

Forgiving All Trespasses

An arresting statement follows the Lord's Prayer: "...but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:15). That is an explicit statement with no qualifications.

Several times lately we have heard a person whose loved one was killed by some unknown attacker declare, "I have forgiven whoever it was who did it." Must we offer that sort of forgiveness in order to be forgiven?

Some explicit statements have qualifications. For instance, Jesus also taught, "Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you" (Matt. 5:42). Does that mean every beggar and every borrower must be helped? Paul gave us at least one exception. Speaking of the deadbeats in Thessalonica he wrote, "For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If any one will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work" (2 Thes. 3:10-11). By giving to a person who refuses to work one becomes an enabler of his unacceptable behavior.

Does Jesus demand of us a virtue that the Father does not possess? I think not. God does not forgive all who offend him. Just a bit from Romans 2 (v. 4-5) teaches otherwise: "Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." The impenitent heart will not be rewarded by God's grace. God has always demanded repentance before forgiveness. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Christ's atonement provided forgiving grace, but it is not irresistible grace. If those who do not accept his grace are forgiven anyway, their sin is rewarded, license is given to sin, and criminality is unrestrained. God would thus become an enabler of sin. Those who do not accept Jesus' payment for their sins must pay for themselves. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

Disciples are not called upon to forgive the impenitent. "Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in a day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him" (Luke 17:3-4).

What is the proper attitude toward offenders? Jesus was not giving approval of an unmerciful, hateful, or vengeful attitude. God is still our model of loving care even for the impenitent. Paul pleads, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:19-21). We must not react out of personal indignation or self-gratification in rendering vengeance. But God avenges, exacting a penalty of punishment according to divine justice. In temporal avenging, God recognizes civil government as an agency for social organization and rendering of justice (see Ch. 13: 1-7). The disciple may appeal to this *minister/servant* of God for the administration of justice in avenging the offender.

He may file charges and offer testimony with the pure motive of bringing about justice rather than settling of vengeful feelings.

In personal relationships, concern for the offender and justice should first bring a face-to-face communication of rebuke (Lk. 17:3-4). “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Etc.” (Matt. 18:15-34).

In dealing with the impenitent disciple who flaunted his adultery in Corinth, Paul instructed, “You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5). To the repentant, forgiveness should extend indefinitely – “seventy times seven.” And the parable of the unforgiving servant reminds us that we all need forgiveness and should show mercy to others as we want and receive mercy. A person, however, may forgive a swindler, rapist, or murderer while justice is still being avenged by organized society by fines, imprisonment, or execution.

Our gracious concern for the vilest of humans makes us more eager to correct, restore, and forgive than to outpour our fury in self-satisfying vengeance. Mercy is preferable to justice and avenging, especially when we are the offender. ☺ Mercy, however, must not encourage lawlessness, giving license to sin.

The piety claimed by some in forgiving offenders is unbelievable. For a wife to claim to forgive her unrepentant husband’s sustained affairs with other women, saying, “I forgive you and forget your offenses as though they never happened,” would be unrealistic. That is about like the celebrity divorcees declaring that they are still good friends with their former spouses. That is as phony as all the rest of Hollywood.

For our own emotional sake we must conquer our hatred and bring resolution to ill feelings. To harbor hatred does not affect the offender but it can destroy the offended if wrath is nurtured and allowed to boil within. We can work to erase emotional scars while dealing with justice for the offender more logically.

The truly penitent person may find it hard to forgive self, so special demonstration of loving forgiveness is needed. The adulterer in Corinth found himself in this state, so Paul wrote the disciples, “so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him” (2 Cor. 2:7-8). When the disciples reaffirmed their loving forgiveness to him, it was a happy ending for such an ugly, sordid affair!

While we must have a forgiving heart, we must distinguish between forgiving and condoning. To condone is to accept without protest or censure some reprehensible act or condition. To forgive is to give up not only of any claim to requital or retribution but also of any resentment or desire for revenge. God does not condone our faults but paid the deadly cost for them. To the penitent who accept his gift of life, he gives up any claim of requital or retribution and also any resentment or desire for revenge.

In view of all this, Jesus still urges, “If he repents, forgive him!” (Luke 17:3:4). There are no exceptions! This is not just an option, for “if you do not forgive men their

trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:15). It is time to clean out the heart! []