

9. Prayer and Forgiveness

In the last lesson, the Lord inserted instruction on how to pray inside his teaching against self-righteousness. That prayer—commonly called the Lord’s Prayer—is more truly a disciples’ prayer. The prayer presents the ethical standard, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” In a world of *an eye for an eye* and *a tooth for a tooth* ethics, the standard of forgiveness, the ethics and morality of Jesus depart from the ethical norms of the day. In the 21st century, this standard contrasts markedly with the *dog eat dog* and *get them before they get you* attitudes. As with all the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus, forgiveness is rooted in the beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.

The forgiving heart is only found where people manifest mercy, pure hearts, and a will to be peacemakers. The Lord taught in Matt 5:7-9:

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Christians must have these attitudes even when they are under such dire circumstances as persecution. In Matt 5:11-12, the Lord explained: “11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” The beatitudes laid the foundation for the spirit necessary for forgiveness.

The Forgivers Will Be Forgiven

Matt 6:9-15: 9 “*This, then, is how you should pray:*

“*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, 10 your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today our daily bread. 12 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.*”

14 *For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

In the text of the prayer, the Lord conditions the forgiveness of our debts from the father: “As we also have forgiven our debtors.” This focus on the ethical standard of forgiveness receives emphasis when the Lord concludes by reiterating it twice in verses 14 and 15. God’s forgiveness of us depends on our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us. Yet in daily lives, brothers, spouses, fellow church members, and sure enough enemies go to the grave without forgiving one another. The ethics of forgiveness becomes a true test of who the children of God really are.

Forgiveness Is Unlimited in Number and Scope

The standard of forgiveness is unlimited in the number of times a person is to forgive another. In Matt 18:21-35, Matthew records Peter raising the question of how many times he should forgive his brother:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”

22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. [Some versions say, “Seventy times seven.]. Matt 18:21-22

After establishing the unlimited frequency of forgiveness, Jesus tells a parable that teaches once again that Christians must forgive one another. In Matt 18:23-35, Jesus tells of a wicked servant who, when his master came to collect his debts, prayed of his master to forgive him. Matt 18:26-27 says: “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’” 27 The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

Beginning in Matt 18:28, the servant refused to forgive his fellow servant his debt; and instead, he threw him into prison in Matt 18:30-31: “30 But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.”

The master’s response in Matt 18:32-34—just like God’s response to us if we do not forgive—was immediate and certain:

32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

Jesus removed all doubt and concluded in verse 35, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

Forgiveness Includes All People and All Grievances

Perhaps, humankind is more amenable to forgive a brother than to forgive others. The ethical standard of the Lord required us to forgive all people. In Mark 11:25, the Lord taught, “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” The word, *anyone*, of this passage, extends our forgiveness to all men. Christians are to forgive all men before they pray asking God to forgive them. In Col 3:13, Paul teaches that we are to forgive whatever grievances we have: “13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

God holds Christians to the high standard where they are to forgive everyone whatever the grievances. Of course, that is exactly what Christians receive from Him.

Forgiveness Does Not Have to Be Asked for

All of us commit sins against one another. A slight, a harsh word, a debt overlooked—all of these and more happen in all human relationships. Often we stand back, offended, waiting for the husband or wife, friend or neighbor, or Christian brother or sister to make the first move. John teaches that we should pray for the one committing the sin and God will forgive him. Do not wait to be asked to forgive is the lesson. John wrote in 1 John 5:16-17

16 If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.

The exception to the standard is a sin unto death. The sin unto death is a broad subject for another time. Suffice for this lesson to say, that these sins are willful, continual, and sometimes against the Holy Spirit of God. Consider the following passages, but remember that the focus of John is that if we see a brother sinning a sin not unto death, we are to pray for him: Rom 6:1-3, Heb 6:4-6, Heb 10:26-28, 2 Peter 2:20-22, and Mark 3:28-29.

Conclusion

There is no higher ethical standard than to forgive everyone whatever the grievances. We must strive to achieve the level of ethical behavior achieved so powerfully by the Saviour as he went to the cross. In Luke 23:33-34, he asked the Father to forgive his murderers: “33 When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals . . . Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Dying at the hand of an angry mob, Stephen prayed in Acts 7:59-60: “‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep.” All Christians should be this forgiving in the most difficult of times of our lives.