

JESUS, OUR EXAMPLE IN FORGIVENESS

by

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Introduction

Today we are going to talk about Jesus as our example in forgiveness. Ephesians 4:32 is one of the places in Holy Scripture that sends forth this idea, saying, "*And be ye kind one to another tenderhearted forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.*"

Notice the point of emphasis here: "*even as.*" You forgive "*even as,*" which would indicate that God's forgiveness has set the example for us as to how we are to deal with one another in the problems that arise. Now if there is anyone here who has never been the occasion of an offense, or if there is anyone here who has never been offended along the way, then you are excused. You can go drink coffee or visit with friends or whatever. But, we mortal folks need to hear a word along this line.

Surely God does not expect us to exercise the kind of forgiving spirit toward one another that He showed toward us, does He? The scripture says yes, He does. He does because, on the one hand, we are Christians. We call ourselves that "Christlings." You have ducks, and you have ducklings, which means little ducks growing towards becoming big ducks. And you have Christ, and you have Christians, which means we are the same nature, and we are growing up in Christ. Therefore, it is expected that the little ducks will quack like the big ducks and will walk

like them and swim like them, and it is expected that the Christian will manifest Christ in attitudes, in action and in this emotional area of forgiveness.

When you stop to think about it, the Bible does not present the Christian as a student of Christ but as a disciple of Christ. Is there a difference in the two? Indeed! There would be a great deal of difference if I stood before you this morning and said, "I am a student of Karl Marx." By that I would mean I'm studying Marx's writings. I am interested in his economic philosophy or his political philosophy. That would be one thing. It would be a totally different thing if I stood before you and said, "I am a disciple of Karl Marx." That would mean I am a Communist, that I agree with him, I'm trying to emulate Him, I'm trying to put his principles into effect in my life and in the lives of people whom I can influence. While we are students and we pursue diligently in the study of the teachings of Holy Scripture, none the less, we are disciples of our Lord, which means that we seek to emulate him, and we seek to put His principles into effect. When He teaches us on this matter of forgiveness, it behooves us as the people of God to put into effect what principles He has taught and demonstrated to us.

Now, let me drive four little pegs and hang a few thoughts on each of them to help you see as I move along through this.

DEFINITION OF FORGIVENESS

Let me speak a word to you first about the definition of forgiveness. What does it mean to forgive?

A word study

If you approach the subject from the lexical standpoint (looking at Biblical words), you will find there are four basic words used in the Biblical languages that have to do with, or are translated, forgive. There are three words in the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, and one primary word in the Greek language of the New Testament. In the Old Testament you have *kaphar* on the one hand, which means to cover. It is our idea of atonement. In fact, our word atonement means to cover. You have *nasa*, which has the idea of lifting up and carrying away, removing in the sense of forgiveness. *Shalach* has the idea of sending away. It is the removing, only in this instance it is sent rather than carried. When we come to the New Testament, *aphiemi* means to lift up and send forth or to remove. So, from those four words you see the basic idea of forgiveness is either to lift up and carry away or to send away. So it has to do with the removing. The removing of what? Of two things: First, the removing of the cause of offense. You see, when God forgives our sins, He takes away the sin and the thing that caused the problem. The offense, whether it is rebellion or missing the mark or whatever sort it is, that thing is taken away. Now that is the one aspect. The second thing that is removed is the punishment that is due. So, in the matter of forgiveness there is (1) the removing of the cause of offense and (2) the removing of the punishment that should come as a consequence.

Now, let us say that in daily life some brother says something or does something, and I'm offended by it. I am hurt, and I have a little personal pity party for a while. He doesn't have a right to do that to me, I feel, or it is not fair for him to accuse me of that or to feel that way toward me, whatever it maybe. Now, when I forgive, two things are going to happen: (1) The cause of that offense is going to cease. That is to say, I no longer will hold that issue against him, and whatever it was that caused me to feel as I feel is going to be dropped. It is not going to be dealt with anymore. Then (2) whatever it is that I expect him to do to get right with me again

(you know, if the scoundrel will come and get on his knees and apologize to me, or whatever it is that he needs to do, in my opinion, to get right with me again), when I surrender the right to expect that of him anymore, the punishment that is due as a result of the offense is taken away. In a very practical sense we could say that forgiveness is an act of the will by which an individual surrenders the right to hold an issue against the person ever again. Now, will you notice this: I say that forgiveness is an act of the will; it is not an emotion. Somebody says, "But I don't feel like forgiving." That's not the matter. It's not a matter of how we feel about it; it's a matter of the act of the will.

Somebody said, "Well, I can forgive, but, brother, I can't forget." Now usually what that means is, "I'm neither going to forgive nor forget." Well, of course, we can't forget. How could you forget something bad anymore than you can forget something good? There is a built-in computer that has a tremendous retention possibility within our heads. Of course, we will remember. But to forgive means that if or when that incident comes to mind again, I can remember it without emotion, without the rise of blood pressure, without bad feelings toward that brother. I can remember it, and in the remembrance of it praise God for having reconciled it in my own heart.

A personal experience

Now let me give you an illustration of this. I wish I could say this about every offense that has ever occurred in my life, but I can't. But, I can say it about one. Let me tell you about that one time I gained the victory. There are some occasions when we can forget. I have been writing the Adult Sunday School quarterly for our association, and I'm writing now on my 33rd year. Once in a while someone will disagree with this or that, and I'll get a letter from here or there, and so on. Several years ago there was a pastor brother who disagreed with something I had written in the quarterly, and he wrote me a letter. The first sentence of the letter was: "You have betrayed the confidence of our people, and you are no longer fit to write anything for us to read." After that kind introduction he got plain and said what he meant! I'll be honest with you, that hurt. It hurt on the one hand because a brother would have that kind of animosity. It hurt on the other hand because I felt I had a correct interpretation of the scripture. It hurt deeply. I wrestled with the issue, and I prayed over it, and I did my best to get a good feeling toward that brother. It was just a problem. Finally, I brought that thing to God, and I said, "Lord, I can't handle this, and if I have a right feeling toward this brother ever again, you are going to have to do something in me. And when I meet this man, if I can shake his hand and honestly say 'brother' to him, something is going to have to happen in me." And God did something in me. As a spiritual sacrifice to God I sought to surrender to Him my right to hold that feeling and that letter and that statement against that brother. And God did something remarkable in my heart. I remember the incident, of course, because I'm telling you about it; but, God being my witness, I don't remember that brother's name today. And if he is sitting here in this congregation and feeling embarrassed at the moment, I don't know him. Sometimes God just ministers in a special way when the hurt is deep. But otherwise, it becomes a matter of an act of our will by which we say, "I surrender to God as a spiritual sacrifice the right to hold this issue against this person ever again."

Two Old Testament pictures

The Lord gives us two very beautiful pictures in the Old Testament about this matter of the removal of the guilt and punishment of sin. The one, of course, is the scape goat. You are

familiar with how the goat was brought, the hands laid on it, the sins of the people confessed, the animal killed, the blood sprinkled according to the prescribed ritual. A second goat was brought. Hands were laid on it, sins were confessed, it was taken away from the camp, so far away that it would not wander back to the camp again. The sacrifice on the one hand; the removal on the other hand.

There's a second picture not quite so familiar in the Old Testament that beautifully illustrates this concept of forgiveness. It pictures the victim being sacrificed and the blood caught in a basin. A bird is brought, and the tips of the bird's wings are touched in the blood, so that there is blood on each tip of the wing. Then the bird is released, and it flies away into the air, carrying on the tips of its wings the blood of the sacrifice victim. God said that is what forgiveness is really like. Now, the Bible talks about God's putting our sins behind His back, burying them in the sea, covering them, blotting them out, forgetting them, washing them away —just one metaphor upon another emphasizing that when God forgives - may I say it - He "plumb" forgives, not "kinda" forgives. God forgives by removing (1) the cause of offense and (2) the punishment that should come as a consequence of the offense. And I am following my Lord if I surrender by the act of the will the right to hold an issue against the brother ever again.

DESCRIPTION OF FORGIVENESS

How does the Lord forgive when He forgives us?

God forgives completely. He forgives us completely. Psalm 103 is a beautiful psalm of praise to God: *"Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits."* Then the psalmist begins enumerating the benefits of God. And do you remember number one? *"Who forgiveth all thine iniquities."*

Now you read through the scripture, and here is David with a sin of passion in Bathsheba's situation. God forgives it. Here is a prodigal son with the sin of rebellion, and the father forgives it. Here is Peter in a sin of cowardice when he denies the Lord, and God forgives it. Just go through the scriptures and note what categories, what classifications, what types of sins are there, and God forgives all your iniquities.

In the New Testament you find the same thing said about our Lord Jesus. Colossians 2:13 says, *"And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened (or resurrected) together with him, having forgiven you ALL trespasses."* Every kind of offense, even if oft repeated.

God forgives freely

Again, God forgives us freely. That's the reason why you have the word grace associated with forgiveness so many times. Grace is much more, as you are aware, than simply merit. It is God's goodness to us in the face of demerit. It is not simply God's doing good for us when we are on neutral ground; it is God's doing good to us when we have such demerits that God really ought to act in judgment on us. It is not like some beggar coming to your door and saying, "I'm hungry. I haven't eaten food. Do you have anything to eat?" And you look around, and there is some remainder of the evening meal left over, and you say, "Yes, I was going to throw that out anyway." So you put it in the plate and give it to him. That's not grace. Grace would be if that person came in and stole from you or injured a member of your family, and, in spite of that, you

were good and kind and helpful to him. It's in the face of a demerit that God forgives us. As Ephesians 1:7 says, "*In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.*" That "*according to*" is shouting ground! You see, here is a man that has \$100 million, and he comes to one of you preachers and says, "I'd like to help your church in its building program. I want to make an offering." And so he gives to you out of his riches, he gives you \$1. He has made a contribution, and he has given to you out of his wealth. But, let that fellow give according to his wealth, and you get a fist full of money! When the Lord ministers to us, He doesn't minister to us out of grace; He ministers to us "*according to grace,*" and His grace is so super-abundant that we cannot begin to estimate it. He forgives us freely.

Now, in our forgiveness sometimes if a brother has offended us, we say, "Well, if he would come and apologize, I would forgive him." Well, indeed, I would. I mean, if he will just come and humble himself, to show that someone like him had no basis for creating an offense toward someone like me, that would preserve my pride, and it would humble him. Surely, I would forgive him. But to forgive him freely? To forgive him when there is no basis for it except the goodness of my own heart? See, I'm in a totally different area when I do that. And that is the way God does us.

God forgives repeatedly

Again, the Bible says God forgives us repeatedly. In Luke 17 Jesus is teaching forgiveness, and He says, "*If a person trespasses against you and turns and says, 'I repent,' forgive him. And if he does it seven times in one day and then seven times in one day turns, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him.*"

Now, maybe Simon Peter took up on that a little later when he said, "*Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother, seven times?*" Usually we say, "Shame on Simon, seven times." But have you actually tried to forgive a person the same offense two or three times? Simon Peter is going a long way in grace when he says seven times.

Jesus said, "No, no, Simon. Not seven times; seventy times seven." He is not saying that after you check it off in your little black book and you forgive him that seventy times seven, then the next time you can let him have it No, that is legalism. That is not what He is saying The Lord is really saying "Don't keep count." As oft as the offense arises, forgive.

Psalm 78 has a record of Israel's experience in the wilderness. Verse 38 says, "*But he being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity.*" Listen, many a time He turned away His anger. Many a time. They start out of Egypt with a high band. Wow! They are just rejoicing and shouting victory. It is wonderful. Pharaoh has been subdued, their freedom is secured, they think, and so they start on their journey. They get to the Red Sea, and they begin fussing, complaining against Moses, complaining against God. God opens the sea and lets them through. They get down to Marah, where the water does not taste good, and they murmur again. God gives them good water. They get a little farther and run out of food, and they murmur again, and God sends the manna and the quail. They run out of water in the wilderness, and they murmur again, and God opens the rock. They get to Mt. Sinai, and God Himself comes down on Mt. Sinai and manifests Himself with awesome demonstrations. They said, "We don't want to talk to a God like that. Moses, you go up there and talk to Him. We don't want to talk to a God like that." Many a time He forgave them and turned away His anger.

Some of you fellows have been in the military service. You know what it is like when you get a new stripe on your sleeve. All your buddies want to tack it on for you. After a while your arm

gets so sore it hurts just to touch it. You do the same thing over and over and over, and it gets painful after a while. Even so, God forgave, and He forgave, and He forgave. He just kept on forgiving. Is that saying anything to you and me about those little offenses that arise? And I say little, even though they may seem big to us, but considering what we have done that God forgave for us, they are little things.

God forgives compassionately

God forgives compassionately. We have heard already that this word compassion means to suffer with someone, to feel what the other person feels. Jesus on the cross, crucified, suffering severely, I think both in the body and in the spirit, bearing the sins of mankind, cries out to the Father, "*Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.*" That's compassion!

If you were in a store doing some shopping, perhaps looking at a piece of merchandise you are considering buying, and somebody bumps against you and thrusts you up against the counter, and maybe it hurts, and you look around, perhaps with a little touch of aggravation, and suddenly you see that person has a white cane in his hand, your anger is gone. Instead of feeling aggravation toward that person, you feel sympathy. "Well bless that person. He didn't know I was there; he couldn't see me."

Now, if someone does you an injustice, can you deal that way? Can you say, "That brother has a problem. God bless that brother?"

Someone told of a group of professional men who had offices in the same building and rode up on the elevator each morning. Among them was a psychiatrist, and on the floor right below him there was a fellow who for some reason hated him. . Every morning as they would ride up on the elevator together, when this guy would get out on the lower floor, he would turn back toward that psychiatrist and just kind of spit at him. One day someone said, "Why in the world don't you stop that guy?" He said, "I don't have a problem. He's the one who has the problem."

Now, would you suppose that when someone does that thing or says something, that person has a problem? Will you adopt the problem, too? Ask yourself, "What is it that causes this person to rebel? What is it that causes that person to gossip? What is it that causes that person the nature of the offense?" Then pray, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."

That's compassion.

Stephen, in Acts 7, took the words of the Lord as his own dying words, almost. Being stoned to death inexcusably, brutally, accused and now dying, his words were, "*Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.*" A great deal of the offenses among us would never have occurred if we had that kind of compassion in our dealings toward one another. And that is exactly what our Lord had toward us.

A preacher brother (he wasn't one of our brethren) got aggravated with another brother, and he began to say hard things about him and spread rumors, and somebody told the person against whom the word was being spoken what the other fellow was saying. His response was, "Let him curse me and call me a devil a thousand times, still I will love him and call him a brother."

You see, it's impossible for someone to give an offense unless there is someone to take the offense. I heard a lady say concerning her husband one time, "He just aggravates me.

Sometimes I want to fuss, and he won't fuss back!" You can't have a fuss if nobody answers. Can't have an offense if no one becomes offended.

God forgives tenderly

God forgives tenderly. Ephesians 4:32 said it, didn't it! "*You be kind one to another, you be*

tenderhearted, you forgive one another just like God was kind toward you.” Aren’t you glad that when you came to the Lord with your sins, He didn’t demand the pound of flesh for every sin? Aren’t you glad that when you came, He did not seek to humiliate you and debase you and punish you? But, like the father of that prodigal, He received you with love and welcomed kindness.

DEMONSTRATION OF FORGIVENESS

In John chapter 8 there is an excellent demonstration of the forgiveness of our Lord.

A woman charged with adultery

We are told that Jesus was at the Mt. of Olives very early in the morning. When He came again into the Temple, all the people gathered around, and He sat down and was teaching them. Scribes and Pharisees, who were the opponents of Jesus, of course, brought to Him a woman taken in adultery. They sat her out right in the middle of everybody. In other words, they specified her and put her in the spotlight. Then they said to Jesus, “*Master* (that’s a good way to start out if you want to trick a fellow, isn’t it?), *this woman was taken in adultery in the very act.*” “No question about her guilt, you see. Moses in the law commanded that such should be stoned. “What do you say?” they asked. You can see where the thing is headed here. They were tempting Him. They wanted a reason to accuse Him.

But Jesus stooped down and with his finger wrote on the ground. Now the interrupters have come up with all kinds of suppositions as to what Jesus wrote. Maybe He wrote, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” to convict the woman. Maybe He wrote the names and the sins of some of the men who were accusing the woman. I don’t know. Some people said He just doodled, just as if to say, “This is not a matter with which I am to be concerned.” But He wrote on the ground.

They continued asking Him, that poor woman standing there exposed all this time. Jesus raised up and said, “Now, whoever among you is without sin, you be the first one to throw a stone at her.” Then he stooped down and wrote on the ground again. They heard it, they were convicted in their own consciences, they went out one by one from the eldest to the youngest, and it was just Jesus and the woman and the crowd of bystanders that were left there. By the way, those bystanders were still there because Jesus and the woman were “in the midst.” They were in the middle of something, so I think the bystanders were still there to see what was going to happen. Jesus raised up and said, “*Woman, where are thine accusers? Is there no one here to condemn you?*” She said, “*No, there is no one, Lord.*” And Jesus said, “*Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more.*”

By the way, wait a minute. We are talking about offense here, aren’t we? We are talking about forgiving offenses. This woman hadn’t offended Jesus, had she? Yes, she had. In that private secret place in the act of adultery, she had. Why? Because when David committed adultery with Bathsheba and he offered his confession to God, he said, “Against you and you only have I sinned and done this evil.” You see, every sin is against God, and when this woman violated the principles with whoever her partner was, violated the principles of morality, she was sinning against God. Therefore, it is appropriate for the Lord to deal with this issue.

How Jesus dealt with it

Now, notice how He dealt with it. **First**, He did not participate in recounting her sins. (“You know what Bro. So and So said about me? You know what that woman told on me?” You

know—just participate in recounting the sin.) Now that’s what the accusers did. They just kept on saying, “Hey, you got an adulteress here on your hand; what do you think ought to be done?” They did, but Jesus didn’t. **A second thing**, Jesus did not seek to humiliate the woman to debase her. She was a sinner; she knew it. She did not have to be humiliated. **A third thing**, He did not demand the letter of the law. Now the law really did say that you killed a person for adultery. There was no divorce for adultery in the Old Testament. If a partner was unfaithful, you just killed the guilty one. You didn’t have to worry about divorce then, you just had to worry about funeral expenses! But He did not demand the letter of the law, even though the law did decree death for adultery.

Maybe you and I could apply this to ourselves. It is true that Jesus said if a brother trespass against you and turns again and repents, then you forgive him. Should I wait until a brother turns again to say “I repent” before I forgive him? If I do, there are some folks I will never forgive because there are some folks who are not going to confess. For the health of my own spirit, I’ve got to settle the forgiving part before God, whether or not that person ever turns and says, “I repent” — not insisting on the letter of the law. Again, Jesus did not condemn the person who needed forgiveness. Note, please, He did not condone the immorality, therefore, He said, “Don’t do it anymore. Go and sin no more.” But He also said, “I don’t stand in judgment over you.” That’s a little strange, but what is it saying to you and me? To you and me it is saying that it is not our place to stand in judgment over one another. *“Who made me a judge over you?”* Jesus would ask the fellow who came wanting the affairs of the family estate settled. “I came not to judge the world,” he said, “I came to save.” And if our Lord would do this, raising the question elsewhere, “Who are you that judges another man’s servant — to his own master he stands and falls,” it’s not our business to stand in judgment of one another. It is our business to make sure that we keep the kind of relationship to God that if a brother or sister trespasses against us, we can have the spirit of Christ in dealing with that trespass, the spirit of kindness, sympathy, love and forgiveness. He forgives all sin. He forgives the worst of sin. He forgives oft-repeated sins. Now, as I said a word about the definition of forgiveness and the description, here’s the demonstration of it in John 8.

DEMAND FOR FORGIVENESS

Now one more word: that is the demand for forgiveness.

Forgiveness requires forgiveness

In the Model Prayer that Jesus gave us, one of those petitions is: *“And forgive us our debts”* Of all the petitions of prayer, that was the one that Jesus took to develop further.

After the prayer is ended, He said, *“If you forgive men their trespasses, your Father in heaven will forgive you your trespasses, but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, your Father in heaven will not forgive you”*(Matthew 6:14, 15). That’s a strange saying, isn’t it? It almost sounds like legalism. What is He saying? Is He saying that our forgiving is an example which the Father shows in dealing with us? No. Is He saying that our being forgiving is a deed of merit by which we obligate God to forgive us? No. What is He saying, then? Well, all through the gospels you remember that Jesus teaches us to forgive. Forgive; forgive seven times in a day. Forgive seventy times seven. That’s all through scripture. So, there is no question about the Christian’s being under the instruction of the Lord to be forgiving.

Forgiveness requires the forsaking of sin

Think of it this way. Here is a man who comes to God, and in honest prayer he says, “God, I have sinned. I have let things come into my life that ought not to be there, and I’m grieved by my sin. Please Lord, forgive all my sin, but I have an adulterous relationship with a certain woman over here, and I fully intend to go right on with that relationship. But, please, God, forgive me everything else.” Is God going to forgive in a situation like that? No. That man is not dealing honestly with sin.

Here is a businessman who says, “Now Lord, I want you to forgive me, I want to be right with you, but on the computer I have discovered how I can manipulate that thing so that I can skim some of the company profits off and put it in my own account. I am embezzling from my company, and I am making so much money on it, and I have figured out a way I won’t get caught, and I’m going to keep on doing it, but please forgive me everything else.” Is God going to forgive that kind? No. That person is not dealing honestly with sin.

Do you remember Psalm 66:18? It says, “*If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.*” What does it mean to regard? When I was a lad living out on the farm, we would usually go to town once a month. And when we would go to town, my Dad would give me a nickel (sometimes a whole dime) to buy candy. Man, you could buy enough candy for a dime that if you ate it all in one day, you would make yourself sick! But anyway, not being accustomed to carrying change in my pocket as a lad, I would take that coin in my hand, close my fist over it, stick my fist in my pocket, and that’s the way I would carry that coin until I picked out what candy I wanted to buy.

Now, that is regarding sin. Here’s this thing I like it so well, it feels so good, it is so profitable or whatever. I’m not going to turn loose of it. And if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me. So, I come to God, and I say, “Lord, please, I want to have forgiveness of sin, peace with God, power of the Spirit on my life and ministry. But, Lord, you know, Bro. So and So did this or that and you know howl feel toward him, and I have no intention of settling that issue.” Now is God going to forgive? Is God going to hear that prayer? No sir, I’m regarding iniquity. He’s saying that if we don’t have a forgiving spirit, we are living in disobedience to God, and we close up heaven against our prayers—our whole prayer life.

That’s the demand for forgiveness. It moves totally out of the area of social relationships. You know, I feel at ease with this person or don’t feel at ease, or I’m welcome here or not welcome here, It moves totally out of the realm of social relationships. It moves even out of the realm of human relationships, and it moves into a divine encounter. If I bear in my heart animosity toward the person God loves, I am out of step with God.

Who does God love? You will never meet a person God does not love. That contrary person, that cranky person, that rebellious person—you’ll never meet a person God does not love. You be kind one to another. There is the explanation of it, the example of it, the command of it. You be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you. Folks, that is beyond us. If we do it, we move into the realm of grace, and God Himself must minister that spirit within us.