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Mini Study - 39

FORGIVE - AND FORGET?

*"But if you forgive not men their trespasses
neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:15).*

*"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins,
and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9).*

A child is brutally murdered. As a Christian do you forgive the thug who took his life away? Should you forgive "the bombers"? Families can be driven apart by such. Even professing Christians will harbor a grudge, sometimes for years, as past perceived hurts are allowed to fester. An entire church can be torn apart by unresolved internal disputes. The idea of forgiveness is troubling and often misunderstood.

- Forgiveness implies wrong-doing at some level. Sin is "*debt*" said Jesus (Matthew 6:12). It's a matter between two human entities. But God is also always an offended party, for, as King David notes: "*...against you only have I sinned*" (Psalm 51:4) - despite his adulterous involvement with Bathsheba. It may not be admitted, but all wrong-doing, no matter how trivial, is *sin*.
- Sin is defined as anything that "*...falls short of the glory of God.*" That's pretty much all human behaviour! As such, forgiveness is mediated only through Jesus Christ and his sacrifice. Sin stems from the inner man, the "heart", and remains hanging over us until forgiven. The personal need for forgiveness, and to offer forgiveness, affects every human: Christian, humanist, atheist, all faiths. It spoils relationships at every level: personal, family, nationally, globally.
- Those in whom dwells the Spirit of God, Christians, are already forgiven past sin: "*...Christ Jesus, Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God*" (Romans 3:25). That's permanent, an immutable divine promise. It's "in the bank." But Christians are not immune to sin *after* conversion (I John 1:9).
- Even in the community of Christians sin is a cancer that blights assemblies and, unless adequately, and Biblically, addressed, eats away at unity and harmony among the brethren. And that demands *forgiveness*.
- In the so-called "Lord's prayer" Jesus addressed his teaching to those who can call God "Father." That is, to the Spirit-begotten, those who have entered into a relationship with Him through faith in Christ. Yet the one aspect of his teaching he returns to is this matter of forgiveness: "*...for if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*" (Matthew 6:14-15). What does Jesus mean?
- His words do not negate the fact of our forgiveness at conversion. It does not mean that God will blot us out

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of the Book of Life if we fail to forgive. It does not mean He will hold past (pre-conversion) sin against us (Psalm 103:12). It *does* mean that He will deal with us. The consequences are *temporal* - not eternal, necessarily. Our Father corrects us in this life. Note Hebrews 12: "...*But you have forgotten that the Scriptures say to God's children, "When the Lord punishes you, don't make light of it, and when he corrects you, don't be discouraged. The Lord corrects the people he loves and disciplines those he calls his own"* (vv.5-6 CEV). That's here and now (not future "purgatory"), for Christians are now, in this life, being judged. Wrote Paul: "... *we must each be careful how we build.... But if [our spiritual building] is destroyed by the fire, we will lose everything. Yet we ourselves will be saved, like someone escaping from flames*" (I Corinthians 3:10,15 CEV). Jesus adds: "*As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten*" (Revelations 3:19).

- Christians are to "*be one*" said Jesus (John 17:21), in harmony with one another. Given contentious human nature that means we must forgive one another. Who knows that the "problems" we face, individually or as a local church or a denomination, are not the direct consequence of failure to forgive. They could be the Father's loving chastisement.
- To forgive is to "let go," "lay aside" (Gk *aphiemi*). Since Jesus commands us to forgive, then, no matter how serious (or trivial) the situation, *it is possible though often difficult for us to do so*. He details a procedure to deal with it (Matthew 18:15-18). Ideally (v.15) you "*tell him his fault*", privately, face-to-face, confidentially. The Greek (*elencho*) implies explanation, persuasion. If the individual accepts his guilt, repents (Luke 17:4), reconciliation can then take place and the relationship can be enhanced. (Note that this process is non-confrontational; if the accusation was wrong the air is cleared.) If the offence is real, but the "sinner" refuses to repent - Jesus explains the next step(s).
- Conversely, if you offend (sin against, annoy, upset) a brother or sister, an "apology" is not enough. Get the offended person to acknowledge your repentance. Otherwise it may simply fester. If, when you ask forgiveness, they say "*I forgive you*" that is a promise, a vow, before God and means they will not bring up the matter to you, to anyone else, nor to himself. Do this and you will indeed come "to forget" and the broken relationship can be repaired and improved.

(All Scripture references are KJV unless otherwise noted.)

Published by:
The Churches of God Outreach Ministries
PO Box 54621
Tulsa, OK 74155-0621
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