

FORGIVENESS VERSUS MALICE

"Forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." – Eph. 4:32.

A FORGIVING spirit is a part of the spirit of love, a part of God's Spirit, the holy Spirit or disposition – the spirit of the truth – inculcated by God's Word. It is thus the opposite or contrary of the spirit of malice, which is a part of the evil spirit or disposition common among men in their fallen condition – the spirit or disposition of the world.

A forgiving spirit is kindred to the spirit of love, joy, peace, meekness, patience, brotherly-kindness, godliness. A malicious spirit is related to anger, back-biting, slander, wrath, jealousy, hatred and all the works of the (fallen) flesh and the devil.

Recognizing these two spirits in the light of God's Word, his people must surely desire and seek more and more to cultivate the *forgiving disposition* – a spirit of readiness or willingness to forgive, which would *rather* that the transgressor would penitently turn from his evil way to the way of righteousness, and which would *take pleasure* in receiving him back into fellowship again under such conditions.

However, on this as upon every question, extreme and unscriptural views are sometimes entertained. Some feel that the most extreme view conceivable must be the right one, because of their desire to get as far away as possible from the unforgiving or malicious spirit. In consequence, some are continually chiding themselves for not being able to forgive those who have not repented, who have not asked forgiveness nor brought forth fruits (evidences) indicating repentance.

This comes of the fall. Human judgments have become defective, so that it sometimes perplexes us to know how and where to draw the lines upon our own hearts and conduct. But here God comes to our rescue. He knows: his mind or judgment and not our own imperfect judgments, therefore, must be our guide or criterion; and his Word expresses to us his mind (spirit or disposition) on this and every subject. If we accept and use it, instead of our own imperfect judgments, we are said to have "the spirit of a sound mind."

Let us study and adopt as our own the spirit of God's sound mind on this subject of *forgiveness*, casting aside as erroneous whatever our own depraved judgments may have previously accepted. This will be following the instructions of the text at the head of this article, and we will learn to forgive *even as* God forgives.

(1) Our spirit or disposition to forgive any one should be of the heart, prompted by the spirit of love and brotherly kindness. It should not be a forgiveness forced out of us by importunity, nor by the appeals of many, nor by pity for the wrong doers' sufferings or sorrow. It should be there pent up in our hearts, ready to pour forth upon the offender as soon as he repents and gives reasonable evidence of his sincerity. God *waits* to be gracious, *desires* to pardon sinners; and such must be our attitude toward those who trespass against us. But God always *waits* for repentance, and never grants his pardon to those who are unrepentant, nor receives them into fellowship as friends.

True, he loved us while we were yet sinners (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8), and he does good even to the unthankful, giving sunshine and rain and food to all; but that is a pitying love, not a fellowship love, not a communing love: it is the sympathetic love of a benefactor. And we are to have this pity-love also, even to our enemies. We are to love our enemies, and do good to them

that persecute us; but with us, as with God, this can be no more than pity-love: it cannot be fellowship-love, "for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?" Nevertheless, while we can have *no fellowship* with the unfruitful works of darkness, but must rather *reprove* them (Eph. 5:11), we can still have that benevolence of heart which would not permit even an enemy to perish with hunger. "Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him," etc. In so doing we are but imitating our Heavenly Father, who is merciful even to the unthankful and spiteful.

(2) God's readiness or quickness to forgive and receive into fellowship depends upon the amount of light and favor sinned against. To the *ignorant*, who know not of his character, he sends his children as ambassadors – evangelists, colporteurs, etc. – to tell them of his love and his willingness to forgive their sins through Christ. But *in proportion* as any have tasted of the good Word of God and been made partakers of the holy Spirit, etc., and have sinned wilfully against light and knowledge (Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31), in that *same proportion* God is slow to forgive, and will not receive such back into fellowship, except they bring forth works proving their professed repentance to be sincere. And God assures us that there is a degree of wilful sin, against full light and ability, that he will never forgive – "There is a sin unto death; I do not say that ye shall pray for it." – I John 5:16.

In this, also, we should copy our Father in heaven. We should be very ready to forgive the blunders and errors of either natural or spiritual childhood, and to all the weak and inexperienced, even before they ask, we should manifest our *willingness* to forgive. And with all who trespass against us, our *willingness* to forgive should be proportionate to the ignorance and lack of wilfulness and malice on the part of the transgressor. Whenever malice, wilfulness and knowledge have been factors in the transgression, it is our duty to be

proportionately slow to forgive and to require proportionately longer and stronger proofs of repentance.

But this is as far as we may go. Although we may be able to decide what would be a sin unto death against God (I John 5:16), we may not decide that any transgression against us is *unforgivable*; against us there are to be no unpardonable sins. Our imperfect knowledge, as well as our imperfect judgments, forbids such a decision. Hence our Lord said, "If thy brother trespass against thee, *rebuke him*; and *if he repent*, forgive him. 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." Peter said, "Lord *how oft* shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times, but, Until seventy times seven." – Luke 17:3,4; Matt. 18:21,22.

From these Scriptures it is evident that some of God's people make the mistake of forgiving transgressors before they repent. It is as much the Lord's command that we *rebuke* the transgressor, and that we *do not forgive* until he turns again and repents, as it is his command that we do forgive, from the heart, when he does *turn* and *repent*. And if he trespass seventy times seven times he should be *rebuked* as often (either by word or conduct or both), and should *repent* in words and *turn* in conduct just as often.

To require less than this is to disobey our Teacher's instructions and to do injury to the transgressor by giving him lax ideas as to his duty. A lack of strict justice, in this respect, on the part of God's people has often injured their children, whereas a proper exercise of justice with forgiveness on proper grounds would have helped those children the better to understand God's dealings, and would guard them against expecting his favor

except upon full repentance; and also against tempting divine mercy by sinning against knowledge.

But while some need to correct their hearts and conduct as above, more, probably, need to guard against an unforgiving spirit. Such should remember that Christ Jesus by the grace of God tasted death for every man – paid the price of every man's natural or inherited imperfection – and consider that if God can accept that *ransom-price* as the full satisfaction for all except *wilful* sins or the *wilful portions* of sins, then we can and should do so also; and all who have God's spirit or disposition will hold wrong-doers responsible for only their *wilful share* in sins and be ready to forgive and pass over quickly whatever is of Adamic depravity and truly repented of and thereafter shunned.

Let such remember the words, "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and *just* to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"; and consider that we who accept our Lord Jesus' sacrifice, as being for the sins of the whole world, must also, if *we* would be *faithful* and *just*, forgive those who trespass against us, if they confess and repent, because Jesus paid *all* of their debts, to us as well as to God. [R4560 : page 60]

Justice, therefore, demands of all who trust in the merit of Christ's sacrifice as the ground of their own forgiveness, that they recognize the same precious blood as the covering of all Adamic ignorance and weaknesses. And the Lord assures us that unless we forgive those who trespass against us (when they repent), neither will he forgive us when we repent.

Moreover, our forgiveness must be from the heart (Matt. 18:35) – not a lip forgiveness and a heart hatred. The forgiven one may be held at a distance for a time to prove the sincerity of his repentance; but just as soon as we have good cause to believe him sincere we must be prompt and hearty in our forgiveness – as a heart with a forgiving spirit or desire will always be glad to

do. The length of time we may hold aloof from the erring one must be measured by our willingness to have our Heavenly Father hold aloof from us when we trespass against him: this is the Divine rule of the Lord's prayer. But, even then, although fully and heartily forgiven, we may not put such a one into a place of the same responsibility as the one from which he fell until we have seen a stronger and truer character developed in him. And this would not imply a lack of full forgiveness, but merely a proper caution – not only for our own protection, but also for the good of the one who transgressed and his protection from too strong a temptation of the same kind.

We find no mention in the Scriptures of *forgiving* on God's part without the requirement of repentance. The passage which reads, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), might be considered to refer to a pardon without repentance; but these words are not found in the oldest Greek MSS. – the Sinaitic and Vatican.

A passage frequently misunderstood is:

"If thou comest to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gift and first go and be reconciled to [or make amends to] thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." – Matt. 5:23,24.

It should be noted that the one addressed is not the brother trespassed against, but the trespassing brother. He must leave the offering of his gift or prayer, until he has made amends to his brother for the wrong he is conscious of having done him, in word or deed. Not until then will his offering be acceptable to God.

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