

"FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS."

– MATT. 18:21-35. – AUGUST 12. –

APPARENTLY this lesson grew out of the preceding one on the necessity for guarding against stumbling the least of the Lord's little ones. It would appear that Peter had immediately attempted to put into practice the instructions of the previous lesson, and it was his inquiry as to how often it would be his duty to exercise forgiveness toward a repentant brother, that gave our Lord the opportunity to inculcate a lesson upon the subject of forgiveness.

The teaching of the Jewish rabbis on the subject of forgiveness was, that if the wrong-doer repented of his evil words or actions and came to the aggrieved person, acknowledging his wrong and asking forgiveness, he should be granted forgiveness as often as three times. They based their teaching on this subject on the statements of Job 33:29 – margin, and Amos 2:4. Our Lord's teaching on the subject was, in many respects, the reverse of this, and required the offended one to go to the offender to make inquiry respecting the matter, and to show him his fault. This would require great humility on the part of the one who felt himself aggrieved, for it is much easier to resent and avoid the injurer, than to go to him according to the rule which our Lord has laid down. Peter seems to have gotten the impression that the Lord's rule, being different from that of the rabbis in this respect, would also probably be more generous and require that forgiveness be granted a larger number of times; hence Peter adds together the three and the four times mentioned by Amos, making seven in all, and inquires whether the Lord would have his followers be generous and forgiving to those who trespassed against them to that extent – seven times. What must have been his astonishment, and that of all the apostles, to hear the Lord say that forgiveness should be accorded, practically, times without number – seventy times seven.

The thought would seem to be that those who become the Lord's people, partakers of his spirit, the spirit of love, will, in proportion as they are filled with that spirit and led by that spirit, be so generous, so magnanimous, so loving, that they would not only be willing but glad to forgive a repentant brother; – glad to be first to extend the olive branch and to make his way back to reconciliation and harmony as smooth as possible. From hearts full of pride, envy, malice and other elements of the spirit of selfishness and sin, and merely topped off with a coat of benevolence and generosity, it will be impossible to dip out very much of the spirit of forgiveness, without dipping out with it some of the bitterness and hatred; and even with this mixture forgiveness could not be granted very freely by an unregenerated heart. But with a heart emptied of malice, and hatred and envy, and filled with brotherly kindness, meekness, patience, gentleness, forbearance, love, we may dip a cup of forgiveness on every occasion and as oft as it may be applied for, and it will be without a mixture of evil, bitterness, sarcasm, etc., but pure and unadulterated, generous, loving forgiveness.

We are to remember, however, that this holy spirit which we have in our earthen vessels did not abound there at first, but with all was merely a surface coating, as it were, to begin with. Gradually, as the holy **[R2666 : page 216]** spirit increased in our hearts and abounded, it displaced the wrong spirit; hence those who are able from their hearts to dip the cup of forgiveness repeatedly and without a mixture of evil thereby give evidence that they have been with Jesus and have learned of him, and that they have drunk deeply of his spirit, and that they have been purging out the old leaven of malice, and are being sanctified by the truth, being made meet for the inheritance of the saints in light. We are to remember that this growth in grace, while it has a positive time of beginning, in our consecration vow, is nevertheless a gradual work, requiring patient perseverance in well-doing, requiring also that the old nature, with its evil disposition, be mortified continually – deadened – so that our minds may be renewed under the transforming influence of the spirit of the truth, in which we are to grow daily.

The "seventy times seven," mentioned by our Lord, we would not understand to signify a limited number of times, but rather an unlimited number – that whoever has the Lord's spirit will be glad at any time to witness a repentance of evil-doers and to accord them forgiveness. This does not imply, however, that there may be no penalties attached with the forgiveness; as, for instance, in the dealing of a parent with a child, the moral obliquity of the misconduct may be forgiven, [R2666 : page 217] and the parent's indignation against the disobedience or misbehavior pass away immediately, and yet it may be proper at times to impose some penalty on the trespassing child. In every such case, however, it should be clearly understood by the child that this is not because of the parent's disfavor, which has ceased in the forgiveness, but that his peculiar parental duty requires that a lesson shall be taught which will be helpful to the child in the formation of character. In such a case the love of the parent will of necessity be generous, sympathetic, and careful that the punishment shall be only such as might properly be of benefit to the child – correction in righteousness, not in wrath. However, such corrections as this belong only to parents and guardians, and do not properly extend to brethren in the Lord's family, who are not commissioned to judge and to punish one another, but to assist one another, – the Master's words to such being most positive and emphatic, "Judge nothing before the time." "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath." "Remember him who hath said, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord."

"Heir of the same inheritance,
Child of the self-same God,
He hath but stumbled in the path
We have in weakness trod."

In the family of God, the saints, begotten of the holy spirit, are all to be recognized as brethren, and to be dealt with accordingly. It is the new creature, and not the old creature, that is the brother in Christ; hence we may love the new creature, and in some respects have very little love for the old, just as all have disrespect for certain blemishes

in their own mortal flesh, as they realize its weakness and imperfection, – and the more so in proportion as they grow in the divine likeness as new creatures. If, therefore, a brother should trespass against us it should be our first thought that this wrong done us is not by the brother, the new creature in Christ, but by his mortal flesh, which for the moment has gotten the upper hand with him or to some extent blinded him. Accordingly, instead of feeling angry with the brother, we should feel sympathetic, and our hearts should go out to him, and our desire be strong to do him good and to help him to overcome the weaknesses of his earthen vessel.

It is in line with this thought that our Lord suggests that the proper course is for the aggrieved one to go quietly, without saying a word to anyone else, and have a kindly conference with the one who is doing him wrong, seeking to point out the merits and demerits of the question at issue, and if possible to gain the brother back to fellowship, righteousness, harmony with the Lord. If this shall be unavailing, the next step shall be still a secret one – the taking of two or three brethren of supposedly good heart and large experience, and that without attempting to prejudice their minds, and to ask these to hear the cause and to give counsel as to which one is in error. Whichever of the brethren is in error should be convinced by his fellow-pilgrims, whose arguments with him should be based upon the Scriptures and the spirit of love; but if differences still exist between them, and cannot be harmonized, then, as a court of last resort, the matter should be taken before the Church – the consecrated – and after being heard by the Church, its decision should be considered final, and be accepted by all. If either of the brethren still have doubts as to his receiving justice in the matter he may console himself with the thought that he will surely obtain a blessing by giving full and hearty assent to the Lord's arrangements, even if he have so large a measure of self-conceit that he still believes his side of the question to be right, notwithstanding the judgment of all the brethren to the contrary.

Whoever will thus humble himself in obedience to the voice of the Church will have a blessing, and as we understand the Lord, it will be reasonable for him to expect that the voice of the Church in such a matter will be supernaturally guided, that truth and righteousness may triumph. But amongst the Lord's people, let us not forget that this is the highest tribunal, and that brother should not go to law with brother in the worldly courts, however much he may feel himself aggrieved: if he have the forgiving spirit he certainly will rest the matter where the Lord directs, and that too without harboring any unkind or ungenerous sentiments. This will be the certain effect of the indwelling of the spirit of holiness, the spirit of love.

In respect to dealings with those who are without, in the matter of forgiveness, believing husbands dealing with unbelieving wives, or believing wives dealing with unbelieving husbands, or believing persons in business relationship with unbelievers: the same spirit of love and generosity and forgiveness will apply in every case, but not exactly the same way. The believer should be generous toward the unbeliever – he should expect in himself a larger measure of generosity than he would expect from the unbeliever, because he has had lessons and experiences in the school of Christ which the unbeliever never had; he has received the new mind, which the unbeliever knows not of. He should not only, therefore, be just in his dealings, but additionally, in proportion as he may be able, he should be generous, forgiving, not too exacting.

However, if an unbelieving partner have attempted a fraud, the believing partner, while exercising a spirit of generosity toward him, if the matter appears to have been wilful, should deliver the offender to the world's courts, which he acknowledges, not prosecuting in a **[R2666 : page 218]** spirit of anger or malice or hatred, but as doing his duty toward society for the suppression of evil-doers in proportion as the laws and arrangements of the world are reasonable from a Christian standpoint. And even if he should fully forgive, concluding that there were extenuating circumstances which would not require that

he should deliver the guilty one to the judges of earthly courts, he might properly enough esteem it to be his duty to have no further dealings with such a person, whom he could not trust. This would not imply any lack of forgiveness, but merely a reasonable and commendable prudence.

Indeed, the consecrated people of God are admonished by the Apostle not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers, and this might not unreasonably be applied, not only to marriage, but also to business engagements and alliances. Similarly, the Apostle informs us that if the unbelieving husband or wife choose to depart from the believer, the latter may conclude that it is providential and for his deliverance from an unequal yoke, as the Apostle says, "Let the unbeliever depart" – permit *him* to cancel the marriage contract if he will.

THE PARABLE OF THE TWO DEBTORS.

As was his custom, our Lord illustrated his teaching on this subject with a parable: the king, in the parable, first forgives one of his servants a very large indebtedness – that is, he permits him to go free, as tho he had no such indebtedness against him, that he might do what he could toward the payment of the debt. This servant in turn finds a fellow-servant who owes him a trifling sum, and who likewise promises its payment: but the unmerciful servant, not having the spirit of the king, is ungenerous and exacting, and refusing forgiveness attempts to exact it through force. The matter reaching the ears of the king, he is justly incensed at such conduct on the part of one who has himself been so generously treated, and, in consequence, he puts in operation the machinery of justice which will punish the unmerciful servant by now requesting of him the payment of his full debt; and our Lord followed the parable with the statement, "So likewise shall the heavenly Father do to you if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses."

Not only did our Lord address these words to the disciples and not to the multitude, but additionally he declared that the illustration was

applicable to those reckoned members of his Kingdom, saying, "The Kingdom of heaven is likened unto" this parable. The parable, therefore, is not an illustration of the Lord's [R2667 : page 218] dealings with the world of mankind, but rather an illustration of his dealings with those who have become separated from the world through the forgiveness of their sins, and who additionally have become heirs of the Kingdom through consecration of themselves to the Lord Jesus, to suffer with him, if so be that they may also reign with him. The parable, therefore, is to the Church, and suggests to us that our original sin was not blotted out, not forgiven in the absolute sense of the word forgiven, but in the language of the Scriptures, "covered." "Blessed is the man whose sin is covered, to whom the Lord doth not impute iniquity." – Psalm 32:1,2; Acts 3:19.

Our sins were *covered* from the Lord's sight, and we were treated as tho we owed him nothing, by his grace, exercised toward us through Christ Jesus and his atoning sacrifice; and this reckoned forgiveness will be made actual by and by, and the debt entirely canceled, if, according to the New Covenant we have made with the Lord, we shall prove faithful in cultivating his spirit of love and in becoming copies of his dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, – forgiving others as we would be forgiven by the Lord, loving, sympathizing with and helping others as we have been treated by the Lord, etc.

The parable is but an illustration of the Golden Text of our lesson, taken from the Lord's prayer: it is only so long as we are willing to forgive our debtors that we may pray with confidence to our heavenly Father and hope for his forgiveness of our trespasses. If we forgive not our fellow-creatures, and that not merely in word, but in deed and from the heart, neither will our heavenly Father forgive our trespasses, and altho he has generously covered them from his sight, and treated us as justified by faith, he would immediately remember our trespasses against us, and thus our justification would lapse or be abrogated, by a failure on our part to exercise the holy spirit toward the brethren and toward all men as we have opportunity.

From this standpoint the question of forgiveness of the brethren and forgiveness of all others is a very serious one to the Lord's people. It means that if they do not in a reasonable time develop this spirit of forgiveness, the spirit of love, the spirit of God, the holy spirit, they cannot continue to be recognized as Christ's disciples, they cannot continue to be recognized as children of God, they cannot be recognized as having their sins covered, but, on the contrary, will be treated as even more responsible than the world of mankind in general, and have executed upon them severer punishments than will be exacted from others who knew not the Master's will, and who have never tasted of his grace, and who therefore would be less culpable in the exercise of a selfish, uncharitable, ungenerous, unforgiving spirit.

We cannot suppose, however, that the Lord would [R2667 : page 219] expect perfection in this matter at once, from those who are still but "babes" in Christ. But his expectations are reasonable, that we should grow in grace as we grow in knowledge of him, and as expressed in the lesson of the Vine and the Branches; every branch which in due time, after due opportunity, does not bring forth the fruitage of the vine, the grapes of love (including forgiveness), will be cut off by the great Husbandman, – no longer recognized as a branch. So in this parable, the one who had experienced such great blessing from the king, and who had been reckoned for the time an honored member of his kingdom-class, ceased to be so regarded and so treated, and, on the contrary, was treated by the king without favor.

The statement that the unmerciful servant would be delivered to the tormentors, until he should pay the uttermost farthing of his debt, might be understood in either of two ways. First, we might understand it to represent the original debt resting against every member of the human family – the penalty of death – a penalty from which our Lord Jesus redeemed all, and from which he proposes to set free all who will obey him. In this view of the matter the unmerciful servant's penalty would signify a delivery to the Second Death. Or if the debt be understood as representing, in whole or in part, the obligations of his

covenant as a new creature, then the penalty upon him for failure to develop and manifest the characteristics of the new creature during the trial-time might be understood to signify that such an one, tho an accepted servant of the Lord, would be required to comply with the full details of his consecration vow, by going into the great time of trouble, and there meeting to the full the demands of his covenant, and learning effectually the lesson of love and sympathy, and to appreciate the grace of God in the forgiveness of sins, as he never before appreciated it. However, we are inclined to think of this matter from the first of these standpoints, that the exaction of the uttermost farthing would signify a hopeless case, in any of the Lord's people who, after experiencing divine favor in forgiveness of their own sins, should fail within a reasonable time to learn to exercise mercy and forgiveness toward the brethren, – that such would, as a result, suffer the Second Death.

The Lord's people very generally find themselves in considerable trouble along the line of justice. We all recognize justice as the very foundation of all order and righteousness, and when we feel that justice is on our side it is proportionately the more difficult to freely forgive the person whom we believe to have been acting from the standpoint of injustice. There is a general tendency to require others to measure up to our standard of justice, by some sort of penance, before we forgive them. It is against this very spirit that our Lord was teaching, and to counteract which he gave this parable. We are to remember that the Lord will require us to live up to the standards we set for others. If our standard in dealing with others be one of exact *justice*, we may expect no mercy at the Lord's hands. (See James 2:13.) And what would this mean as respects the sins that are past through the forbearance of God, and what would it mean as respects the obligations upon us every day and every hour, to whose full requirements we are unable to measure? As we cannot come to the Lord ourselves on the score of justice, so we are not to deal with others upon that standard. As we must ask of the Lord mercy, grace, forgiveness, so we must be willing to extend to others mercy, grace, forgiveness, when they

trespass against us; and as heartily, quickly and freely as we ourselves hope for.

The Lord has not laid down this rule in an arbitrary fashion, as simply saying, If you do not forgive others I will not forgive you. There is a deeper reason for it than this. He wishes to develop in us his own spirit, his own character, a likeness or copy of which was exhibited to us in the person and life of his dear Son, our Lord Jesus. It is absolutely essential, therefore, that we shall have the character he desires, or else we can never attain to the joint-heirship in the Kingdom which he is pleased to extend. Hence we are to understand that this requirement or command of forgiveness, etc., is with a view to develop us as copies of his dear Son, in order that he may bestow upon us, in due time, all the riches of his grace, contained in the exceeding great and precious promises of his Word.
