

# BASIC BIBLE THEMES

## SESSION 5: FORGIVENESS

*by Mark A. Holmes*

**Scripture Cited:** Deuteronomy 19:15; Matthew 18:15-35; Luke 18:15; 23:34; John 8:11; Romans 3:23; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23

It had been a long and well-publicized trial. The lawyers had finished presenting their cases, and the matter was turned over to the jurors. I was watching the proceedings on television. Filling the airtime while the jury was out, a reporter asked what the victim's family was doing while they waited. A friend responded, "They are a deeply religious family. They are home praying that he will get what he deserves."

The response struck me with its contradiction. My human nature understood well what these people were seeking, yet my Christian nature was shouting, "Something is wrong here!" This is not what Jesus would have sought. His words "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34) and "Neither do I condemn you.... Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11) came to mind.

Jesus came to earth for a number of reasons, but the main purpose was to procure salvation for all who believe, salvation that would result from God forgiving us of our sins. Jesus' ministry would need to provide not only the means of forgiveness, but also the pattern by which His followers would be able to both receive and express this gift.

How is this possible? How do we move beyond the desire for judgment and condemnation to a more Christlike expression of forgiveness and grace? What was there about Jesus and His nature that enabled Him to forgive people as He did? How do we establish these attributes within our own lives?

The 18th chapter of Matthew is very helpful in answering these questions, and revealing the biblical theme of forgiveness. It is an extended discussion by Jesus regarding the exercise of grace toward one another. He reveals three major understandings that must be held by people who hope to live like Him: (1) In relating people to people, we must recognize equality. (2) In relating people to the law, we must

recognize priority. (3) In relating people to God, we must recognize liability.

### **The Equality of People**

The topic of equality is introduced earlier in chapter 18 of Matthew through a question posed by the disciples regarding who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Though the connection between greatness and forgiveness may not be immediately obvious, the relationship is unmistakable. Judgment is only possible when one establishes levels of superiority. The supremacy of one allows for the judgment of another. The wider the distinction, the easier judgment may be expressed. Jesus dispels this superiority issue by illustration and parable.

He illustrates equality by placing a child before the inquiring disciples as an example of greatness. In doing so, He turned the hierarchy of His day upside down, making what society viewed as the least the greatest. Jesus' teaching expressed that superiority in the Kingdom was determined by different criteria than in the world. Superiority could not be determined by age or position, but by childlike humility. In the world, pride and superiority may walk hand in hand; but in the kingdom of God, superiority's companion is humility.

Jesus continued to press His teaching home on this topic by sharing a parable illustrating that superiority could not be determined by number. What is more important, the masses or the individual? Even today we stress the superiority of size. We feel it reflects greatness, success, authority. However, by telling the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus taught that one lost individual took precedence over 99 others that were saved. This move from the masses to the individual continues to challenge us today. It has been said that we view our church services as 1 congregation of 100, but Jesus views it

as 100 congregations of 1. Jesus is not impressed by our size, but by our concern for the individual. This point is made clear in this scripture passage as Jesus places great stress on the care and concern of the individual person. He speaks of a brother who sins—not a group, a town, or a society. The sins of one individual become a major concern for the follower of Christ.

Jesus gives some rather specific and pointed instructions regarding the way we are to handle those among us who commit acts of sin. His message reveals that the one who is not guilty of a particular infraction is of no greater significance than the one who is. In fact, the sinner is to be restored by the innocent, even if the innocent was the victim of the wrong. Jesus' lifestyle and teachings revealed that superiority cannot be defined by such words as "victim" and "perpetrator," "guilty" and "innocent." People are people; some are forgiven, and others are in need of forgiveness.

This equality does not imply that we are without ability to discern between right and wrong or make a judgment regarding correct behavior. Often this error is expressed by some in saying it is not their place to judge. Or others, seeking to justify an action, say that no one has the right to judge them. We do have the right to determine the appropriateness of an action and should exercise it. However, this responsibility does not give us a means to distinguish people as much as it represents the requirement to restore the errant. Once it is determined that a person is wrong, the response is not separation, but reclamation. True, at the end of Jesus' instructions, He tells us to treat the unrepentant individual as a "pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:17). Nevertheless, the context implies the judgment is based on the refusal to repent, not the initial sin itself.

A closely associated issue is raised when we make a listing of sins by their severity or their number. Both of these become human means of distinction. This was apparently Peter's concern when he asked Jesus his question in verse 21: "How many times do I let them get away with it before I label them as no longer worthy of my forgiveness?" (author's paraphrase). In Peter's thinking (as well as our own), there is a limit defined by numbers, but not so with Christ. The number of sins, just like the quality of sin, does not make one person less equal to us.

We may be repulsed by the act committed, or even the frequency, but the person is still our equal. Only the rejection of grace and restoration, in time, can reduce the person's status.

If we are to live a life of forgiveness that exemplifies our Lord's, it must begin by our willingness to refuse the labeling of people with superior or inferior positions in life. We all carry an inherent value, an intrinsic worth, which makes us equal to one another in the eyes of God. This value was given to us by God when He created us in His image and when He purchased us by the death of His Son. Paul reminded his readers that we were "bought at a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23). The value of an item is determined by the price one is willing to pay for it. The death of Jesus Christ has assessed our value in God's eyes. If we are to forgive as Jesus forgives, it can only begin by seeing the equal value of each individual, a value that He gave to us by dying in our place.

### **The Priority of People**

One of the great obstacles we encounter in the area of forgiveness is created by our confusion of priorities. Which is of greater importance, the law or the person? This apparently was a stumbling block for the religious leaders of Jesus' day, as was illustrated on several occasions when Jesus desired to heal people of the Sabbath. Three occasions are listed in Scripture: a woman stooped over for years with a crippled back (see Luke 13:10-16), a man with a hand withered beyond use (see Matthew 12:10), and a man with dropsy (see Luke 14:1-6). When Jesus wanted to express compassion by healing these people, He was rebuked by the leaders for breaking the Sabbath laws. In their view, the laws and their protection took precedence over people. Jesus, in indignation, pointed out their error by revealing they treated their livestock with more compassion than they did humans. Livestock could be fed, watered, and rescued from peril, but people were to be left to their suffering.

Justice deals with the protection of the person as well as the law. To harm either by our action produces its cry against us. Justice claims, if we break the law, we must pay. Infractions cannot be overlooked without the risk of making the law impotent. Laws not upheld stand the risk of becoming ignored. This reality is well-known among

the religious leaders of Jesus' day, and they placed a strong emphasis on the prevention of any law being misused or overlooked. People may have needs, but the law was the law.

Jesus had a differing view, not that the law was unimportant but that restoration of people took a higher priority. This view of prioritizing humans above justice is apparent in His instructions to the disciples concerning the restoration of the person who sinned.

His instructions for restoration call for a multi-stepped approach. The first attempt is personal, because it involves one individual approaching another—whether as a victim to perpetrator or a concerned individual to another in need. The purpose for this meeting is not revenge or even justice, but restoration. Reveal the fault, and if the person is open to change, “you have won your brother over” (Luke 18:15).

However, not everyone is willing to deal with his or her errors in life and may respond coldly. Our efforts are not to end there. The next appeal reflects a social attempt, as one is to take along one or two additional people in an attempt to resolve the matter (v. 16). This is not a call to gang up on the guilty; but in keeping with the dictates of the law, it serves to testify of the guilt while keeping the door open for restoration. Jesus reminded them of this responsibility from Deuteronomy 19:15, which prevented any one person from being accused by another without additional witnesses. This approach reflects the beginnings of a judicial process, which grows stronger with each refusal by the guilty.

However, as redemptive as our efforts might be, some people refuse to listen to both individuals and society in regard to their wrongs, remaining in opposition. If this be the case, Jesus instructs us to take them to the next level—the church (v. 17). Again, the opportunity should be allowed for the person to repent and be restored. However, if he or she refuses to heed the church in its expression of grace, the person is to be dealt with as one who rejects the grace. They are “pagan” or as despicable as a “tax collector” was in Jesus' day.

### **The Liability of People**

One final view is necessary to enable us to forgive as Jesus did—the recognition that as humans we are all liable for sin. “For all have sinned and

fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). This common liability brings the awareness that any view or attitude we might hold or express toward others on account of their sins is in effect an indictment of ourselves, since we are in the same situation. This is Jesus' message of the unmerciful steward in Matthew 18:21-35. The servant failed to make a connection between the massive debt he owed the king and the insignificant debt owed to him by another. With the king, he pleads mercy; with his fellow human, he exacts justice. The king's question in verse 33 is the foundational understanding for our actions: “Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?”

This is the missing ingredient I recognized with the news interview mentioned at the beginning. Here were “deeply religious people” obviously forgetting their massive debt forgiven by God while praying for vengeance upon another. Apparently, grace is the desired reaction we hope the world will take on our behalf—unless we are the victim. Then it becomes personal, and we lose sense of our own liability. Jesus does not allow us this option. In fact, He warns us that our forgetfulness in relation to our liability could well cost us the grace we have originally received (Matthew 18:35).

Our sense of liability becomes distorted by our subjectivity. We find it impossible to forgive someone for a single incident while we want God to forgive all our waywardness in life. Only as we keep an accurate perspective of our liability can we forgive the offenses of people against us.

In an age of grace, Jesus has revealed that people are to be dealt with equally, with an emphasis on forgiveness rather than punishment. However, this is not the final expression. There is the potential that we can thwart God's grace by outward refusal or callous disregard of the realities of grace in a person's life. Failing to recognize our common liability before God subjects us to the same abandonment as the hardened sinner who rejects God's gracious rescue. Forgiveness for the Christian is not just a passive experience where we receive God's mercy. It also must be an active work on the part of the believer, extended to others as equal in value, superior to judgment and in recognition of the common liability we all hold before our Heavenly Father.

## A Look at Life

Looking at Jesus' example and teachings, we come to the timely question: why is His call to forgiveness so important to our present experience? The answer has three facets. First, there is a personal dimension. As Jesus has stated in the parable of the unmerciful servant, the need for a person to forgive others is not a suggestion, but a command. Our failure to forgive people will result in the sacrifice of our own salvation. We must be willing to extend mercy if we hope to receive it.

Second, there is a corporate dimension. The actions of the followers of Christ must exhibit to the world the nature of Christ. Do we not contradict our message when we refuse to forgive people? Don't we distort the image of the Church when we proclaim a message of grace while living a life of judgment? There is always an attraction to pharisaism, where we exalt ourselves above others, emphasize the law, and forget the works of grace in our own lives. Such attitudes develop over time and seem natural to the human experience. However, such actions become contradictions to the gospel's claims and mar the message and mission of the Church.

Third, there is a holiness reason. If we understand holiness to be that transformation of the inner nature of humanity to where we love God with our whole heart and our neighbors as ourselves, then Jesus' mandate for forgiveness is a primary requirement. How can we profess a holiness experience while we express an unforgiving nature? As forgiveness is the first necessity for us to begin our relationship with God, it must also be the completing act which allows His salvation to be made complete within us. We only fool ourselves when we believe that by replacing grace and forgiveness with judgment and denouncement, we somehow reflect a holy nature. Holiness without forgiveness is legalism. Holiness expressing forgiveness is the very breath of God blowing upon an all-too-desperate world.

In 1981, an assassination attempt was made upon Pope John Paul II. The would-be assassin was arrested, tried, and convicted much as we expected. However, the media recorded the visit to the jail cell where the pope came to forgive the man who shot him. This distinction must always be the message of the Church. Let governments judge and destroy, but

the Church should be recognized by its acts of restoration and mercy. If our actions do not portray our message, our hypocrisy will be our epitaph.

Recognizing the necessity of forgiveness does not make its expression easy. There are certain obstacles that we need to overcome. One major challenge is the task of overcoming our feelings of being victims. There is nothing like being hurt that makes us cry out for "justice." In our litigious society, the potential for vengeance is great. If we feel victimized, our answer is to bring suit against the guilty. We can claim any number of negative experiences to validate our claim. We take away one another's wealth as a compensation for hurt, but does any financial settlement really take away the hurt? How do we move beyond being victims to being victors? By recognizing that the person who has wronged us is a valuable person. When we are hurt, it is easy to degrade our attackers, which helps us respond destructively. If we refuse to reduce their standing in our eyes, our temptation to denounce them may lessen. Second, if our concern is for their restoration in place of our vindication, our energies may take a different direction. Finally, if we remember that we were not without guilt and were worthy of being punished, we may be able to relate a more graceful expression. Such realizations may appeal to our logic, but not necessarily to our heart. The mind may relay these truths, but our human nature may dictate an entirely different desire. This becomes the arena for God in His Holy Spirit to enable us to do what we ourselves cannot do.

One of the more memorable parts of Corrie Ten Boom's book, *The Hiding Place*, which describes her horrid experiences as a prisoner in the German concentration camps during World War II, comes near its end where she was free from the concentration camp and was busy sharing her testimony in post-war Europe. At the conclusion of one of her messages in Munich, she was approached by a man whom she immediately recognized as one of the S.S. guards who had so brutally treated her and the others at the prison camp. Not recognizing her, the man came over to her and extended his hand while expressing his gratitude for her message. Corrie wrote that she knew, as a Christian, she should take the man's hand, but she could not find it in herself to lift her own in response. Finally, confessing to God her own inability to forgive the

man, she asked God to enable her by His power. Immediately, she was able to raise her hand and shake that of her former tormenter. She said of this encounter, "When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love, itself."\*

That is the core of the biblical theme of forgiveness.

\* Corrie Ten Boom and John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1971), 238.