

Teaching Sound Doctrine

What the New Testament Teaches on Forgiveness

Before we get to the heart of this lesson there are some things that should be said about (Indiscriminate Forgiveness). Many people, including Christians, believe that we are obligated to forgive someone whenever they commit a sin. For instance, if a man steals your car, is arrested and put on trial, many believe you should go ahead and forgive him—even though he remains unrepentant. Some see this as the noble thing to do; something that will help me. However, there is no biblical basis for this type of thinking.

The Bible does teach we are to forgive others, but the forgiveness has conditions attached to it. The person who committed the sin must seek forgiveness. Jesus said, “Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him” (Lk. 17:3, 4).

What happens when that same person does not repent and seeks forgiveness? Are we obligated to forgive anyway? No. We are under no greater obligation than God. Paul wrote, “...forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). He will forgive us after we repent (Acts 8:22-24).

If we are authorized or even compelled to forgive someone before he or she repents, what does that do to church discipline? The person from whom a church withdraws is to be forgiven only after that person repents (1 Cor. 5:1-5; 2 Cor. 2:6-11; 7:8-11). Forgiveness before the point of repentance would make the entire process a futile exercise in chaos.

Further, consider the scenario Jesus gives us in Matthew 18:15-17. One brother sins against another. If a one-on-one conversation brings repentance from the sinner, then the issue is solved. However, if the one in the wrong does not make correction, then the offended brother does not forgive him; he takes the next step to bring repentance. The principle laid down is that forgiveness, and thus reconciliation, is extended when the sinner repents, not before.

Christians need to hold people accountable for their actions. Sinners need to know they are sinners and we do not accept them in that condition. If they have personally sinned against us and/or the church, they need to feel the burden of their sin. Our desire for peace or to simply not deal with the problem will not solve the issue. Too, God does not approve of us brushing aside sin in the absence of repentance; something that may endanger our souls.

The devil must surely delight in the condition he finds in many congregations of God's people. He already knows, even if Christians haven't yet learned, that those who bite and devour stand to be consumed one of another (Gal. 5:15). He (Satan) knows that where a congregation is full of hatred and envy, backbiting and slander, offenses and insults unrepented of, which no real progress is to be made in opposing him. He fears not the loss of his subjects to the Lord as a result of the efforts of such a group for "every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand" (Matt. 12:25). They are too busy fighting one another to fight him and are too divided over their petty differences (many times personal matters that should have been settled privately, but when brought into

the church, were introduced through gossip instead of in the God-ordained way that brethren might "judge" between the two sides and bring the guilty to repentance or else withdraw from him) to try to convert their community and the world to Christ.

Have you ever known churches of the Lord in which there were brethren who never missed a single service, but who bore grudges and ill-will which would not permit them to speak to or even to sit on the side of the building with some others who were just as steadfast in attending the services? One or the other, or both, were wrong. Many such conditions are prevalent, but such is in the devil's favor and to the detriment of the Lord's cause.

Brethren need to study the teaching of God's word on the matter of forgiveness. Jesus taught more on this subject than on water baptism, and the apostles found it necessary to admonish Christians to "forbear one another and forgive one another" (Col. 3:13).

Offenses will come but when an offense has been committed, duties are enjoined for both the person guilty of the offense and the one who is offended. It is a "two-way street," and with the principles involved we concern ourselves here.

Duties of the Offender

In Matt. 5:21-24 Jesus teaches that acceptable worship to God is predicated upon our feelings toward our brother. Having shown the danger of grudge-bearing and of being angry toward another in verse 22, He then states, "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." Thus, when one is aware that a brother "hath aught against him," he should go to the brother and beg his forgiveness. And there is a sense of urgency in the words of Jesus, "FIRST be reconciled" and then offer the gift. It ill behoves an offender to wait for the offended one to come and tell him of the offense if he is aware of having committed it. Delay might be deadly and his worship is unacceptable.

There is further imposed on the one who is guilty the duty of repenting of the offense against his brother. Now since repentance takes place within, the offender may feign penitence to the offended one, but he does not escape the knowledge of God in the dissemblance. Jesus advised, "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and IF He REPENT, forgive him" (Lk. 17:3). Young defines the word here translated repent as "to have another mind," thus to change one's mind. Involved in repentance is the recognition of having done wrongfully, confessing it and turning from it. It is insufficient to say to one whom we have sinned, "IF I have sinned against you . . ." This is pride refusing to admit guilt, and it is to one's own condemnation when he is unable to go to one whom he has injured (by word or by deed) and admit his guilt while asking forgiveness.

Duties of the Offended

It is entirely possible for one to be guilty of offending or harming another and yet be unaware of it, in which case it becomes the duty of the offended to go to the offender even as it is when the offender knows but does not do his duty. Jesus said, "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him" That the peace between them may not be broken, the offended person, not stubbornly waiting to see whether the offender will come to him and beg his forgiveness goes

to the offender and rebukes him for his error.

Some principles that most assuredly should be learned and practiced are found in Jesus' words in Mat. 18:15-17. Again the first of these is that of the offended going to the offender and "telling him his fault between thee and him alone." This is the rebuke of Luke 17:3. Here it should be borne in mind that "hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins" (Prov. 10:12) and, with confidence in the one being rebuked, that a reproof entereth more into a wise man than an hundred stripes into a fool" (Prov. 17:10). And surely "meekness" and "consideration of self" are necessary as in no other circumstance (Gal. 6:1). "If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother".

Many make the argument to set aside the responsibility of going to the guilty does not alter the command, but if the guilty fails to hear the offended one in their private discussion, the offended should then take two or three witnesses that every word may be made sure. If this action still does not avail, then and only then is it to be taken to the church, not through the chain of gossip but by the offended and the witnesses before 'whom the two parties aired their differences. The court in which differences between brethren are to be heard and in which a judgment is to be made is the court of the saints of God, and the only law to which one who is a brother is to be taken by another brother is the law of God which is perfect, right and clean (Psa. 19:7-9). Inspiration's use of Paul's pen asks, "Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? " (1 Cor. 6:1-6). Should this action fail, the offender is to be counted as an heathen man and a publican. Paul terms the action of the church upon the unrepentant as deliverance "unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit may be saved in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 5:5).

Forgiveness is a further duty of the offended whether the offender repents after the first admonition or only after the action of the church. "If he repent, forgive him." And if after the action of the church, then the church too must exercise forgiveness toward him (II Cor. 2:6-7).

Frequency of Forgiveness

Many still want to ask, "How often shall I forgive one who has sinned against me?" Peter asked the same question and the Master answered plainly, "Until seventy times seven" (Mat. 18:21-22). Again, "If he (thy brother) sin against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee saying, I repent, thou shalt forgive him" (Lk. 17:4). Even these do not place a limit on the number of times we forgive an offender, but are an expression of infinity. Just as we call upon God times without number to forgive us the trespasses of His laws, so is the willingness to forgive those who sin against us to be characteristic of us. God's forgiveness of our wrongs is predicated upon our forgiving those who wrong us (Mat. 6:14-15; Mk. 11:25).

The Finality of Forgiveness

Frequently is the prayer offered, "Forgive our sins and remember them against us no more." Yet, who of us has not heard one who claims to have forgiven another a trespass make the statement, "I'll forgive, but I can't forget." Forgiveness is forgetfulness so far as ceasing to hold the person guilty of the offense, never to be laid to his charge again. There is finality about forgiveness when forgiveness is from the heart, and only such avails before God (Mat. 18:35).

The person who forgives another will not ask, "Does this mean that I must shake his hand, go out the same door, speak to him, etc?" Just as God's forgiveness of our sins heals the breach between Him and us, so our forgiveness of the sins of another against us heals the breach that had existed.

Barriers to Forgiveness

The processes of restoring peace between persons are sometimes hindered by the erection of barriers such as pride and sins of the tongue. Perhaps James intended the prevention of gossip when he wrote of converting a sinner and "covering a multitude of sins" (Jas. 5:19-20). Paul recognized the harm and destruction of gossip when he admonished, "study to be quiet, and to do your own business . . . even as we charged you" (I Thes. 4:11) and when he rebuked "busy-bodilying" (II Thes. 3:11). Any time an offense finds the circuit of gossip, solutions to the problem become increasingly difficult.

The barrier of foolish and stubborn pride is destructive to the proud, for he whose pride will not suffer to go to one whom he has offended and repent and plead for forgiveness will by that pride be hindered from admitting his guilt of trespasses before God without which he cannot be forgiven of God (I Jno. 1:8-10). Or the person who refuses because of pride to forgive one who comes to him in penitence has no forgiveness of God. "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18), and "a man's pride shall bring him low: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit" (Prov. 29:23).

Let us all work to the end that we may be able to sing with David, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Psa. 133:1).