

# Forgiveness

## Part I

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My wife, Carolyn, practiced law for many years. One day a woman came to her office to talk about an old law case in which she had been a party. The dispute happened fifteen years earlier, yet the way the woman talked, it could have happened the prior week. Sadly, even after fifteen years, the woman was full of bitterness and unforgiveness toward the person on the other side. What bondage of body, soul, and spirit she was in!

We have all wrestled with the sins of bitterness and unforgiveness. You can't live in this world without encountering people who hurt you, often when you have done nothing wrong. It is at these times that we must bring to bear the biblical principles of forgiveness if we are to continue our fruitful walk with Jesus.

Jesus set the standard for us in the area of forgiveness when he answered this question of Peter's.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Matt 18:21,22 NIV)

Of course, we know that Jesus didn't mean that we should take His response literally and count seventy-seven trespasses by someone against us thereby giving us the liberty to not forgive (or worse yet, retaliate) on the seventy-eighth offense. Jesus' point was that forgiveness is to be unlimited.

Notice that when Jesus told Peter he must forgive his trespasser seventy-seven times, He didn't deny the trespass. He didn't pretend that it didn't happen or that it really wasn't so bad as all that. Nor did Jesus say that the other person would pay for his actions. Rather, He focused on the one who has been wronged as one who must forgive.

Jesus' response to Peter's question was a revolutionary way of thinking for the Jews of His day. Throughout the Old Testament, the general principles the Israelites lived by were vengeance, retribution, and warfare against one's enemies. Most often, the consequence which flowed from a hostile act was an even more hostile act. The Jews of Jesus' day had the same attitude as did those of the Old Testament. They did not view forgiveness as a virtue. We can see this when Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'" (Mat 5:38 NIV) He also said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" (Mat 5:43 NIV) It was only when Jesus began to teach the principles of the

kingdom of God that forgiveness became a virtue.

### The Act of Forgiving Someone is Meant to Set Us Free

Why did Jesus (and other Scriptures) make it so clear that we must forgive those who have trespassed against us? The answer is that it is only when we forgive someone for what they have done

to us that we become free. *Forgiveness is for us! It sets us free.* In fact, it often has nothing to do with the other person.

To the Jews who had believed in him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:31,32,36 NIV)

### From What Are We Set Free When We Forgive?

When we forgive someone for a hurt he or she has caused us, we are freed from anger, resentment, and a growing root of bitterness in our soul and spirit. Galatians 5:1 says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." I am absolutely convinced that one area of that bondage of slavery we are freed from in Christ is bitterness! What a wonderful gift that is.

Remember, we are spirit beings. We have a spirit, a soul, and a body. Our spirits enable us to commune with the spirit world. Our souls are composed of our mind, our emotions, and our will. We live in a body. When we harbor bitterness, we contaminate our entire being. Our spirits are hindered in our communication with God and we are more subject to attack by the demonic world. Our souls also become contaminated as our minds dwell on the trespass and our emotions are stirred up by anger, resentment, and vindictiveness. Eventually, even our bodies can be affected.

Paul actually commands us to get rid of all bitterness. "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice." (Eph 4:31 NIV) Peter, in the books of Acts, says to Simon the Sorcerer, "For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." (Acts 8:23 NIV)

Like Simon the Sorcerer, if we have the root of bitterness within us, it comes out.

"Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. *For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*" (Matt 12:33-37 NIV, emphasis added. See also Luke 6:43-45.) "*For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.*" (v 45, emphasis added)

### The Lord Tests Our Hearts

Even if we try to hide unforgiveness or bitterness, the Lord always knows it's there because He tests our hearts. "The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the heart." (Pro 17:3 NIV) Why does Jesus test our hearts? Because He wants us to become aware of these sins and to repent. It is not

pleasing to our Lord and, as we have already seen, it is bondage to us.

How often have we asked the Lord to search our hearts? "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psa 139:23,24 NIV) "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer." (Psa 19:14 NIV) Once we pray these kinds of prayers, we may forget about them but the Lord doesn't! He sends His Holy Spirit to penetrate our innermost being. The Holy Spirit probes our hearts and souls to expose any unforgiveness or bitterness.

## Consequences of Unforgiveness

### 1. God Only Forgives Us to the Extent We Forgive Others

It is extremely important to understand that harboring unforgiveness in our hearts is a sin. Jesus told us that we are to forgive seventy-seven times so to disobey this directive is sin. It is also extremely important to come to an understanding of just how serious a sin it is in the Lord's eyes. Let's look at the parable of the unforgiving servant that Jesus told his disciples.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back' "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." (Mat 18:23-35 NIV)

There is a very sobering principle embodied in this parable. It is that God only forgives us to the extent that we forgive others. How can that be when we know that God forgives all our sins? Well, He does, but only after we have repented of them. So if we allow the root of bitterness and unforgiveness to nest in our hearts, we are keeping ourselves in a constant state of the sin of unforgiveness. Jesus reiterated this principle in the Lord's prayer.

"Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. . ." (Luk 11:4 NIV)

This principle is really the only way we can explain the other verses in the New Testament that say the same thing. "For if you

forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." (Mat 6:14 NIV) This verse contains what is called a conditional covenant. It is an "if. . . then" type of verse. *If* we forgive men their sin against us, *then* our heavenly Father also forgives us! We see this principle again in Luke. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. *Forgive, and you will be forgiven.*" (Luk 6:37 NIV, emphasis added.)

### 2. We Can Become Sick

Another consequence of unforgiveness is that it can even make us physically ill. Let's look at the principle in James 5:14-16.

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.* The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. (NIV, emphasis added.)

In today's church we use this Scripture to call sick people up to the altar during or after our services so that the elders can anoint the sick with oil and pray for healing. That's fine. But the deeper meaning embedded in these verses is of someone being really ill, perhaps with a life threatening illness, and having the elders of the church pray until they get the mind of the Lord about any underlying cause of the illness. Often, if someone harbors bitterness for years, it is like a cancer in the body. It can actually cause someone to become ill. These verses charge the elders to pray for the sick person, perhaps for days or even weeks, to see if there is any sin the person is holding on to that is blocking the healing. That's why James put the verses about sin and repentance right in the middle of these verses about healing. If the elders of the church pray through to the mind of the Lord, (and by elder I mean anyone mature in the Lord who knows how to pray), then they can confront the sick person with that sin and help work through the forgiveness necessary to unblock the healing.

Let me hasten to add that I am not saying all illness is caused by the sin of unforgiveness, or any other sin for that matter. There are many reasons for illness. We just need to be sure that if it is a root of bitterness or unforgiveness, it is repented from so that the healing can flow.

### 3. Unforgiveness Damages Relationships With Others

Hebrews 12 tells us that the root of bitterness grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. *See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.* (Heb 12:14,15 NIV, emphasis added.)

A bitter person often causes trouble in every relationship in which he or she is involved. This includes among family members, friends, within their local church, and even in the workplace. As we shall see later in the teaching, the enemy of our soul loves our roots of bitterness. The demonic world can stir up endless trouble for us and those around us through this particular sin.

Sadly, we have lots of examples of relationship breaches throughout the Bible. Remember Jacob and Esau? After Jacob deceitfully stole Esau's birthright, he had to flee for his life. While he was away, his mother, whom he loved, died. So one of the many consequences of this breach was that Jacob never saw his mother again. It was many years before the two brothers healed their relationship. (See Genesis, 27, 32, 33.)

And, of course, we have the story of Joseph and his brothers. (See Genesis 37 and 50.) Here again it was years before these brothers were reunited. Not only that but their fight caused their father untold sorrow and heartache.

But, even if we manage to maintain good relations within our families, and so on, the root of bitterness defiles many. Matthew 12:34 states, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." I concluded years ago that a bitter person will always eventually let that bitterness come out in his or her speech. When it does come it is defiling to the hearers, especially if we have to listen to it over and over again!

If we know someone like that, we, as believers, need to pray and ask the Holy Spirit how to handle the situation. Often we need to confront that person, in love, but confront nevertheless. If we don't, after a while we may become part of their problem instead of part of their solution. Of course, their solution is Christ. This is especially true if the person is already a believer. That's part of the James 5 concept of the elders confronting the sin of the sick person so that healing can flow. Even if the person is not physically sick, there is still the illness of the soul and spirit that demands repentance.

#### **4. Unforgiveness Damages the Church Body**

Unforgiveness between two believers causes a horrible breach of unity in the body of Christ. This is especially true if both people belong to the same local church. Here are Paul's words in Philippians 4.

"I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life." (Phi 4:2,3 NIV)

Here we see that Paul was so concerned about the apparent breach between these two women, Euodia and Syntyche, that he actually included their fight in his letter to the Philippian church. How would you like to be remembered forever in writing as someone who had an ongoing breach with another Christian?!

Fortunately we also have a good example of believers having a disagreement resulting in a breach of fellowship but seeing that breach healed later on. Remember the falling out Paul and Barnabas had over Mark?

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. (Acts 15:36-40 NIV)

Paul and Barnabas had such a falling out that they chose not to minister together for a time. But we know that later on in Paul's life, he and Mark healed their breach and Mark became a helper to Paul. (See 2 Tim 4:11; Phm 1:23,24.) I suspect that Mark was simply immature in the beginning and, as he matured, and possibly Paul mellowed a bit, they reconciled.

In any event, we are called by the Lord to absolute unity in the body of Christ.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to one hope when you were called--one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all . . . From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Eph 4:1-6,16 NIV)

#### **The Authority to Forgive Sin**

Let's look at a verse that has been so difficult for many believers. "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (Jn 20:23 NIV) This is the primary verse Catholics use to justify the doctrine requiring them to confess their sins to a priest. We Protestants have more or less simply ignored this verse. I believe by ignoring John 20:23 we have diminished our understanding of the power Jesus gave us, especially when we understand and practice the biblical principle of binding and loosing.

Let me explain. We know Jesus had the authority to forgive sins. "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . ." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home." (Mat 9:6 ) Furthermore, we know that Jesus has all authority over heaven and earth. (Mat 28:18) So, when Jesus said to His disciples that anyone's sins that they forgave are forgiven, and conversely, if they did not forgive someone's sins, then those sins weren't forgiven, He (Jesus) was conferring the authority to forgive sins to His church. We, as His church, have never lost that authority. But we have tended to ignore it.

Allow me to quote theologian William Charles Morro.

"The power of binding and loosing, which means forbidding and allowing, was granted to Peter and to the Christian community (Mat 16:19; 18:18; Jn 20:23). It clearly implies the possession of the power to forgive sins. In the case of Peter's power it was exercised when he used the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Mat 16:19). This consisted of the proclamation of the gospel and especially of the conditions upon which men might enter into relationship with God (Acts 2:38; 10:34ff). It was not limited to Peter only, but was shared by the other apostles (Mat 16:19; 18:18). Christ left no fixed rules the observance or non-observance of which would determine whether one is or is not in the kingdom of God. He gave to His disciples principles, and in the application of these principles to the problems of life there had to be the exercise of discriminating judgment. The exercise of this judgment was left to the Christian community (2 Cor 2:10). It is limited by

the principles which are the basis of the kingdom, but within these principles the voice of the community is supreme. . . .<sup>1</sup>

It is this transferred authority from Christ to each believer that gives an individual the right to forgive someone who has sinned against them. Jesus also transferred this same authority to the corporate church or to the leadership of the local church. Thus the local church's leaders have the corporate authority to either forgive or withhold forgiveness as, for example, in church discipline. (We discuss this more in depth in Part II of this teaching.)

### **To Forgive Another Is an Act of the Will**

As we have seen, unforgiveness is a sin. If we continue to hold onto this unforgiveness, it eventually grows into a root of bitterness. There is only one way to rid ourselves of that sin and the bondage that accompanies it. That is to make the *decision to forgive. It is an act of the will.* Look at what the Lord said to Cain when he was angry at Able.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, *sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.*" (Genesis 4:6-7, emphasis added. See also 1 Jn 3:12)

Here God is confronting Cain with his sin. Or rather He is telling Cain that he is on the verge of committing a sin (it is crouching at his door.) Then the Lord tells him that he must master it. Notice that God didn't tell Cain that He, God, would take care of it. Rather God is making it clear that it is Cain's responsibility to take hold of his thoughts and emotions and to not allow that sin to get a grip on him.

In other words, God is telling Cain to engage his own will and take control of his own thoughts and actions. These same instructions from God apply to us as believers today. We are to engage our wills in this process. We must, as an act of our will, decide to forgive our offender, and then we must do it.

In Part II of this teaching we will examine how we forgive someone, whether or not consequences need to flow even with forgiveness, setting boundaries of behavior within the church,

and how the enemy manipulates us if we are unforgiving. Finally, we will look at God's role in the forgiveness process and why we must keep our thinking right before the Lord concerning the hard things that happen to us in this life.

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<sup>1</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Volume II, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI., Page 1133.