

FORGIVENESS

by Michael Smith

Chapter 3 from the book, *Walking With Jesus* (2002/2017)

Most of us at some stage in our lives have found it hard to forgive someone who has deeply hurt us or a loved one near to us. We sometimes hear a person say, “I will *never* forgive.” And so, the question arises: should we forgive others, and if so, how, if our hearts are filled with hurt or anger?

The first Good Friday nearly 2000 years ago reminds us that when Jesus was nailed on the cross His first words were, “Father forgive them because they don’t know what they are doing.” This prayer has been answered down the ages every time a person repents, turns to Christ, and seeks forgiveness. As the Apostle John wrote decades later, “the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin” [1].

Jesus had come to bless us and save us from our sins and give us the priceless gift of eternal life, but many men - then and now - found Jesus too demanding and holy and so kept away from Him. They loved the ways of darkness more than God’s ways of light and truth.

Jesus taught that God expects us to forgive others, and this is essential to our well-being. He taught that if we want God to forgive us our sins against Him we must be willing to forgive others their sins against us, and that if we are unwilling to forgive others then God is unable to forgive us [2] because our hardness of heart towards others blocks God’s grace and forgiveness from reaching us. Our refusal to forgive is like a cancer that spreads within our hearts and will in time eat us up.

True forgiveness, then, is an act of our wills: we *decide* whether to forgive another or not. When we suffer rejection, betrayal or some tragedy at the hands of someone close to us and we are deeply hurt it is all too easy for our hearts to harden, leading to resentment, bitterness [3] and hatred. If we allow our hearts to become filled with these destructive emotions we do ourselves great harm; we become sour within, and so it is for our own good that Jesus emphasised the need to forgive others regardless of what they may have done to us. God promises that *He* will deal with those who are wicked and evil and we must leave it up to Him and never seek to avenge ourselves. He alone sees all that is deep-down in a person’s heart, and He alone has the wisdom needed to deal with it perfectly [4].

It is also helpful to remember we have all offended God [5] and we all stand guilty before Him, so we can’t really point the finger at others. But God is merciful and gracious so that if we sincerely seek His forgiveness He is only too ready to wipe the slate clean so that our sins are blotted out and forgotten, and we stand before Him as if we had never sinned; we are spotless in God’s sight [6].

The message of Good Friday is one of forgiveness and reconciliation between God and man. On the cross of Calvary Jesus was tested to the ultimate degree - if God was willing to take our sins upon Himself and blot them out as if we had never sinned at such cost to Himself, then we in turn should be willing to extend mercy and forgiveness to those who have harmed, rejected or hurt us.

We forgive others because the Lord has forgiven us, and we forgive others in exactly the same *way* the Lord forgave us. That is, as God was willing to forgive us for our sins and forgave us when we came to Him in repentance, so we too must be willing to forgive those who have wronged us and forgive them when they come to us in repentance.

A wonderful example of this was Corrie ten Boom who forgave the man who had been a guard at Ravensbruck, one of the unspeakable German death camps, in which her sister Betsie had died. This man had subsequently become a Christian and he came to Corrie, following a meeting at which she

had been speaking two years after the war ended, to ask her forgiveness. Corrie said that to be able to do that from her heart required every ounce of grace that God could give her.

It isn't easy to forgive others - indeed, it can be very hard to wipe the slate clean and let the offender off when deep down, humanly, we want to get even and pay the other person back. But God reminds us that we have all sinned and that when we repented and asked for God's forgiveness, He forgave us. Likewise, we are asked to do the same to others when they repent and ask our forgiveness.

Sometimes, even when we are willing before God to forgive someone, they remain unrepentant, in which case there can be no reconciliation and healing of the relationship. But we can still ask God in prayer to lift away from our heart and mind any hurt, pain, resentment, anger, bitterness, or hardness we may have toward the person concerned, and by this we will also save ourselves from some of the physical bodily consequences which can result from a heart filled with unforgiveness or hatred [7]. Another terrible outcome of unforgiveness, and the worst tragedy of all, is that it cuts us off from fellowship with God, through Jesus Christ.

Most people at some time in their lives have been deeply hurt by another or suffered some tragedy through someone else's fault. True forgiveness isn't easy and without God's help, grace and love it may be humanly impossible to be willing to forgive another who has deeply offended, hurt or damaged us. It is only God's help, grace, forgiveness and strength that will carry us through without the situation crippling us in body, mind or spirit. For this reason, the message of Good Friday is so important for all of us.

On Good Friday, the battle against sin raged on the cross. But Easter Day is the time to rejoice because the battle was won; sin had been cleansed by Jesus' shed blood, Satan had been defeated and his evil works destroyed, and every barrier between God and man had been removed so that the way was open for fellowship with the Father and the prospect of eternal life with Him. The Lord's Resurrection is a time of victorious celebration because God has done for us what we could never do for ourselves and having won the victory He freely shares it with us as a gift. The only question is, will you open your heart and receive all the blessings that God has for you through Jesus?

**HEAVENLY FATHER,
please give me your grace and strength
to forgive all those who have hurt me in the past,
as I also ask You to forgive me all my sins. Amen.**

Footnotes:

(1) 1 John 1:6-10. (2) Mark 11:25-26; Luke 11:4; and 23:33-34. (3) Hebrews 12:14-15. (4) Romans 12:19-21. (5) Romans 3:10-12. (6) Romans 4:7-8. (7) In a TV programme on BBC1 aired on 17th January 2001, doctors said that a person hanging onto anger or resentment into middle age is more likely to suffer from heart disease, cancer, depression, headaches, social isolation or accidents.