

Forgiveness

by John O. Reid (1930-2016)

Forerunner, December 1996

How important is it to forgive others? Could our eternal salvation depend on it?

There have been times in my life when I did or said something that I wished with all my heart I could take back or change. But there it was for all the world to see! Immediately, self-incrimination raced through me. I did not want to face anyone, and I wanted, if possible, to drop off the end of the earth.

Many years back, an evangelist related what he had done after making a serious mistake while speaking. Once he finished his message, he left the building, went to his car and sobbed in frustration. He was so filled with remorse and anguish that he ended up with his back on the car floor and his feet up on the seat and back rest. He truly desired things to be made right!

How wonderful it is to be forgiven for a mistake or sin! Relief floods through us. It feels as if a giant weight has been lifted from our shoulders. We may still shudder when we think about what we did, but in the next thought, we remember we have been forgiven. We really appreciate the person who realizes it was just a misunderstanding or a mistake, and says, "Hey, its all right. Let's forget it and get on with our lives."

In looking back on our lives before being called, we begin to realize all the laws of God we have broken and that God had every right to take our life but did not. What He did do, upon our repentance, was forgive us.

As we begin to grow in the church, sinning and forgiveness become less academic and more serious. With greater depth, we understand the sacrifice made and the price paid, so that sinning now produces greater sorrow in us. With that understanding comes greater appreciation for the forgiveness God extends.

Forgiveness Produces Peace

Forgiveness is one of the chief characteristics we must have if we are to become literal children of God in His Kingdom. God has positions of teaching and authority prepared for us (John 14:2; Revelation 5:10). Because these positions come with great power, we must have a heart ready and willing to forgive and forget mistakes. Those coming out of the Great Tribulation will make many mistakes, just as we have in coming out of this world. We will need to have a nature willing to encourage and forgive.

In this world it is easy to see that a major cause of conflict is an unwillingness to extend forgiveness. The crisis in Bosnia, smoldering for many years, finally burst into flame. The rivalry between Arab and Jew has lasted for centuries. In this country the conflicts between North and South, the Hatfields and the McCoys, management and labor and many others have raged with neither side being willing to forgive. At home the lack of forgiveness causes family problems to arise over and over until divorce or violence erupts.

How does God view this hardhearted lack of forgiveness? Does He take it lightly? If we lack a truly forgiving heart, could it cost us our salvation? Jesus tells us to pray:

And forgive us our debts, *as we forgive our debtors*. . . . For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:12,14-15)

Jesus compares our sins to debts. We have violated our obligation of being obedient to God, and this exposes us to the penalty that results from that violation. To teach us the lesson of forgiveness, *God bases how He forgives us by the forgiveness we extend to others!*

Those who come before Him unwilling to forgive others cannot expect God to show them the love and mercy they desire. God *will not* show them the mercy and love they will not extend to others! If we forgive others when they injure us, our Father will forgive us.

How are we to conduct ourselves in forgiving others? We must forgive, even if the offender does not ask to be forgiven. We should treat the one who has injured or offended us with kindness, not harboring any grudge or speaking of that individual condemningly. We should always be ready to do him good if the opportunity arises. This is a tall order!

Why act this way when it goes so strongly against human nature? First, it produces peace. Second, it sets the example for the offending individual—and for everyone else—of what God considers right and proper.

Does forgiveness of a person fighting a recurring problem mean that we should place complete trust in him in the area of his problem? With many problems—poor money handling, gossip, lying, stealing and sexual sins, to name a few—we need to see a track record of overcoming before considering him trustworthy, but we can still be understanding, forgiving and encouraging.

Forgiving a Brother

The Greek word for "forgive," *aphiemi*, means "primarily, to send forth, send away . . . , to remit" (*Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 462). Vine goes on to say that it "signifies the remission of the punishment due to sinful conduct . . . ; secondly, it involves the complete removal of the cause of the offense." It is complete pardon for wrongdoing.

Jesus instructs on the subject of offense and forgiveness in Matthew 18:15: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone: If he hears you, you have gained your brother." Peter, having listened to Christ's instructions through verse 20, then asks in all sincerity: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (verse 21).

Peter had a definite rationale for saying "seven times." The Jews had ruled that one could only be forgiven three times, but never a fourth. Realizing Jesus would show more mercy than the Jews, he must have thought seven times was more than fair.

Christ's response shows how important forgiveness is. "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (verse 22). He means that we are not to limit our forgiveness to a specific

number of times. As often as someone offends us and asks forgiveness, we should extend it. Further, even if he does not ask forgiveness, we should forgive him and treat him properly, setting the right example.

Then Jesus, really wanting to drive home the importance of being forgiving, tells the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (verses 23-35). The story relates how a king, settling accounts with his servants, finds that one owed him 10,000 talents. *Barnes' Notes*, written in the late 1800s, estimates the value at \$15.8 million! Christ's point, of course, is that no one could ever repay this huge amount. Spiritually, we owe Him far more than we could ever repay.

Normally, the servant would be cast into prison and his family sold into slavery until all was paid. But when the servant entreated the king to have mercy on him, the king, "moved with compassion," forgave the entire debt!

The forgiven servant then found one who owed him 100 denarii or about \$15. This petty debtor begged for additional time to pay off the debt, but the servant, without mercy, had him jailed until all was paid. The king's other servants heard of this and told the king.

Then his master, after that he had called him, said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. *So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.* (verses 32-35)

We can learn several lessons from this parable:

1. Our sins are very great.
2. God has forgiven them all.
3. By comparison to the offenses we have committed against God, our brethren's offenses against us are small.
4. We should be so appreciative of being forgiven that we freely forgive others.
5. We must forgive from the heart, not merely in words. When we truly forgive from the heart, it is as if no offense had ever occurred.
6. If we do not forgive, God is justified in not forgiving us.

The Wisdom of Solomon

In Proverbs 10:12, Solomon leaves us wisdom in this area of interpersonal relationships: "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins." The Soncino commentary remarks,

Hatred makes mountains out of mole hills, but love covers, or puts out of sight, and enables one to overlook insults and wrongs.

Adam Clarke comments:

[Hatred] seeks for occasions to provoke enmity. It delights in broils. On the contrary, love conciliates; removes aggravations; puts the best construction on every thing; and pours water, not oil, upon the flame.

Commentator F. C. Cook writes,

[Love] first hides, does not expose, and then forgives and forgets all sins.

Solomon gives a similar proverb in chapter 17:9: "He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates the best of friends." F. C. Cook comments on "He who . . . seeks love": "[He] takes the course which leads to his gaining it." This course is forgiving the sin. Solomon is warning against a person living with the irritation of a past offense, instead of simply burying it out of sight.

Have any of us had to forgive offenses against us as Jesus Christ did? He is the example in whose steps we are to follow. Notice the example He left for us even as He suffered crucifixion: "Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they do'" (Luke 23:34). He set a course that would lead to love and reconciliation through His forgiveness of those torturing Him.

The apostle Paul gives God's children a message that we should all heed:

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and *forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do*. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body, and be thankful. (Colossians 3:12-15)

We live in an age rife with anger and hatred. Tempers flare and offenses abound. Though forgiveness may not come naturally, it is what God asks of us. We need to forgive because forgiveness will produce peace among us, and it is a prime trait of character we must have to be in His Kingdom. We need to promote love, harmony and peace among all of our brethren—all the people of God—by forgiving one another.