

The Christian Experience of Forgiveness

There is a story about a couple who every time they have a row (according to the husband) the wife gets historical. Someone asked do you not mean hysterical? "No" said the husband, "She brings up everything I have done in the past." God is not like that as we can see from the scriptures, He not only continually forgives and cleanses us from sin but promises never to remember our faults again.

Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 34 reads: "The days are coming," declares The LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them" declares The Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD.

"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares The LORD. "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

Do you see that, the promise that He would remember our sin no more? This is not the experience of so many in the church, it is a fact that even with Ministers in churches, if you offend them they will remember the offence for decades after it happened, even if it never happens again. This is precisely the opposite of what Jesus requires of His true disciples and ministers.

Do you remember Peter's question to Jesus in Matthew chapter 18 verses 21 and 22 when he asked about forgiveness? "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me - up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." In other words countless times, just as God forgives you countless times.

There are some wonderful verses of scripture in the letters that the Apostle John wrote to the churches. For instance in 1 John chapter 2 verses 1 and 2 we read: "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father— Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."

The whole idea of Jesus going to the cross was so that we could be forgiven and that we should escape the wrath of God when it comes upon the world at the time when the man of sin will rule the earth. Since Jesus has won total forgiveness for us from The Father we then have no right to refuse total forgiveness to any brother or sister in Christ whatever position in the church that person holds.

Many times you will hear people say that there are certain people whom they love but would never allow into their church. This is a contradiction in terms and shows that the love of God is

not fully matured in the person's heart otherwise the person would be as much concerned about reaching the worst outcast of our society as they are about reaching everyone else with the true gospel of Jesus Christ and seeing them saved.

In Mark chapter 11 we read another lesson Jesus taught us about forgiveness towards others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ. Verses 20 to 26 of this chapter read: "In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

If you continue to hold unforgiveness against anyone, especially a brother or sister in Christ, then don't expect your prayers to be answered until you have at least made a genuine attempt to make it up with them. Jesus Himself left instruction about dealing with someone in church who steps out of line and continues to do something that is offensive to others.

Matthew chapter 18 verses 15 to 20 read: "'If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." To be successful in what it undertakes an army must be united in purpose otherwise they are already defeated in whatever it is that they want to achieve. Scripture states in 1 John chapter 4 verse 20 "If anyone says "I love God" yet hates his brother, he is a liar. Anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke chapter 10 verses 25 to 37) show us that we are to treat everyone as though they were our brother or sister in Christ.

Therefore we cannot behave to one section of people in a loving and caring way and tell others that they are bound for hell and then make no attempt to seek them out, befriend them and eventually tell them of the love and acceptance that Jesus offers. If you look at John chapter 4 verses 1 to 42 read as follows:

He had to go through Samaria, so He came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw

water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans. Jesus answered her “If you knew the gift of God and who it is who asks you for a drink you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water.”

“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?” Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am He.” Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?” Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?”

They came out of the town and made their way toward him. Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?”

“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields!

They are ripe for harvest. Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.

Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour." Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony.

"He told me everything I ever did." When the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and He stayed two days. Because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world?"

Do you notice something else in these verses? Jesus begins the conversation by talking to the woman about something that is important to her and then turns the conversation round into a spiritual dialogue, this alone is an important lesson we could learn when approaching people with the gospel, at no time did Jesus convict the woman of guilt.

She was living a life of sin and immorality yet although we know that Jesus does not approve of people living in this way He uttered no words of condemnation towards her only words of love and acceptance. As a result an entire village came to salvation. I wonder how many outcasts of society would come to Christ if we ceased to be instantly judgemental towards them Jesus had a few words to say about that.

Matthew chapter 7 verses 1 to 6 reads: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. In the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"

How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

Jesus as the good shepherd is very accepting about people who come to Him He does not judge them at that time thereby frightening them away but He offers them the love of God and His acceptance. In John chapter 6 verses 37 to 40 God again offers love and acceptance of anyone who comes to The Father through Jesus Christ His Son.

"All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. This is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day."

To end with, the ultimate in forgiveness (other than the inaugurating of the New Covenant) and that is shown in John chapter 21 verses 15 to 19 reads: When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."

Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" Many people even in churches would relish the opportunity of saying something like "You let us all down very badly, I don't know how I can ever trust you again, I think you should resign until you can learn to do better."

But what did Jesus say? He at no time mentioned the offence that Peter was guilty of. Since Peter had denied him three times Jesus restores him by extracting a confession of love for Him. No resignation was called for, no guilt was rubbed in to Peter's soul, and the only thing that Jesus was concerned about was restoring Peter as soon as possible. Surely we should always in this way be like Jesus?