

New Covenant Priesthood (Part 11)

Self-Righteousness

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As we continue this present series we're going to take a good hard look at one of the more difficult sins for the upright to uncover within themselves, and then work (sometimes with a great deal of sacrifice) to overcome. To begin today's sermon I'm going to give an overview of a number of points touched on in the previous message given on the First Day of Unleavened Bread (March 28, 2002). Some of these points were expanded upon, and other—merely mentioned—will be expanded upon either within this sermon or maybe within one more sermon as well.

Here is the summary of my last sermon, and I'll be giving one point after another: First of all, we are to ask for forgiveness every day because it is as needful for us *spiritually* as food is *physically*. That is easily seen and acceptable, but then God says that we are to forgive even as we are forgiven by Him. This is much more difficult because forgiveness is not always easy or simple, but it must be pursued, because forgiving is commanded. It is an obligation that we owe to God and to others.

An important element to forgiving is to understand and accept that we are sinners just like those who sin against us. This helps set the stage so that forgiveness can be given. We must deal with the fact that human nature's first reaction is to retaliate, but following through retaliation pretty much takes God out of the picture and makes forgiveness exceedingly more difficult. We must not set ourselves up as judge, jury, and executioner of the punishment. Instead, we are commanded to do good to our enemy. This does not forgive, but it's part of setting the stage for an effective and complete forgiveness.

Jesus' example of the conduct of His life was meekness, not retaliation. This virtually guarantees that one is going to be perceived as weak, but His example is the one that we must follow. In order to be meek, one must have an intimate relationship with God and an understanding of, and acceptance of, His sovereignty in one's life. The meek person is meek because he thoroughly grasps, accepts, and yields to this fact.

Humility, forged at least partly in an understanding and acceptance of one's own sinfulness, when combined with the meekness that grows from the intimate relationship with God, permits forgiveness. Humility, meekness, and forgiveness are linked by seeing God's hand in the affairs of one's life, and knowing full well that **He** judges and executes punishment.

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We have been seeing that pride is intimately entwined with both judgment and giving forgiveness. Indeed, pride exists because of a self-centered perverted judgment, and in turn it perverts other judgments, thus tending to prejudice us according to our biases. In like manner, it is often a poor judgment, or a series of poor judgments in which pride plays a part that hinders us from forgiving.

In previous sermons in the priesthood responsibilities we saw that both Jesus and Paul admonished us to be very cautious about making judgments. They are a necessary part of life, but in John 7 Jesus warned us "to not judge according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment." Paul in turn warned us in I Corinthians 4 "*to make no judgments before their time.*"

You might recall that on the First Day of Unleavened Bread I made the point that in order to be in a better position to forgive, we have to be able to see ourselves as sinners just like those who sin against us. This of and by itself will tend to make us more cautious, accurate, and less biased in our judgments involving forgiveness. It should also tend to lead us to repentance.

These points are clearly made by Paul in Romans 2, and that is where we are going to begin. I'm going to read verses 1 through 6, and then verse 11.

Romans 2:1-6 Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whosoever you are that judges: for wherein you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you that judges do the same things. But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things. And think you this, O man, that judges them which do such things, and do the same, that you shall escape the judgment of God? Or despise you the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering: not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But after your hardness and impenitent heart treasures up unto yourself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; Who will render to every man according to his deeds.

Romans 2:11 For there is no respect of persons with God.

The setting here in Romans 2 follows immediately upon the heels of Paul's excoriation of the Gentiles for their flagrant sins against God in Romans 1. This sets the stage for his censure of the sinners among the Jews in chapter 2. It would be very easy for us to look upon this as merely exposure to historical facts and let the instruction stop right

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there, but this would not help us much toward getting a very sobering lesson for ourselves.

In order to get the best instruction from this, we're going to look at this as though the Gentiles of chapter 1 are the unconverted of this world around us, and the Jews of chapter 1 are "**us**"—the converted of the modern world, and therefore *spiritual Jews*. This is in no way twisting of scriptures, because Romans 2:28 says the following:

Romans 2:28-29 But he is not a Jew which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

The use of those terms—circumcision and uncircumcision—is a very strong indication that the Apostle Paul aimed this directly at the **converted** Jews in the church at Rome. It was not aimed at the Jews in the world. This Book is for the sons of God. It's not for the unconverted. Certainly they can use it, but it is aimed at those who are to live by every word of God, and so those very powerful words that Paul wrote in Romans 2 are aimed directly at you and me who are in the church.

Romans 1 states the abject immorality of the unconverted world. Romans 2 shows the deceitfulness of the heart—even in conversion. Both of them together become the platform for teaching the absolute necessity of salvation by grace through faith, which Paul eventually gets to.

Paul's manner of presenting his argument is psychologically effective, because he presents it as though he is involved in a conversation with an unseen person—an interlocutor. This is not unique to him, because others in the Bible have used this ploy effectively. Nathan used it when he approached David with his sin. He got David agreeing with him about the mean-spirited sinfulness of the rich man who took the poor man's lamb to sacrifice for himself when he more than enough for himself and did not need the poor man's lamb. David grew angry at the injustice. And then Nathan said, "**You are that man!**" David was trapped! That's pretty much what Paul has done here.

Amos did the same thing. At the beginning of his book he began reporting to the Jewish and Israelitish audience that he was addressing the essence of the sins of Damascus, and of Tyre, and of Gaza, and Ammon, and Edom and Moab. You can just about hear those people in the audience saying, "*Yeah, man! Give it to them, preacher!*" But Amos was just like a big old hawk circling around there, and circling around, and he had their

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attention. Suddenly that hawk came down and grabbed them by the neck, because then Amos began exposing **them** to the multitude and seriousness of **their** sins. He probably shocked them into a sullen and defensive silence that in all probability, unlike David, eventually turned outright anger against him (Amos), because there is no evidence that those people repented like David did.

I specifically chose Amos, because when he exposed the sins of Judah, his accusation became the model for Paul's here in Romans. They had the revelation of the law of God, and yet neglected their conduct. Therefore their judgment was going to be even more stern than those ones that were pronounced on those Gentile nations, because "To whom much is given, the much more is required."

Let's look at Romans 2:1 once again.

Romans 2:1 Therefore, you are inexcusable, O man, whosoever you are that judges: for wherein you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you that judge do the same things.

I am going to read that verse to you in John 7:24. Jesus is speaking.

John 7:24 Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.

We're urged by Christ to make righteous judgments. Righteous judgment rests on the ability to discern the facts in a given case. Discerning the facts is not always easy because facts are not always right on the surface and easily seen, let alone understood. Even though we may have the facts right before us, we can't put them together in the right sequence.

In addition to this, you might recall something that Paul said that is recorded in I Timothy 5:24.

I Timothy 5:24 Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after.

This is rather an awkward rendering in the King James. It basically means that some men's sins are easily seen because they are gross and obvious. But not all sin is that

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way. You might recall again the Publican and the Pharisee in Luke 18. The Publican's sins were easily seen. They were both sinners, but anybody could tell a Publican was a sinner. They were right out front. Everybody knew that he was extorting extra taxes from other people. But then there was the well-dressed, white collar criminal—the Pharisee—and his sins were not so easily seen. People would think of him as an upright, influential person who could truly be trusted.

Some sins are subtle and more difficult to discern. It is **those** sins that are part of the instruction that is in this chapter. It would seem, on the surface anyway, if one is able to see the sins of another, that it would logically follow that one should be able to see one's self as being in the same predicament; that is, in need of forgiveness and change of conduct. But unfortunately, logic doesn't often matter where human nature and pride are involved. Because human nature is so deceitful, and pride gets us so involved with the self, it maneuvers us to get so caught up with the faults of others that we overlook our own failures. This is why Jesus gave the following warning in Matthew 7:1.

Matthew 7:1 Judge not, that you be not judged.

There is a reciprocity rule (principle) that is at work in the things of God.

Matthew 7:2 For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged, and with what measure you use, it shall be measured to you again.

The reciprocity principle works.

Matthew 7:3-5 And why behold you the mote [the splinter] that is in your brother's eye, but consider not the beam [the log] that is in your own eye? Or how will you say to your brother, Let me pull out the mote out of your eye; and behold, a beam is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of your own eye; and then shall you see clearly to cast out the mote out of your brother's eye.

In one sense, verse 1 may be somewhat misleading to us because we might be led to think that we are not guilty of exactly the same sin as another. It says, "*You do the same thing.*" This is something that we can expect human nature to do, because it is always ready with a "*Yes, but...*" It is always looking for an escape from condemnation.

Let's consider this. The sin does not have to be exactly the same sin in order to break the law and bring on the death penalty, does it? All sin, great or small by our evaluation, still has exactly the same penalty. So whether it's a white lie, or a black lie, or adultery, or idolatry, all carry the death penalty. The difference lies in the **effect**—the damaging impact that they have on other people, but legally they all carry the same penalty. Therefore the spirit of what Paul writes applies to **all**, regardless of exactly **what** the sin is.

Now we're going to take this one step further, and we're going to see that we may be directly caught in what he says in saying "do the same things," and that it might mean **exactly** what he says.

There is no doubt from the pages of the Bible regarding Christ's ministry that the Jews, especially the Pharisees, were censorious of others not having the law. Even the term "Pharisee" means "separated one." They withdrew from the unwashed Gentiles, even Publicans and sinners (who may have been Israelites) were anathema to them. The Pharisees had a very serious spiritual problem. It was a subtle sin, yet it was a sin of the highest order, and they were blind to it. They were self-righteous.

Before God, what does it matter whether one physically bows down to an inanimate statue perceived to be God, or worships himself? That's what self-righteousness essentially is. It is the worship of the self as God. It is idolatry. That person has his own standard of morality, and he has intruded into the position that belongs only to the true God. In this case the obvious sinner and the subtle sinner are guilty of exactly the same sin, only in slightly different forms. One is outwardly and openly doing it before a statue, and the other is **inwardly** bowing down to his own opinion of himself.

What we are looking at here in this section is a converted person's vulnerability to one of the major pitfalls of the upright. That is, to think of himself as above or better than others because they are not doing as *he* thinks they should, according to *his* standard. Read Romans 2. That is exactly what Paul is saying there. But one of the truths of the matter is that all of us (whether converted or unconverted) are capable of seeing or grasping or understanding more than we are actually able to do, and so we don't actually live up to the moral and spiritual purity and the beauty that we are able to see.

We just had a sermonette here about the Israelites who could not see God. They knew He was there. They knew He was powerful, but they did not live up to what they saw. Therefore, to judge others who are doing in principle exactly the same thing, we stand self-condemned.

Are there any here who are going to say that they are living up perfectly to everything that they know? This is what he means. We're guilty of the same things. The Gentiles are not living up to what they know, and we are not living up to all **we** know. Of course we know a great deal more than they do, but we're not living up to it either. We are guilty of what Paul is accusing us of there. It is an inescapable fact that we all fall short—exactly as they do—only in different areas. So on what basis then are we intolerant and unforgiving?

There is yet another piece of instruction regarding the possibility of sin to consider here. It involves complacency. Richard mentioned complacency in his sermon this morning ["Baptized in the Sea"]. It involves complacency, and complacency brings to mind the letter Christ wrote to the Laodicean church. Some Bibles even label that paragraph "*To the complacent church.*"

One of the foundational pillars of self-righteousness is self-satisfaction. In fact, self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, and complacency (though slightly specifically different) are so closely related my *Reader's Digest Oxford Complete Word Finder Dictionary* listed them as synonyms for each other.

The Laodicean says, "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing." Is not the Laodicean expressing his self-satisfaction? "*I am satisfied. I need nothing.*" He's self-righteous. These people are satisfied with the level they have achieved. Now here comes the spiritual trap of the upright: When they reach that level, they stop growing because they stop striving to grow ever closer to the image of God. They are deceived into believing they have *already* reached the pinnacle. That's what human nature and pride do, and so out of this come self-righteousness, self-satisfaction and complacency.

Laodicea even means something akin to "*the judgment of the people.*" Their judgment is that they have already reached the standard and are fit to judge others by their standard. But God's judgment of those people is that they are "wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." By His evaluation they are nowhere near His standard. Because of their guilt in the form of the sins of self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, and complacency, they stand in danger of not making it into the Kingdom of God unless they repent.

Here's something to consider. All of us know a little bit about track and field. Coming to know God is akin to doing the pole-vault in track and field competition. We manage to clear the bar at a given height and have what we feel is a well-deserved sense of satisfaction in something good accomplished. Just about this time we come to know

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God a bit better. We turn around and look at the bar, and it has been raised yet higher! Brethren, this experience supplies those pieces of evidence that keep reinforcing on us the fact that salvation absolutely must be by grace through faith.

The Bible says to "prove all things, and hold fast to that which is good." Those who merely accept teaching, regardless from whom it is coming, have reached a level of self-satisfaction, and the complacency of the Laodicean is not far behind, putting them in a potentially dangerous position of being spewed out.

Let's go to Romans 2:2.

Romans 2:2 But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things.

Here is another possibility of being wounded in our perception of ourselves. We (meaning those who have the revelation of God) know full well that God judges according to truth. The contrast here is that man is influenced by too many factors to always judge according to truth. The truth is that all men are inclined to cut a little slack in their judgment toward the area of their bias or prejudice, and so men make concessions in their judgment of their nation. We can make excuses for what the United States does, but if somebody did that to us, we wouldn't like it at all. You see, we'll cut some slack because it's our country. Right or wrong, it's our country, and so we take a certain pride in that and we won't judge in exactly the same way. The same thing happens in judging a race, or a team, or a profession, or a family.

It's interesting in Genesis 18:25 where Abraham was arguing with God and kept reducing the number of people that would be spared in Sodom. He said, "That be far from You to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked, and that the righteous should be as the wicked. That be far from You. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" **Absolutely!** That's what Paul was saying in Romans 2:2. He said that God will judge according to truth, that He alone knows all of the facts. He alone can set them perfectly in order and with perfect righteousness.

Again let me remind you here, because I don't want to get too far from this, that none of this I am saying means that we cannot judge. We have to judge. It only means that we should be very cautious and careful in making those judgments. We should be especially careful about leaping to a conclusion to the point of condemnation, because honestly, brethren, we do not have the wherewithal to know all the facts. Even if we did, we must also be aware that our biases still tend to swing us in certain directions.

But God always judges according to truth. Our sins, and our capabilities, and what He should be able to expect from us, are fully known to Him. Can we honestly face that? Is God going to cut some slack for us? We'll see the answer to that in just a little bit.

Romans 2:3 And think you this, O man, that judge them which do such things, and do the same, that you shall escape the judgment of God?

Paul is saying that we, of all people, who have the knowledge of God's purpose, and have an awareness, fall short in what our knowledge tells us is right. We ought to be humble enough to realize that the pride which makes us so blindly confident to judge another is both absurd and tragic.

The devastating feature of this process that Paul is dealing with is that we can allow our goodness and our desire to obey God to betray us into self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, and complacency and superiority. When we do that, we bring ourselves under God's judgment. On the surface we may be obeying God very well. We don't lie. We don't cheat. We don't steal. We don't covet. But if we have a sense of superiority and "*a better than thou*" attitude, we have brought ourselves under God's judgment. This is the trap that the righteous can fall into.

Romans 2:4 Or despise you the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?

I'm going to interject something here that I saw in a couple of commentaries regarding this word "repentance." Though it is a correct translation in terms of the exact word, both of these commentaries I looked into said it would be far better if we understood Paul talking about what we in the modern sense call **conversion**. This is because repentance technically only deals with a change of mind. That's good, but what Paul is getting at is that God just doesn't want a change of mind, He wants a change of mind **and conduct**.

The better, more accurate understanding would change that word "repentance" to "conversion." They did in their translation. "*Or despise you the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering: not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to conversion.*" That's what God wants. He just doesn't want repentance. He wants us to change our conduct. He wants us to be converted.

Romans 2:5-6 But after your hardness and impenitent heart treasures up

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unto yourself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; Who will render to every man according to his deeds.

What we have beginning in verse 4 and going through verse 6 is a New Testament practical application of Ecclesiastes 8:11.

Ecclesiastes 8:11 Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.

What Paul is saying here is that because God does not crack down on us right away for something that is going on, it doesn't mean He is overlooking it. He is withholding things because He wants us to come to an understanding ourselves, repent, and change. He is not *approving* of what we are doing.

Let's get it even narrower here. He is saying that if we fail to recognize where this superior, judgmental behavior is taking us, it will gradually turn into arrogance that blinds us to God's goodness in forgiving us in the first place, while at the same time ensures that we are storing up His wrath, which He will surely execute. So the longer we delay in changing, the more intense the punishment is going to be.

We're going to be turning now to the following scriptures because I want you to see, first of all, the example of the Israelites.

Isaiah 63:9-11 In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old. But they **rebelled**, and vexed his holy Spirit: therefore he was turned to be their **enemy**, and he fought against them. Then **he** remembered the days of old, Moses and his people, saying, Where is he that brought them up out of the sea with the shepherd of his flock? Where is he that put his holy Spirit within him?

What this is getting at here is that Israel had a very serious problem. I'm going to turn to Deuteronomy 8:2 and read this warning to you.

Deuteronomy 8:2 And you shall remember **all** the way which the LORD your God led you these forty years in the wilderness.

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Psalm 78:5-11 For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born: who should arise and declare them to their children: That they might set their hope in God, and **not forget the works of God**, but keep his commandments: And might not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation; a generation that set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not stedfast with God. The children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle. They kept not the covenant of God, and refused to walk in his law; And **forgot** his works and his wonders that he had showed them.

Psalm 78:37-42 For their heart was not right with him, neither were they stedfast in his covenant. But he, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, and destroyed them not: yes, many a time turned he his anger away, and did not stir up all his wrath. For he remembered that they were but flesh; a wind that passes away, and comes not again. How oft did they provoke him in the wilderness, and grieve him in the desert! Yes, they turned back and tempted God, and limited the holy One of Israel They remembered not his hand, nor the day when he delivered them from the enemy.

We are called upon to remember "**all of the way.**" One of Israel's most frustrating sins was that they kept forgetting both God's goodness, as well as His faithfulness of His judgment. We cannot afford to follow this example. Paul's warning in Romans 2:4-6 is they are to reflect back on the history of the Israelitish people, and they should know full well that just because God is not coming down on *them* right now does not mean that God is not going to come down on them in the future. They should remember "**ALL of the way,**" and not be deceived into thinking that somehow they are pure and innocent when they are not pure and innocent.

Romans 2:11 For there is no respect of persons with God.

This is another reason why we should always be somewhat uncomfortable with our position. God can and does judge without any partiality. No favoritism is ever shown. God will not deal more generously with us. This is a lesson that Peter had to learn. Instead, He will use the criterion stated so clearly by Jesus in Luke 12:47-48.

Luke 12:47-48 And that servant which knew his lord's will [That's us.] and

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prepared not himself [we're trying to prepare the bride], neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he [the unconverted we may be judging] that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.

We're going to go now to Amos 3:2.

Amos 3:2 You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I *will* punish you for all your iniquities.

Unlike the unconverted in Romans 1, we have almost no excuse. I don't know whether there has ever been a people who have lived, even since the time of Jesus, who have as complete knowledge as we do, and have it so easily available so that we know what to do. We are not in ignorance. Romans 2 is aimed right at us, but the whole chapter is pretty powerful when the whole thing is taken together.

I think we are all aware that there is a reciprocity involved in our relationship with God. This subject of forgiveness is yet another example. Our continuous possession and conscious enjoyment of God's forgiveness is to some degree contingent upon our forgiveness of others. This was one of the Pharisee's major problems. He bragged before God about how good he was.

Jesus gave a parable to illustrate how much we have been forgiven in comparison with the value of others' sins against us. We're going to look at this in Matthew 18. I'm going to read through the whole thing, and then we're going to go back and look at it one or two verses at a time. Please don't forget that in the first section of this sermon where I went through part of Romans 2, the concept in mind was this thing about forgiveness, and being able to forgive others. If we fall short in that, we have fallen short in a major area of the keeping of His commandments.

Matthew 18:21-35 Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times? Jesus said unto him, I say not unto you, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he

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had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow servants which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that you owe. And his fellow servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay you all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt, because you desired me: Should not you also have had compassion on your fellow servant, even as I had pity on you? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you if you from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

This parable supplies one of the answers to the riddles involved in this subject, and it too is one of the easier ones to grasp. Peter's question contains the possibility that maybe he was of the temperament that found it difficult to forgive. But Jesus' reply leaves no room for anybody of **any** disposition to use that as an excuse.

One of our favorite justifications is to claim, "*That's just the way I am. I can't help it.*" Many people have short fuses and long memories that tally up in justices with resentment simmering just below the surface. Some might say, "*I can forgive, but I can't forget.*" That generally unfortunately means, "*I do not quite forgive.*" We are not to take a pardon given, and then put it into an account to be revived if another offense is committed, adding to it what has already been tallied before. We're already beginning to get in deep water here because a reality that we must deal with is: *How does one shut down his memory? How can one blot something out altogether?*

Peter might have had the thought that he had given a very wide allowance when he said "seven times." But Christ's answer lifts the answer completely beyond any hard and fast limit when He said, "Seventy times seven." He didn't mean 490 times, but He gave that response to indicate **times without number**. The expression indicates **endlessness**. The answer then to Peter's question—"How many times must I forgive my brother?—[is] **ALWAYS!** Is that a high standard, or what? That's sobering. We are to forgive, even as

God forgave us, and God is **ever ready** to forgive us. That's what the standard is.

When Peter gave his question, and then stated his own standard, Jesus' response is not dealing with the difficulties of practical application—the difficulties of meeting that high standard—but the extent of our **obligation** to forgive. We are obliged to do it. There is no limit to our obligation. The parable is given in order to help us understand **why** we ought to forgive, and also to give us a measure of understanding of what forgiveness is. If we can grasp these things, the question of "*How often?*" will not even be asked, because the question will be largely answered.

Regarding verse 24, I figured this out for you in modern dollars and cents. The man owed his master ten thousand talents. Using a hundred pounds per talent that comes out to \$3.24 billion American. (I found that by using the 12 ounce Avoirdupois times \$270 an ounce, times ten thousand, and so forth.)

A talent was the largest denomination in the currency of that period. I'm going to give you another way to understand this. We're going to put in back in the time of Jesus, because according to the commentaries, one denarius was the wage of a laborer for one day. If a laborer earned 6 denarius a week, in one thousand weeks he would equal one talent. Do you know how long one thousand weeks is? It's 19-1/4 years. In 19-1/4 years he would have **one** talent. He owed him **ten thousand** talents. Ten thousand times 19-1/4 years is 192,500 years!

The purpose of that huge figure is to portray the immensity of **YOUR** and **MY** debt to God! It is **IMPOSSIBLE** to pay it! It is so immense it is beyond us. It is so immense it took the life of God Himself (our Creator) to pay the penalty—a Man perfectly sinless and divine at the same time! There is absolutely **no way** we can pay that debt, and yet God will very quickly forgive it upon repentance.

There is within us, in human nature, a very strong tendency to minimize our sin. It does not matter what the sin is, because every sin against God is a great sin that incurs the death penalty.

I said earlier that the sense of sin is failure, but there is an additional sense as well. It is the sense of rebellion. It is failure coupled **with** rebellion. Somewhere in the mix of virtually every sin is pride, and pride rages against God in order to exalt the self, and in the end produces sin of some sort. The factor of rebellion is because sin represents the enthroning of the self against God, as being victorious against Him. Think back to Satan. This is why Romans 8:7 says "the carnal mind is enmity against God." It is in rebellion against Him because of pride that is lodged within human nature. It has

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hostility against God. It will not be subject to God's law and rule, because pride makes us want to rule ourselves in place of God.

There is always a tendency to categorize sins as *small* and *great*. This is not entirely wrong in the sense that some sins have greater impact or effect on our fellowman than others. But examined legally again, the wages of sin is death, and it doesn't matter whether we categorize sins as small or great. In the legal sense they are all great because they all carry the death penalty, and that's why it can't be paid. We cannot pay it and live.

David made the following remark in Psalm 40:12

Psalm 40:12 For innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of my head: therefore my heart fails me.

Like Paul, I think that David had a pretty good idea about the complexity and sinfulness of his heart. Now how many hairs do you have on your head? I'm just adding to this picture, helping us to see why we need to ask God for forgiveness every day. It's not just a one-time thing. How many sins, and how many debts, do we owe to God? Do you know? I don't know mine. Do you believe about yourself that the debit side of your ledger is filled to capacity and overflows from one page after another? Do any of us realize the infinite number and overwhelming greatness of our debt owed to the Father?

The next thing to note is in Matthew 18:25. The man, his wife and children are to be sold into slavery, and all of his possessions sold to partially pay the debt. I say **partially** because that would not even come close to satisfying the debt. This may appear harsh, but according to the laws in the Old Testament, for a person to be indentured was a perfectly legal satisfaction for indebtedness.

I want you to notice also that though the wife and children may not have been responsible for the servant's debt, they nonetheless were to suffer **because** of the servant's sins. That is a practical fact of life. We do not sin in a vacuum. There is no such thing as a sin that does not affect others. When we commit a sin, there is no telling how far its effects are going to be borne, and who is going to be poisoned by them. But unwholesome fruit will be produced because "*whatever we sow, we reap.*"

In Matthew 18:26, the debtor's appeal is pitifully weak. He was penniless. How long is it going to take a penniless, bankrupt man to repay \$3 billion? All of these things keep

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adding layer upon layer, and from what Jesus says here, we can understand there is no such thing as ever being able to repay God the debt that we have incurred. No righteousness, no works performed in the future can make up the debt incurred in the past. We have absolutely nothing to offer. Here is where a major element of humility comes in. There is only one thing that will blot out the handwriting of ordinances that is against us, and that is Christ's blood. But at least the debtor's petition gives God the opportunity to reveal His incredible, merciful, magnanimity by means of forgiving the huge debt. Let's see what David wrote in Psalm 103:10-13.

Psalm 103:10-13 He has not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pities his children, so the LORD pities them that fear him.

Now back to Matthew 18:28. Here comes the display of the contrasting actions of many of us. The same man who had a monumental debt mercifully forgiven is in turn owed a pitifully small amount by comparison to what he owed God, but he cannot bring himself to forgive even that pitifully small amount—a hundred pence. That's like a dollar compared to three billion.

Do you ever treasure up somebody's slights? Do you never pigeon-hole for safe keeping, and then use them to draw out at a convenient time as a record of some trivial offense against you? Those are things that are like a dollar against three billion.

It's very likely that all of us will go out from this place, and when somebody rubs us the wrong way, we will very quickly mark down that person's act against us. I want you to understand that the original debtor in this parable was no monster of iniquity. He was "**us**" having been forgiven, but he was not *forgiving*. All of us have fallen short there.

In Matthew 18:31-33, God said "*Even as I had mercy upon you,*" shows that God's forgiveness is the model in terms of the relative magnitude of our sins against Him as compared to the sins against us, the completeness of the forgiveness, and its inexhaustibility as well. Brethren, that is the standard for you and me, and it's not an easy standard to reach. But strive to do so—we must—if we're going to be in His image. Sometimes it's going to require great sacrifices, and we may be hurt repeatedly by the very same people we have forgiven. But brethren, how many times have we sinned against God **since** we were originally forgiven?

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Verses 34 and 35 are really sobering. It's very likely that the servants who ran and told the lord what the debtor had done would very likely have done the same as the original debtor. But we see in these verses for the very first time in the parable that the lord is angry. He's angry at the exposure of the ingratitude of the forgiven man, and he places *the **unpayable debt right back on his head***. Now this is where it gets—"**Oooh!**"

The lesson here is that if we are going to retain a consciousness of being forgiven, we must in our measure and degree imitate what we have received from Him. In Matthew 5 it says, "*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*" There's that reciprocity again. But here is a fact that needs to be considered. In order to be truly merciful in the biblical sense, we must first have been given mercy by God to imitate; otherwise we don't really know what mercy is. Do you see where we're coming here? God has set the standard—the standard by which He has forgiven you and me, the standard by which He has been pitied, the standard by which He has been merciful. This standard becomes the standard that we have to put into practice in our lives.

Just a moment ago I mentioned the unpayable debt being put back on the person's head, and if we have not yet grasped the seriousness of forgiving others, I want to reinforce verses 34 and 35 with a set of verses that appears in Romans 2.

Romans 2:25-29 For circumcision verily profits if you keep the law: but if you be a breaker of the law, your circumcision is made uncircumcision. Therefore if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? [It's talking about judgment here.] And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge you, who by the letter and circumcision do transgress the law? For he is not a Jew which is one outwardly, neither is that a circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

These verses here are the summary of Paul's argument in Romans 2. Circumcision is a code word for us. It is, in relation to the New Covenant, synonymous with baptism, and therefore conversion, of entering into the covenant. When a person (a man) entered into the **Old** Covenant, he was circumcised. When a person, under the **New** Covenant, enters into that covenant, he is circumcised ***in the heart***, and goes through the ritual of baptism. So circumcision is a code word for being baptized and converted, and entering into the covenant.

Think of the application of what Paul is saying in regard to having sin put back on our head because of our failure to forgive others, because that's what happened in Matthew 18:34-35. The sins were put back on the person's head. Baptism/circumcision/conversion does indeed profit, but only if we put the law into practice. If we become transgressors of the law, our circumcision/conversion becomes uncircumcision, and circumcision of the heart, unaccompanied by obedience to God's holy law, is of no value. We are commanded to forgive, and now brethren, that command is part of God's law. It is just as much a part of God's law as "*You shall not steal.*"

Can you see what my drift is here? If we fail to follow through on that, then there is a possibility that God could put the sins that He originally forgave us of back on our heads, because now He considers us unconverted because we're breaking His commandments. This is why I said at the beginning of this sermon that what we're looking at is something that is really subtle. It is not the kind of sin that the world most likely is going to fall into, but it is the kind of sin that the **converted** fall into. It shows a vulnerability of the upright that we have **because** of what we have, and because our heart deceives us into thinking in terms of self-righteousness and superiority simply because we have what we have.

I think that we need to take some time to digest this, because it is something that is somewhat difficult and subtle to grasp. Our circumcision of the heart must be tested and proved. I have a pretty good idea that most of us are beyond the place where we're going to be breaking the Ten Commandments openly and significantly and regularly. We may slip up once in a while, but what we saw today was the kind of sin that we can slide into, and if we're not careful, be practicing without even realizing it. And so our circumcision of the heart has to be tested and proved. Unless we follow through by submitting to God in worshipful obedience in spirit and truth, we too can fail. We have to prove to God that our hearts have been sufficiently softened to enable us to forgive, even as we have been forgiven.