won't compromise His righteous principles, He won't forgive under just any circumstances, nor forgive any and all sins regardless of the sinner's outlook; but within the scope of His principles, He will forgive all sin & all sinners; He lives to forgive.

3. God's forgiveness is THE issue in Exodus 33-34

The overriding collective behaviour of God's 5 characteristics (mercy/grace/longsuffering/goodness/truth) is forgiveness (34:7).

Forgiveness is bound up in the Memorial Name, Glory and Purpose; forgiveness enables Him to achieve His Purpose.

There is a right way and a wrong way to seek forgiveness; unless divine principles are honoured, sinful people remain unforgiven.

Moses had a wrong understanding of forgiveness; following Israel's sin (golden calf) God rejected Moses' forgiveness request.

It is only after Moses gains a correct understanding of God's righteous principles and re-appeals to God, that Israel is forgiven.

God requires sinners to take specific steps before they will be forgiven; Israel takes these steps in 33:4-10.

4. God immediately punishes Israel for their grievous sin, but they remain unforgiven at the end of Exodus 32 or 33

With Moses away in the mountain 40 days, the people grew impatient and turned to the ways of Egypt for immoral pleasure.

They became corrupt (32:7), same Hebrew word (decay/ruin) as in Gen 6:11-12, describing behaviour in Noah's day.

Israel had declared they would obey God in Ex. 19-20, having witnessed His great power, but they now disregard Him.

Moses, on the mountain, intervenes on Israel's behalf; God repents of their destruction (v14), but they are not yet forgiven.

Twice, Moses will ask God to forgive the people, 32:32 and in 34:9; forgiveness will not be granted until 34:10.

3000 die, and God sends a plague, but Israel remains unforgiven; forgiveness is not granted by the death of the wicked.

Moses offers his own eternal life for the sake of obtaining the nation's atonement (vv30-32), but God rejects his offer (v33) because it is not righteous for God to take one man's eternal life in exchange for covering the sins of others.

God will only forgive sinners on a righteous basis that is consistent with His principles and character.

He won't ignore sins, He won't ask one man to die in the place of others, nor will He ask one man to forfeit his eternal life.

God rejected Moses' initial appeal for the nation to be forgiven because it was based upon an unsound and unrighteous basis.

5. Events of Exodus 33 reveal Moses needed to learn about forgiveness and Israel needed to repent

God informs Moses (v3) the Angel of His presence (Isa 63:9) will no longer accompany the nation; which grieves the people.

God rebukes the people (v5), who respond with weeping and putting off the ornaments (v4) worn in the evil events of ch 32.

It's a different and repentant people, as seen in their newfound daily behaviour when Moses goes to commune with God.

When Moses goes outside the camp (to where the tabernacle had been moved due to the sin of ch32) the people rose up, stood at the door of their tent until the cloudy pillar descended upon the tabernacle, and then they worshipped.

In ch 32, they sat down to eat and drink and rose up to (immorally) play; now they rise up to worship Yahweh.

Several contextual connections contrast the change from ch32: same Hebrew words for "rose up" in 32:6 and 33:8-10, and for

"worship" in 32:8 and 33:10; in 32:10 they worshipped a golden calf, in 33:10 they worship Yahweh.

Their response to seeing God's presence was to bow their head and worship; Moses' response was identical, in 34:8.

It is a 'repentant' people who change their heart/thinking; it is a 'converted' people who now walk in a new direction.

6. Ps 103 shows Moses' appeal for greater understanding, "that I may know thee" (Ex. 33:13) concerned forgiveness

It's not that Moses didn't know who God was; he didn't know how God forgives, his atonement appeal being rejected in 32:33. The pressing issue was that the people remained unforgiven; Moses is at a loss on how to go forward without greater insight. God's response is to show Moses His glory/character, which will reveal the righteous basis upon which He forgives sin. Ps 103 confirms Moses' inquiry is about forgiveness, and his request to know God's ways (v7) is answered by the revelation of God's character (v8), which is a forgiving character (vv9-14).

God doesn't treat us according to what we deserve (v10 – "*He hath not dealt with us after our sins*"); instead He forgives us. His mercy ('*cheded*': lovingkindness) is enormous, it cannot be measured; David provides 3 comparisons to emphasize God's lovingkindness is boundless: a) the infinity of space (v11); b) the infinity of distance (v12); and c) the infinity of time (v17). God has a loving and forgiving character because He knows our pitiful condition; the ease at which Sin can beset us (vv13-14). God wants us to know Him, as Moses sought to do, so that we will learn to live like Him *and be forgiving like Him*.

7. Ps 86 links the 5 characteristics of God's glory (vv14-15) with forgiveness

Adversaries cause David to fear for his life (v14), causing him to appeal for God's help to preserve him (v2).

David is also mindful of his sins and need for forgiveness, yet approaches God confidently because he knows God's character. Forgiveness is not a passive part of God's character; He is "ready to forgive"; David couldn't paint a more reassuring picture of God's willingness to forgive those who call upon Him.

God's character is not stern and unforgiving, rather loving and forgiving; He wants us to have this clear picture of Him, so that we will turn to Him, in full confidence, when Sin has been victorious in our life.

Parents: we need to model this for our children; to teach them about God's forgiveness in how we respond to their mistakes. Forgiveness is not extended to all, as Ps 86 reveals; only to one who: has a humble spirit (v1); has a commitment to holiness (v2); cries to God for help (v3); lifts up his soul to God (v4); and seeks to be taught by Him and walk in His ways (v11).

8. God forgives Israel's grievous sin because of His character and their conformity to His righteous principles

Moses, having seen the moral beauty of the divine character, appeals for Israel's forgiveness (34:9) on the proper basis of God's character and eternal purpose; the nation, having shown confession, repentance and contrition, is forgiven (v10).

Moses learns forgiveness is not obtained by one man forfeiting his eternal life, but on the basis of God's forgiving character coupled with sinners being genuinely repentant.

9. Numbers 14 is further proof of the link between God's character, His willingness to forgive and His future purpose

Once again, Israel commits a grievous sin: rejection of God's will, murmuring, rebellion, threatening His appointed leaders. Moses appeals for forgiveness on the basis of God's character (vv17-19), and what he learned from the incident in Ex 34.

The sin of the people was great, but Moses knew the power of God to forgive was even greater.

God forgives in response to Moses' appeal (v20), but He didn't pardon the guilty; they were to die in the wilderness (vv22-23).

God links His willingness to forgive with His Purpose (v21); on the one hand He keeps mercy for thousands, but won't clear the guilty – those who persist in rebellion, repeatedly put Him to the test, presume upon His mercy, reject the promised land; who, having been freed from the slavery of Egypt (Sin) prefer to return to that way of life.

The 'guilty', whom God does not forgive, place themselves outside His purpose and will not be part of it, by their own choice. God is moving in the direction of the Kingdom; they are not; there is no righteous basis to cover their sin unless they repent.

10. The wisdom and need for divine forgiveness in achieving the eternal purpose

God doesn't forgive us just to wipe out our sins, but to achieve His purpose to fill the earth with a people who reflect His glory.

To achieve that outcome, He must transform men and women born after the flesh into men/women born after the Spirit.

They will inevitably fail, time and again, and need to be forgiven time and again, to lead them back to righteousness.

This is why He is ready and willing and delights in forgiving, because it is a vital part in the transformation process.

11. Forgiveness is also linked to God's Memorial Name, in addition to His character and eternal purpose

Ps 25:11 "for thy name's sake...pardon mine iniquity"; Ps 79:9 "purge away our sins for thy name's sake"; also 1 Jn 2:12.

When God forgives us, He doesn't remember our sins (Isa 43:25), unless we fail to forgive others.

God intends for us to be encouraged, when overcome by sin, to know we can be part of the name, character and purpose.

God forgives the person who aligns himself with His character, purpose and name, and devotes himself to being part of these.

God recognizes that for His purpose to be achieved, forgiveness is needed to sustain faithful saints during probation.

When viewed in light of God's purpose, our sins don't need to end our yearning and journey to be part of His name.

We need to see our forgiveness of one another in the same light of God's purpose; my brother is in training as I am, and will sin against me as I sin against others; I should be willing to forgive and encourage him for the sake of the eternal purpose we both seek to be part of, which is the very reason God forgives and encourages me.

12. Neh 9 – a chapter about forgiveness, not simply a review of Israel’s history

The nation has just celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (ch8) with very great gladness (8:17) and reading of the Law (v18) They assemble in 9:1-2 to seek God’s forgiveness for their many sins (fasting, sackcloth, confession and worship) By the end of ch9, being renewed in spirit, Ezra will call for a covenant to be made and the people will enter it gladly Between the confession/repentance of 9:1-2 and the covenant of 10:1 Ezra recounts the mercy of God as it specifically relates to forgiveness, noting the 2 grievous sins of Num 14 and Ex 32, and God’s readiness to pardon (v17 – cp Ps 86:5), and “manifold mercies” (v18), having discerned from his studies of Ex 34:7 that forgiveness was part of God’s core character

13. The parable of the prodigal son – a rare insight into God’s joy over the repentance of a sinner – Luke 15:11-32

Christ uses this parable to expose the false nature of the Pharisees’ religion – it didn’t encourage repentance; they didn’t know how to bring a person to repentance; which is why John’s work was so popular among the people The loving, compassionate, forgiving character of the father is foreign to the oldest son (representing the religious leaders), yet it was the father’s same loving, forgiving character that helped convince the prodigal son to return home The repentant son upholds the righteous requirements (confession, repentance, conversion) and is forgiven He quotes from Ps 51:4 in v18, acknowledging his sin against God, and reflects a broken spirit and a contrite heart Unstated is the sadness the father would have felt during the time the son was considered “lost” and “dead” (v24); he wouldn’t greatly rejoice over the recovered son without also having suffered a grieving heart when sin prevailed in the son’s life The parable portrays 2 events happening simultaneously! As the son is confessing his sin and recounting his past mistakes and unworthiness, the father is expressing his forgiveness and joy over the son’s return An incredible scene is depicted in vv20-21 as the father (portraying God in the parable) fell upon his repentant son’s neck and kissed him, depicting God’s personal joy over the repentance of a wayward son – the son’s return represents the divine purpose behind forgiveness, the intended outcome it seeks to achieve and the joy such an outcome brings to God The prodigal son returns home without having performed any act of obedience, yet was forgiven; he had turned from his sin, set his heart right and returned home by faith, trusting a loving father would forgive him

The righteous requirements for sinful man

14. Forgiveness is not one sided; God has set specific righteous requirements for sinful man to be forgiven

The requirements expose sin as the great enemy of God and the need to forsake it and return to the path of righteousness When the righteous requirements are obeyed, God is honoured and can forgive without compromising His principles; but when the requirements are lacking, there is no righteous basis upon which God can forgive and the sinner remains unforgiven Requirement #1: Confession of our sins (1 Jn 1:9-10; Mark 1:5); #2: repentance, grk: 3440-*matanoeo*, to think differently, have a different mind, repudiating the sin (the mental part); #3: conversion, grk: 1909/4762-*epistrepho*, to turn around, go in a different direction, to change one’s walk (the doing part), applicable to all saints (Jms 5:19-20); see Acts 3:19 for #2 & #3 To extend forgiveness, God is looking for a person to: 1) confess their sin; 2) change their mind; and 3) change their walk The blessing of forgiveness, by the saving work of Christ, was promised to Abraham (cp Acts 3:25 with Gen 12:3, 22:18) Peter also cites the moral impact forgiveness is intended to have – to turn us from sin (3:26) to walk in a new direction God forgives, not just to wipe our slate clean, but to turn us away from sin and back to righteousness; if we only see the cleansing, without the moral impact of a changed heart and a new walk, we miss the divine moral objective of forgiveness Not surprisingly, the same 3 requirements are also found in the Old Testament (Prov 28:13; 2 Chron 7:14, Ezek 18:26-32) God’s mercy will not flow automatically unless the righteous requirements are present (Isa 55:7)

15. God’s provision for forgiveness is wonderfully simple and precisely what a sinner needs

The sinner is humbled, as he should be, his conscience is cleansed, exactly what he needs; sin is repudiated and condemned (what sin needs), and God’s righteous ways are once again exalted – it’s the perfect divine solution to the situation There is no penance to pay, no delay between request and response, no public humiliation, no vain repetition of words It is not a righteous basis to exact a penalty of a sinner to pay, or impose a ritual upon them to have their sins forgiven Forgiveness is the result of God’s character, not the exaction of some remuneration or ritual; He looks for a changed heart When a price tag or some type of penance is set, God is robbed of His glory and His righteous basis is adulterated Among its many false teachings, the willingness of the Church to make a profit from forgiveness is among its worst

16. Isa 1 – the danger is we will presume upon God’s wonderful offer of forgiveness because it is so simple

Israel repeatedly presumed upon God’s willingness and readiness to forgive, and stands as a warning for us They approached God seeking forgiveness, bringing a multitude of sacrifices, oblations and incense; keeping feast days and new moons, gathering in large assemblies, making many prayers to be forgiven; but God rejected it all! (vv10-15) Though they scheduled and kept all the right rituals, participation in rituals does not bring forgiveness Because their heart was not right and they continued in their sinful ways, they remained unforgiven, despite their worship God identifies the steps they needed to take, the righteous requirements for forgiveness (v16) – 1) confession (implied by admission of evil actions; 2) repentance (cleansed in their mind); and 3) turning from sin (*put away/cease to do evil*) The new direction they needed to walk in is identified in v17, and God’s loving guarantee of forgiveness in v18

Our sins are strikingly apparent to God! like a scarlet stain on a pure white cloth; they can't be hidden, but can be forgiven
On Sunday morning, it is not our participation in the ritual that brings forgiveness; the ritual is intended to remind us of the righteous basis upon which God forgives, which is why we are instructed to examine ourselves, confess our sins, genuinely repent and commit to change our walk

17. There are 2 additional righteous requirements God has established that pertain to our general discipleship

Requirement #4: we need to be walking in the light (1 Jn 1:5-7); practicing righteousness should be the main sweep of our life

#5: we need to forgive those who sin against us (Luke 6:37; Matt 6:14)

Regardless of our sincerity regarding requirements 1-3, if we fail to walk in the light or be forgiving, we remain unforgiven

It would not be right for God to forgive a believer who is content to live in darkness; such a one would only go on sinning, presuming upon God's grace and God would foster perpetual sinners

Nor would it be right for God to forgive a believer who refuses to forgive others, since He could never hope to develop His character of mercy, grace, longsuffering, lovingkindness and truth in such an unforgiving person

18. Forgiveness cannot be earned, it is extended by God because of His grace

When sinful man conforms to God's righteous requirements, he doesn't earn forgiveness

A righteous basis must exist for God to extend forgiveness; that basis comes into existence when we uphold its requirements

Bro Roberts: "...we are justified freely by His grace in the whole arrangement. Through Christ we have access to it...when we have done all, we have only obtained access to a favour."

19. Daniel understood the righteous requirements and made them the basis of his prayer asking for forgiveness in ch 9

He's 90 and understood how grievous sin is to God and the need for forgiveness before God can be approached with a petition

Daniel knows Jeremiah's 70 year prophecy concerning captivity is about to end but is not content to sit idly by

The focus of his prayer is not about God ending the captivity or returning the people to Israel; it's about forgiveness

He begins the prayer in contrition/repentance (v3) making confession (v4) for his own sin and the sin of the people

12 times he links himself with the sins of the people ("we have sinned", "we have rebelled", "we have not obeyed"); this is not an empty application to himself – there is nothing righteous about a man taking on the sins of others thru substitution

Daniel is genuine in confessing his own sin (v20) & reflects the demeanour of a repentant sinner (v3: fasting, sackcloth, ashes)

He understood the need to be *walking in the light* (v4) and the need for Israel to *turn from sin* (v13)

He is citing Solomon's prayer of 1 Kg 8:47; 3 of the 4 Hebrew words used by Daniel (v4) were also used by Solomon

Solomon's prayer at the temple's inauguration was not about the greatness of the temple, but the need for forgiveness

Daniel recognized the nation in his day stood spiritually in the very place of 1 Kg 8:47-48 and appeals to God on that basis

To God belongs: righteousness, mercies, forgiveness; to man belongs: confusion of face (shame), guilt, rebellion (vv7-9)

Ezekiel, guided by the Spirit, calls Daniel righteous (14:14,20); Daniel, by contrast declares it is God who is righteous, confessing his sinfulness and pleading for God's forgiveness

Nehemiah's prayer (ch1) follows Daniel's model; making confession of sin and need for obedience before making his petition

20. The wicked men of Nineveh genuinely submitted to God's righteous requirements and were forgiven!

Their sin was great (1:2); so great they were threatened with immediate destruction (3:4 – within 40 days)

The entire city responded as one, from the king on down, from the greatest to the least (3:5)

Their repentance is detailed: sat in ashes, fasted, cried mightily to God, committed to turning from their evil/violence (3:5-8)

They manifested God's requirements: 1) confession in contrition; 2) repentance (changed heart); 3) conversion (changed walk)

They forsook their former life of sin and repudiated it as a way of life

The same 3 Hebrew words in 3:8, 10 (turn/evil/way) appear in 2 Chron 7:14 in God's response to Solomon's prayer! "*If my people...humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways then I will hear...and forgive*"

Sadly, the same 3 Hebrew words also appear in 2 Kg 17:13 describing what Israel was unwilling to do, causing their captivity

The godly response of the Ninevites was all by faith (3:5); they didn't know if God would accept their repentance (v9)

The king's words in 3:9 are the very same words as Moses' (Ex 32:12) when he sought for God's forgiveness

The city had listened to Jonah's warning of imminent destruction coupled with God's forgiving character; they didn't accidentally get it right; they knew what was required of them because of Jonah's preaching (cp 3:4 and v5)

Nineveh's repentance shows the power and wisdom of forgiveness to lead sinners back to righteousness

Forgiveness is not intended just to wipe our slate clean but to change how we live; they did change their life (Matt 12:41)

Jonah was vexed and angry over Nineveh's repentance (4:1) and God's forgiving character (v2); he knew of God's forgiving character that was revealed to Moses in Ex 34 and complained to God about it!

Nineveh's repentance is but one more example in scripture of how it doesn't matter how great past sin has been, God will forgive all sin, provided the sinner conforms to His righteous requirements

Jonah is a warning to all believers – we can welcome God's forgiveness of our sins while resenting His forgiveness of others

Forgiveness as taught by the Son

21. The Righteous requirement God established related to forgiveness was the sinless offering of the Lord

God set forth Christ on the cross (in all its natural repulsiveness) as an object of faith; the way to life is through sin condemned
All mankind are prisoners, held captive by Sin and in need of deliverance; Christ opened the door through his sinless life and is able to lead those held captive by sin and death to freedom, leading captivity captive (Ps 68:18; Eph 4:8)
All who unite themselves to Christ by faith, taking on his name, love, character, purpose, obey his commands and live by his principles can be freed from the prison without God compromising His righteousness
Substitution doesn't teach forgiveness; it teaches Christ paid the debt owed to God for our sins; a paid debt cannot be forgiven
God isn't a debt collector, He's a forgiver! Forgiveness does not result from a payment, but from mercy, kindness and love
When someone sins against us, we should not look to exact payment from them, we should forgive them

22. The single most important lesson Christ teaches us about forgiveness, he teaches from the cross

He had been badgered and beaten, mentally, physically, psychologically; he was scourged, mocked, shamed, ridiculed, then thrust on a cross with massive nails driven into his hands and feet and subjected to excruciating pain
Yet from the cross, the very first recorded words out of his mouth were a plea and prayer that God would forgive his assailants
This incident defines forgiveness in practical terms; what forgiveness is and what it looks like when you forgive others
It cuts through all the reasons we may invent to justify why we don't have to be forgiving; it sets the standard for our conduct
It represents the forgiveness of our Lord, he whose name we have taken on, whose character we have pledged to make our own
When a brother commits a personal offence against us, we are to forgive him immediately, without any preconditions
If our Lord could forgive those who put him to death, there isn't any situation in my life in which I can justify failing to forgive anyone who does anything against me
He utters the words of forgiveness in what must have been searing agony of a kind we cannot image; yet there is no bitterness
His desire was to save the lost, mirroring the reason his Father forgives; he held nothing against those who crucified him
They are in the midst of the sin and he is in the midst of the suffering; he is forgiving them as they are putting him to death
Only the character of Ex 34:7, reflecting the moral glory of God, which at its core is forgiving, could ask for such forgiveness
It doesn't matter how difficult or miserable a brother has made my life, or how hurt or mistreated I have been, or if he has apologized or not; when I take whatever humiliation, pain, shame, slander, mental or physical anguish I have been subjected to, and place it alongside my Lord's suffering and his response, my only available righteous path is to forgive all
[note: immediate forgiveness is for the personal offense; ecclesial discipline may still be needed, but that is left to the ecclesia to determine; the responsibility of the one against whom the offense was committed is to forgive his brother]

23. The alternative to immediate forgiveness will destroy us

When someone sins against another, an evil spirit is unleashed that disrupts relationships, creates ill will, grudges and hatred
Immediate forgiveness empties the situation of the evil and covers a multitude of sins
Forgiveness takes our mind off of self and how we have been wronged and redirects our thoughts to God
Christ held no grudge as he hung from the cross, there was no ill will, no hard feelings, no hatred; though there had been plenty of evil spirit released that day by the incessant mistreatment of him
Christ's love enabled him to look beyond the sin and to forgive from his heart; the battle was nearly over, sin was on the verge of being defeated and the prison door finally opened; his willingness to forgive at the final hour concluded the victory
He didn't stoically ignore his detractors; he forgave and, by faith, left the matter in God's hands (1 Pet 2:23)
When Christ forgave the people, he didn't remove their sin; only God could do that; each person still had to undergo the process outlined in Acts 3:19-26; Christ's prayer from the cross revealed he held nothing against those who put him to death
Our forgiveness is not the same as God's; He wipes out sins and cleanses hearts; our forgiveness removes the ill will but does not impact the sinner's standing with God; the 5 righteous requirements are necessary for God to forgive us, but not for us to forgive others since our forgiveness is to be immediate, and we don't have the ability to know the heart of the sinner

24. The wisdom and power of immediate forgiveness as practiced and commanded by Christ

The only way to *love* our enemies, *do good* and *pray* for those who mistreat us (Mt 5:44), is to have already forgiven them
We can't wait for them to apologize or repent; by definition (as enemies/persecutors) they may never repent or apologize
If we wait for them to change before we forgive, we may never be able to fulfill Christ's command
We should not allow the lack of spirituality of others to determine if and when we ever forgive them – Christ didn't do this
During the interval between their sin and our forgiveness, evil thoughts will develop in our mind; Christ never allowed this
At some point, grudge seeds become plants that bear fruit; Christ never permitted such a tree to grow or bear fruit
Forgiveness changes our heart towards those who sin against us, removing resentment, making it possible to both fulfill the command of v44 and mirror God's character (v45); this is how Christ could call Judas "friend" after being kissed (Mt 26:50)

25. Christ is not alone in forgiving personal offences immediately, without waiting for an apology or repentance

Stephen, *while* his enemies are sinning against him, in the midst of *his* agony, prayed for their forgiveness (“*lay not this sin to their charge*”) and, like Christ, held no grudge or anger in his heart at his death, because he chose to forgive (Acts 7:60)

Immediate forgiveness, even under the greatest of trials is the right path to take, leaving the matter with God

We don’t know how our forgiveness of others will impact them, but if we fail to forgive, more sin will follow, caused by us

Both Christ and Stephen knew their suffering was part of God’s will – that they should be put to death; but He was also able to accomplish great good out of the evil because both responded by faith and forgave their murderers

Paul too forgave immediately, when earlier all had forsaken him (2 Tim 4:16); he quoted Stephen’s very words “*I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge.*”

David repeatedly forgave Saul despite Saul’s repeated efforts to put him to death, without waiting for an apology

David would not have been useful to God in appealing to Saul had David hung on to the sins Saul committed against him; as long as we refuse to forgive a person, God cannot use us to help the person return to right conduct

26. Joseph forgiving his brethren follows the example of Christ; Gen 50:20 is key to forgiving evil done against us

The sins of his brethren were extreme; the unleashed evil spirit substantial; hatred on Joseph’s part would have been natural

But Joseph doesn’t hold a grudge, nor seek vengeance; he seeks only their eternal well being

39 years later, the brothers are concerned he will hate them when Jacob dies, which shows the power for evil of unforgiven sin

Joseph’s forgiveness reveals its many benefits, the multitude of sins it covers and how it heals relationships broken by sin

Oftentimes forgiveness is the only thing that can right a wrong; it was exactly what the situation needed following the evil of ch37;

had Joseph pursued any other path he would have been of no value to his brethren or to God in helping restore them

The brethren don’t apologize until ch50; Joseph didn’t wait until their apology to forgive them; it wasn’t their apology in ch44 that

brought Joseph to tears, it was Judah’s declaration that he would take Benjamin’s place to spare Jacob further grief

It wasn’t time that caused Joseph to forget the evil and hurt; time couldn’t heal such wounds, but Godly love (Ex 34:7) can

We shouldn’t ascribe evil done against us to time as the world does; rather we should confine it to love, by faith

Joseph never spoke to his brethren about their mistreatment of him because you don’t recall forgiven sins

He forgave them long before they arrived in Egypt, for he recognized God was orchestrating the evil to bring about great good

“*But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.*” (Gen 50:20) – God was using the evil to save the family, provided Joseph remained faithful

God is so wise and in control that He can use the evil that others do to us to save us! – provided we respond to the evil with faithful obedience and forgive those who do the evil against us

We need to make the principle of v20 personal, and forgive any and all sins against us by faith, after the example of Joseph

Joseph forgave his brethren with a purpose, to help save them; it was his sole focus; God forgives us with the same purpose

27. It’s a marvelous scene portrayed in Gen 50 when the brothers approach Joseph following Jacob’s death

Had Joseph not already forgiven his brethren, none of the events of chapters 42-50 would have been possible

Jacob, near death, sends counsel to Joseph to forgive his brethren (50:16-17), unaware Joseph already had; the brothers echo their father’s appeal and thru the messenger finally confess their sin to Joseph and ask for forgiveness

“*And they sent a messenger unto Joseph, saying, Thy father did command before he died, saying, So shall ye say unto Joseph, Forgive, I pray thee now, the trespass of thy brethren, and their sin; for they did unto thee evil: and now, we pray thee, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of thy father. And Joseph wept when they spake unto him.*”

The brothers declare themselves to be God’s servants – they are spiritual men who convey their request to Joseph; upon seeing his tears they enter the room and prostrate themselves before him, declaring themselves to also be Joseph’s servants (v18)

Tears are streaming down Joseph’s face in spiritual joy as his brethren (now *God’s servants*) are bowed in allegiance before him, recognizing his rightful place as the family’s spiritual head for his godly character – Joseph’s dreams are fulfilled!

This picture portrays the spiritual foundation upon which the nation will now be built; but it was only achieved as a result of the most evil mistreatment imaginable having been committed against Joseph, and he forgiving his brethren; such is the power of forgiveness to heal, to save, to cover a multitude of sins, to restore broken relationships, not just so brethren can be friends again, but so they can be spiritually helpful to one another in a meaningful way

Forgive one another, from the heart

28. The warning couldn’t be clearer – if we don’t forgive others we won’t be forgiven ourselves – 4 occasions

#1: the model prayer – Matt 6:11-12; Christ anticipates how difficult it is to forgive and underscored its importance in vv14-15

- Just as God forgives us based upon His loving/forgiving character, He asks us to do the same towards others, making God manifestation not just an option for us to consider, but an expectation God has of us; a pre-requisite for salvation

- If I fail to forgive others, I am telling God, “No! I will not make your forgiving character my forgiving character”, which makes it morally impossible for God to forgive/save me, as I am refusing to make His character my own

#2: Mark 11:25-26 – each time we pray for our own forgiveness, we should also forgive those who have sinned against us

- The forgiveness of others needs to cover everyone and everything! “*if you have ought (anything) against any (anyone)*”

- Our communal prayers need to include both aspects of forgiveness – seeking our own forgiveness and forgiving others

- The wisdom of this command ensures there is never an opportunity for grudges to set in or ill will to germinate

#3: Lk 6:37 – Forgiveness is to be complete; there is no partial forgiveness, and it is done by faith

- The Greek word for “forgive” (#630: *apoloio*) is not the typical word and means to ‘release’, ‘free fully’ (Vines); it’s used to describe the woman loosed from her 18 year infirmity (Lk 13:12) and when Pilate had the power to release Christ (Jn 19:10)
- Forgiveness is done by faith, just as the other difficult commands in the Sermon on the Plain (i.e. love your enemies); when we forgive by faith, instead of by merit (requiring the person to earn our forgiveness), it is the first thing we do, not the last

29. #4: the parable of the unforgiving creditor (Matt 18:23-35) – a warning that past forgiven sins can be reinstated

Peter is struggling with the concept of forgiveness (vv21-22), giving rise to his inquiry, “*is 7 times adequate?*”

God’s view of forgiveness must be learned; it does not come naturally; Peter would never have come to it on his own

Christ’ response (via the parable) reveals there is no upper limit to the number of times we should be willing to forgive

The parable’s meaning is unmistakable: if we don’t learn to forgive, we will not be forgiven, and thrust out of the Kingdom

Our natural bent is to be like the unforgiving creditor: 1) our lack of compassion (v33);

2) an upside down view: we minimize the seriousness of our own sins while maximizing that of those who sin against us;

3) naturally, we tend to keep a tally of those who sin against us – exactly what Godly love doesn’t do (cp 1 Cor 13:5);

4) we have no difficulty justifying the need to hold others accountable for their sins, even to taking punitive action;

5) we would rather exact a payment for sins against us than forgive; yet a debt can’t be repaid and forgiven

God places the value of 200,000 years of wages upon our sins, and 100 days of wages on sins others commit against us

The parable’s vivid language (*throat, wicked servant, wrath, tormentors*) shows how serious God views our refusal to forgive

How we forgive others is the measure of mercy God will show to us (v35); cp 2 Sam 22:26; God’s mercy varies by person

The principle of 490 (v22) shows the unlimited feature of forgiveness; we should expect to forgive over and over again

Thankfully, God forgives us over and over again, oftentimes for the same sin that plagues our discipleship

Forgiveness of others must be from the heart (v35) – genuine, complete, total, just as God’s forgiveness is towards us; when the

king forgave the debt, it was gone; there should be no more discussions with others about a debt we have forgiven

30. Forgiveness of others does not mean we turn a blind eye to sin or that we condone it in any way

Christ’ forgiveness of those who put him to death did not mean he was ignoring or condoning their sinful behaviour

They needed to repent; had he refused to forgive them, it would not have encouraged their repentance, only risked his salvation

When we refuse to forgive others, it doesn’t help bring them to repentance, but it does *jeopardize our salvation*

We can’t be genuinely helpful to a person who has sinned against us, to help them recover, until we have forgiven them

It is important not to confuse forgiveness with condoning wrong behaviour; forgiveness is not intended to provide an excuse for a

sinner to perpetuate ungodly conduct; when God forgives us He does not condone our wrong behaviour

Forgiveness is not a divine principle that can be set against ecclesial responsibility to uphold Truth; both are needed

We should not link our forgiveness of a brother with ecclesial discipline (i.e. no forgiveness until he is right with the ecclesia), or

we end up withholding forgiveness in the name of upholding Truth; this is the error of the Church

It is not a sin to forgive a person who has not repented (Christ, Stephen, Paul, David, Joseph all did); but it is a sin to fail to hold a

sinner accountable for wrong behaviour when it is of a serious nature

We can hold a sinner accountable while having already forgiven them, which is why the need to take ecclesial discipline in matters

of a serious nature, and the parable of the unforgiving creditor are both found in Matt 18

We never help a situation by withholding forgiveness; it belongs at the *beginning* of the disciplinary process, not at the end

The 2 key principles of Matt 18 teach we should forgive an erring brother for any personal offense, and let the ecclesia – who bear

the responsibility for any correction – determine what action, if any, should be taken; to ignore a serious sin would be to the

detriment of the erring brother and ecclesia; but to fail to forgive the sin is to the detriment of the offended brother

31. Abigail understood the wisdom & power for good of forgiveness, giving wise & timely counsel to David – 1 Sam 25

Warning of Nabal to all: do not allow one who sins against you to cause you to commit sin yourself

Forgiveness empties the power of evil from our life and preserves us on the path of salvation

Nabal committed a very public sin against David, of a personal nature, attacking his character and integrity, mocking his faithful

service to God and involving ridicule, public shaming, slander and false accusation

David had faithfully protected Nabal’s herds for some time (v21) and now seeks provisions from Nabal to keep the feast

Nabal’s railing accusation unleashes an evil spirit in David that has the power to consume and spiritually destroy him

Nabal’s sin is about to cause David to commit an even greater sin; Nabal sinned with his words, David will sin with his sword

Abigail takes responsibility for failing to provide David’s requested provisions (v24); she likely ran the affairs of the house

She rightly recognized the situation called for forgiveness, not vengeance; you don’t slay a sinner, you forgive him

Abigail’s plea to David is a plea to us when we have been wronged: don’t let your natural feelings dictate your response; and don’t

wait for an apology or repentance to forgive; men like Nabal never repent or apologize, they just go from sin to sin

Nabal, a foolish, churlish, evil doer had immense power over David without ever lifting a finger against him, just a tongue

We are to forgive, not because the person deserves it, but because the evil unleashed by their sin could destroy us; the divine

wisdom behind the command for us to forgive men like Nabal, is to prevent us from being destroyed by them

Abigail’s counsel to David is her counsel to us: don’t turn to anger when someone sins against you; turn to forgiveness

The power, wisdom and joy of forgiveness

32. Ps 51 – a plea for renewal and cleansing

This is the model for true repentance and restoration and reflects the mind of a righteous man who had been overcome by sin. God forgives with a purpose – to turn sinners back to right living; Ps 51 validates the wisdom of God's forgiveness. David appeals for God's mercy on the basis of His character (v1); he understood the link between God's character and forgiveness, having learned what Moses learned in Ex 33-34; recognizing his sin left him in Israel's position (golden calf). God's forgiving character encouraged David to pursue his cleansing and is intended to encourage His sinful children to repent. David: appeals to God on the basis of His character (v1); declares his desire to be cleansed (v2); and confesses his sin (v3). David acknowledges the evil of his sin and how it wrongfully challenged the righteousness (righteous ways) of God (v4). His sin had caused him to lose his joy and gladness (v8), and he sought for the joy of salvation to be restored (v12) – unconfessed sin removes the joy of our hope and of being right with God.

David committed sin on top of sin in the matter of Bathsheba, and then sought to hide and deny his sin; whatever we may try to preserve (our reputation, family name), or whatever public shame we may seek to avoid, *we lose God in the process* (v11). David's sins were just as grievous as Saul's; one man embraced God's righteous requirements for forgiveness, the other didn't. Unconfessed sins cause God to hide His face from us (Is 59:2); David prayed God would hide His face from David's sins (v9). David saw the good God could accomplish through his sin by teaching sinners about forgiveness and returning to God (v13). Forgiveness enables a confessed murderer and adulterer *to sing God's praises* and proclaim His righteousness (vv14-15). God doesn't ignore or condone sin, or pretend it doesn't exist; when approached on the right basis he covers and removes it. Vv16-17 identify the repentant heart God looks for; it isn't participation in a ritual, it's a broken spirit and contrite heart; the word 'broken' means to shatter; the word 'contrite' to be crushed; not with despair but regarding our rebellious heart.

33. Ps 32 – “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” (v1)

This psalm should be read in connection with Ps 51 as it too describes the blessed condition of finding forgiveness; it appears to have been written slightly later than Ps 51, after David had time to reflect upon the forgiveness he received. The Hebrew word for 'blessed' (v1-2) means happy; forgiveness is intended to leave us feeling happy and encouraged and is the perfect spiritual antidote to the feelings of discouragement and despair caused by sin. Paul quotes Ps 32 in Romans 4; God does not impute (to count, reckon, consider) a sinner to be a sinner, even though the sinner sinned; instead God considers the forgiven sinner to be righteous! Paul is refuting the false teachings of those who taught the need for the Law; Paul cites Abraham and David to show that righteousness is by faith not by works; an old man believed he would have a son; a sinner believed he could be forgiven; both men were reckoned as righteous based upon their faith. There was no difference between Abraham and David in terms of how God viewed them, because of their faith; God took David, a very, very sinful man, and placed him alongside Abraham! He considers both men righteous! On the basis of their faith; such is the joy associated with forgiveness! And why our sins should never leave us in despair! Through forgiveness, we can stand alongside Abraham! David extolled the joy of forgiveness and encouraged all the righteous to “*shout for joy*” over this wonderful blessing (v11). V11 is what a cleansed conscience looks and sounds like; it's where forgiveness is intended to lead us to – the opposite end of the spectrum of guilt and shame.

34. Two simple principles make it impossible for 2 brethren to remain unreconciled under the gospel of Christ

#1: If I have offended someone, I must go seek him out and be reconciled (apologize, make the situation right) – Matt 5:23-24

#2: If someone has sinned against me, I am to forgive him, if I also want to be forgiven by God – Matt 6:14-15

In either case, Christ places responsibility *on my shoulders* to take steps to ensure reconciliation occurs, immediately.

If I am faithful to both principles it will prevent me from maintaining an unreconciled disposition toward my brother.

The importance of 2 brethren avoiding non-reconciliation is so great that the need for me to apologize and reconcile with my brother takes precedence over my fellowship with God “*leave thy gift...first be reconciled...then come and offer thy gift*”

In neither situation does God allow me to remain unreconciled to my brother over matters of personal offense (note: matters involving a deviation of first principle doctrine or conduct by a brother are outside the scope of these 2 principles).

The gospel of Christ is foremost the gospel of reconciliation; the Father and Son have done all they can to reconcile us to the

Father, including the Son's sacrifice; how tragic for 2 brethren to remain unreconciled in light of their saving work. As pertaining to relationships within the ecclesia, there should be no occasion whereby two members remain unreconciled.

35. Doesn't my brother have to repent before I forgive him? – Luke 17:3-4

3 *Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him and if he repent, forgive him.*

4 *And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.*

At times, it is assumed that v3 teaches that an erring brother should only be forgiven if he repents

Bre Roberts (1890), CC Walker (1908) and Islip Collyer (1933) all concluded this view misrepresents the Master's counsel

The context of Luke 17 is to make every effort to extricate a brother who has stumbled, and for the disciples to be far more

forgiving than their natural inclination; "take heed to yourselves" warns of the danger of being unforgiving

Christ's principle point is for us to be ready to forgive a brother multiple times and cites an extreme example (7 times in 1 day)

If your brother sins, then repents (turns from sin), then sins again, then turns away again, highlights the brother's flip flopping behaviour (i.e turning to sin then away from it); even under this exaggerated situation, continue to forgive

Christ is teaching the disciples the unlimited nature of forgiveness; they perceive this is beyond them, "Lord increase our faith"

It is a travesty that these verses, intended to impress upon us just how forgiving we should be, are often cited to justify the exact opposite behaviour; it requires *no faith* to withhold forgiveness and is an area in which the old man excels

As terrible as sin may make a situation, we will never make the situation better by withholding forgiveness; only God can refuse to forgive and only then because the sinners are fit only for destruction

Christ is not introducing a new aspect of forgiving our brother (i.e. requiring that he first repent); that notion is not supported anywhere else in the gospels and neither Christ, Stephen, Paul, Joseph, nor David practiced this

36. Assume Christ is teaching us to withhold forgiveness until our brother repents; consider the outcome:

a) I now need to keep track of all the sins committed against me by people who have not yet repented, even though 1 Cor 13:6 states love doesn't keep score ("*thinketh no evil*" means doesn't take an inventory); imagine Christ's tally sheet!

b) I also need to inquire of others if I have outstanding sins against them for which I have not yet repented/apologized

c) I need to make sure I have confessed all my sins to God or He won't forgive me, for a disciple can only seek forgiveness to the extent he is prepared to render it

d) if my brother were my enemy, committing the exact same sin, I would forgive him (Matt 5:44) and end up treating my enemy better than I treat my own brother

e) all the verses that warn if I don't forgive, I won't be forgiven, at the cost of my salvation, should be understood to mean I am not to forgive until my brother repents, even though none of those verses mention this proviso

f) my natural inclination of not wanting to forgive my brother who has harmed me is the right path to follow; the carnal mind, which is at enmity with forgiveness, I (wrongly) conclude to be right, though it's a behaviour Christ never practiced

37. Our understanding of forgiveness will have a direct impact on how we live

When a person sins against us, we have a decision to make; either turn to our pride and focus on our hurt, or turn to faith and forgiveness and focus on how we can help restore our brother who sinned

What kind of marriage do I want? One in which each person forgives immediately, or one in which forgiveness is withheld?

- newly married couples are counseled to expect to forgive their spouse over and over and over again

What kind of ecclesia do I want? One in which members are encouraged to forgive immediately, or sins are remembered?

We should expect to have to forgive one another on multiple occasions; it is inevitable given our sin prone nature; God uses ecclesias to expose sin that needs to be repudiated, and to transform His sons and daughters; it's why He makes provision for forgiveness of our sins, but has also established the principle of 70 times 7 – be willing to forgive one another

An ecclesia which forgives one another immediately will be an altogether different ecclesia than one which does not

Forgiving ecclesias do not end up with more cases of doctrinal error or personal misconduct; their willingness to forgive one another out of love does not remove their responsibility to uphold God's truth

We don't ever want to run out of forgiveness for our spouse or our ecclesial members

Apologies are very helpful and appropriate and commanded when one person sins against another, but they should not be made a precondition for forgiving others

38. The forgiving spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ – Luke 22:31-34

Christ not only forgave people while they were sinning against them, he also forgave them before they sinned!

Peter was about to face a unique trial, would fail, and need to repent and be converted back to righteousness

Christ warned the disciples that Satan (the religious leaders) sought their end (sift them as wheat); both times the "you" in v31 is plural and references all the disciples Christ was addressing

In v32 Christ is speaking only to Peter ("thee" is singular), regarding Peter's future need to be converted

Peter responds in v33 by boasting of his strength; Christ counters in v34 that he would deny his Lord 3 times that night

Christ, while warning Peter of his impending failure, was also seeking to encourage Peter by revealing that he was already praying for Peter (v32) before the sin had even been committed

Christ knew Peter's sin would leave Peter demoralized, discouraged and in despair, and that Peter was in danger of being lost

Christ's prayer was that Peter, after the sin, would not suffer a failing faith, but would be converted (turn back to right conduct) so that he might strengthen (serve) his brethren and be useful to God

Christ is not focused on his own suffering that Peter's denial (sin) would cause; he is wholly concerned about Peter's recovery. Such is the forgiving spirit of the Son, manifesting the forgiving character of the Father, in sharp contrast to our natural response (seeking vengeance and retribution) to a sin committed against us. This is the mind and forgiveness of Christ – he was aware of a sin yet to be committed against him and was already praying for the sinner to recover; such a spirit would have been greatly encouraging to Peter following his sin. If we want to be helpful to one who has sinned against us, their faith and recovery should be the issue, not the wrong done to us.

39. In these last dark days before our Lord returns...

- 1) let us learn to forgive like he forgave, so that we can be helpful to those who are overcome by sin
- 2) let us learn to turn to faith when others sin against us, not to pride
- 3) let us learn to believe that our God can take the evil done to us and turn it into great good, if we trust Him
- 4) let us learn to forgive one another knowing the gravity of our sins far outweighs that of sins committed against us
- 5) let us learn to forgive because it really is a better way to live and provides a power that is greater than the power of sin
- 6) let us learn to forgive because only then can we experience the joy of being forgiven ourselves and made righteous
- 7) and let us learn to forgive because it is God's character that is being developed in us, a loving and forgiving character that delights in forgiving, that loves to forgive, so that His eternal Purpose can be achieved

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