THE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS (1)

Introduction

“And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.”

— Ephesians 4:30-32

“Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.” — Colossians 3:12, 13

“If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.”

— Romans 12:18

The topic before us in this study is the Biblical doctrine of forgiveness. Forgiveness lies at the heart and soul of Christianity. As Christians we are commanded to forgive others as God has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32). We achieve our understanding of forgiveness from the pattern of forgiveness demonstrated by God in reconciling Himself to the world of humanity. This is achieved through the sacrificial death of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ, on the cross of Calvary.

The idea contained in forgiveness is the pardon or removal of an offense which has led to a broken or severed relationship, with the end goal in mind being to reestablish a reconciliation between the offending party and the offended party. In its primary sense, forgiveness is an act of God releasing sinners from judgment and freeing them from the divine penalty on their sin. Since only God is holy, only God can forgive sin. (Mark 2:7; Luke 5:21). In the secondary sense, forgiveness is also a human act toward another human being.

The Bible is the only religious book which teaches that God can and does forgive sin. Thus forgiveness is a uniquely Bible doctrine. Only the Bible reveals God as a personal Being who relates to humans as other personal beings. In Animism, there is no awareness of a personal relationship with God. Animism is the belief that natural objects (rocks, trees, etc.), natural phenomena (wind, rain, etc.), and even the universe itself possesses souls or spirits which may exist apart from their material bodies. But since there is no personal supreme God who can be offended or is willing to forgive an offense, there is no concept of forgiveness.
In Hinduism there is no concept of forgiveness because God is believed to be unknowable and beyond definition. While admitting that man is imperfect and prone to evil, he can improve his life by self appointed means. If he dies in an imperfect state, he can look forward to a reincarnated state where more improvements can be made. This can go on until perfection is attained. Forgiveness is unknown in this religion.

Buddhism likewise knows nothing of a forgiving God. Buddhism like Hinduism believes in reincarnation but sees it as a curse rather than a blessing. It denies the existence of the soul, while affirming a human consciousness. Life is full of suffering and sorrow, but this is caused by ignorance not sin. Hence there is no need to be forgiven. The goal is extinction of consciousness.

While the idea of forgiveness is present in Islam, it is regarded as an arbitrary act of Allah which has little, if any, moral basis, and requires no act of redemption or reconciliation. Since God is not a personal God, He does not carry on personal relationships with people. All the deeds of a Muslim are done to secure a place of happiness and bliss in the next life.

Without a temple, a priesthood, or a sacrificial system, Judaism has no basis upon which to teach a Biblical system of forgiveness.

Forgiveness has not been considered a virtue among the pagan religions. A kindhearted pagan might merely disregard personal offenses as being beneath his dignity to notice, but to forgive is generally viewed as being weak-spirited and non-virtuous. Thus, I repeat, forgiveness is a uniquely Christian teaching.

After saying these things, let it be now understood that Biblical or Christian forgiveness is one of the most widely misunderstood doctrines of Scripture. This is due to several factors. One, is we have neglected to search the Scriptures to get a clear understanding on the subject, and secondly, we have substituted the world’s way of handling conflict and blame, that being by “apologizing” or saying “I’m sorry.” Forgiveness is not an easy subject, especially in such a complex age as ours. It is very popular these days to speak of “forgiving” ourselves while laying the blame for our shortcomings on the shoulders of our parents, government or society as a whole. Both liberal theology and modern psychology confuse “forgiveness” with the attitude of “unconditional acceptance” in which one is to accept and overlook the hurtful offense which he or she has experienced. The “self-esteem movement” has added further confusion into the misunderstanding of forgiveness. Can these modern ways of dealing with guilt and blame be reconciled with the
Bible’s teaching on forgiveness? I do not think they can and until these are peeled off and separated from the Biblical teaching, we will never be able to come to either a clear understanding or practice of forgiveness. This is one of the goal’s of this study.

Forgiveness is not only difficult due to its complex understanding, but it is difficult in its practical application. It does not come naturally to sinful fallen creatures. We tend to be governed too much by our emotions or feelings. Those who allow themselves to indulge in bitter feelings will find that the seeds of forgiveness do not easily grow in such soil. Instead the root that springs up has a defiling influence which is harmful not only to the bitter person, but to others as well. Hebrews 12:14, 15 states, “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.”

Forgiveness is often frustrated by negative emotions such as unquenched anger and resentment. These emotions cause some to wrongly think they cannot forgive if they do not “feel” like forgiving. But as we shall see, forgiveness is not a feeling, but is a deliberate rational decision to cover the offense and desire only the best for the offender. Someone may say, “but I can’t do that, every time I think about it, I get upset all over again.” Such thoughts are sinful thoughts. A wilful choice must be made to turn away from that kind of thinking. Those who choose to forgive, even when it is hard to do so, will find that positive emotions will follow. Jesus said, “Love your enemies, do good to them who hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them who despitefully use you.” (Luke 6:27, 28). Love is obedience to Christ’s commands. It is a wilful, deliberate act. It is not a mere emotional reflex. When Christ’s commands are obeyed, anger will give way to peace, frustration and anxiety will be overcome by calm and peace. Having a spirit of forgiveness results in lifting many of life’s burdens.

We live in a world filled with violence. Wars between nations, racial violence, terrorism, road rage, employees going on shooting rampages. These and other crimes of vengeance characterize our modern world. Is it any wonder that so many people are inflicted with guilt, anger, depression, and other destructive emotions? Vengeance is popular today, but forgiveness is not. Vengeance is viewed as an evidence of macho strength, and retaliation is often portrayed as a virtue reflecting one’s healthy expression of self-esteem. The pagan view that forgiveness is a sign of weakness is making a revival as the influence of Biblical Christianity wanes in the Western world. The days of Noah are upon us.

As the concept of forgiveness is disappearing, the breakups of marriages, homes, and churches are on the increase. Forgiveness is the oil that keeps the machinery of the Christian home
and church running smoothly. Marriages and churches are relationships that can be likened to driving an automobile. Sooner or later you are going to run into another person, denting a fender or breaking out a headlight. And at times having head-on collisions. Only through the Biblical understanding of forgiveness can relationships be established, maintained and restored.

While forgiveness is painful for man to practice, it was costly for God. It cost Him nothing less than the shedding of His only Begotten Son’s life blood to provide a just foundation upon which to extend mercy and forgiveness to the guilty offenders. Divine forgiveness is a most complicated and costly undertaking in that it required complete satisfaction to meet the demands of God’s offended holiness. Hebrews 9:22 says, “Almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without the shedding of blood is no remission” (forgiveness).

In order to secure the believer’s forgiveness, it was necessary for the eternal Son of God to become incarnate in a body, live a life of sinless obedience, die a substitutionary death, rise from the dead in a new incarnated body, ascend into the heavens to sit on a priestly throne to ever live to make intercession for the guilty party. If any of these activities fail, then the least sin on the part of the offending party will result in banishment from God’s holy presence and the suffering of eternal ruin.

There are two basic needs which we as sinful human beings need to understand. They are:
One: How does God forgive our sins?
Two: How do we become forgiving people?

We need to receive forgiveness and we need to grant forgiveness. These two concepts are inseparably connected in the Scriptures. So closely in fact, that a person cannot experience one without exhibiting the other. Jesus said in Matthew 6:14, 15: “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” One can only become a forgiving person by experiencing God’s forgiveness.

What then best describes how to identify a Christian? A Christian is someone who recognizes that he has sinned against a holy God. He understands that he deserves an eternity in hell for just one of the thousands, yes millions of sinful thoughts and deeds he has committed against God. He realizes that no one can ever sin so offensively as he has against God. He realizes that no one can be as deserving of wrath from him as he is deserving of God’s wrath. Since a true Christian understands the magnitude of his sin and the amazing gift of forgiveness that God has granted him, he is characterized by possessing a spirit of forgiveness toward those who sin against him. A Christian
then “is a forgiven person who is characterized by being forgiving of others.” Those who say they are Christians and refuse to forgive “others as Christ as forgiven them” (Ephesians 4:32), are visibly displaying the fact that they have never been forgiven by God and their claims to know God are false.

“If a man say, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar: for he that loves not his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment have we from Him, that he who loves God love his brother also.” (I John 4:19-21). I know of no subject in the Bible more convicting, yet more helpful than the subject of forgiveness. Perhaps this is why modern Christianity has replaced it with all the self-esteem, self-help teachings found in books, conferences, and pulpits.

Now lest my hearers (readers) are presently assured that they already possess an understanding of forgiveness, let me list some of the questions we will try to address in this study.

1) How can we be sure of God’s forgiveness?
2. Does God ever withdraw His forgiveness from someone who has received it?
3. If Christians are already forgiven, do they still need to confess daily sins?
4. How can God forgive sins justly?
5. Does God forgive sinners who refuse to repent and confess their sins?
6. Can a believer forgive someone who does not repent of his or her offending behavior?
7. Can forgiveness truly occur if there is no reconciliation between the two parties?
8. Isn’t apologizing and saying “we’re sorry” the same as forgiveness?
9. Where does the Bible say we should apologize to someone?
10. Is forgiveness a feeling? How can I forgive someone if “I don’t feel like it.” Would that not make me a hypocrite?
11. How can an all-knowing God “not remember our sins” anymore?
12. Must I confront the person who has offended me?
13. Should I go to the person who has offended me or wait for him or her to come to me?
14. How many times should I forgive a person?
15. Are there any times in which I should forgive God?
16. Suppose an animal kills one of my children. Can I forgive the animal?
17. Suppose a warring army kills my husband or son in battle. Can I forgive the whole nation which the army served? Without them being aware of it?
18. Is there a difference between forgiveness and having a spiritual attitude that is ready to forgive?
19. If forgiveness is unconditional, how would the conditions or steps for church discipline be carried out in Matthew 18:15-20?

20. Must I confront a person every time he or she does something which upsets me?

21. Should I forgive someone who has died and had offended me?

22. What should I do if I know I have offended someone? How soon?

23. Is there such a thing as an unforgivable sin? If so, what is it?

24. Can an unbeliever forgive someone? Can a believer forgive someone who is an unbeliever?

25. How do repentance and confession relate to forgiveness? How does forgiveness relate to reconciliation?

26. Which is easier, to ignore sin or to forgive sin?

27. What do you do when you go ask for forgiveness, and you are told that there is really nothing to forgive, everything is alright?

28. Does God remove the temporal consequences of sin when He forgives someone?

29. Does being forgiven cancel the need to make restitution, if the circumstances call for it?

30. Is there a difference between being guilty and “feeling guilty”?

If you are able to answer these questions, then you are to be commended for the study you have obviously put forth. On the other hand, if some of these questions are such that you cannot answer or perhaps, have never been asked by others or yourself, then get on board and maybe the train of thoughts in this study will take us into the station of Biblical understanding of what it means to be a Christian. May God give us wisdom as we work our way through the inspired Scriptures, and may this study prove to be “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be furnished (equipped) unto all good works.” (II Timothy 3:16)
I. DESCRIPTION OF FORGIVENESS

There are eight words which are used in the Bible to express the idea of forgiveness. Four are used in the Hebrew Old Testament and four are used in the Greek New Testament. Each of these describe forgiveness in various metaphors.

(1) Expressions of Forgiveness in the Old Testament.

The Hebrew words are: (1) kaphar: used of atonement meaning “to cover up” as the sacrifice was offered to cover the deficiency of the worshiper (Exodus 29:36; Deuteronomy 21:8; Jeremiah 18:23). (2) Nasa: used in the sense of “to send away”, as the scapegoat was sent away into the wilderness to bear the sins of the Israelites (Leviticus 16:9). It also means “to be merciful” (Psalm 86:5; 103:3). (3) Salah: God’s act of forgiveness wherein He “lets go of” the offense so as to remove it. (Numbers 30:5, 8; Daniel 9:9) (4) Maha: means “to wipe away or remove.” (Psalm 51:1, 2; Isaiah 43:25; 44:22).

The Old Testament reveals that God is a God who is ready to forgive, yet He is also just and punishes sin. In Exodus 34:5-7 we read, “And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood before him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty. . .”

God’s forgiveness is rooted in His very character. In Micah 7:18 we read, “Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? He retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy.”

Sin deserves divine punishment because it is a violation of God’s holy character (Genesis 2:17; Romans 1:18-32; 1 Peter 1:16), but His forgiveness is gracious. Psalm 130:3, 4 reveals, “If thou, Lord should mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou may be feared.” Also Romans 5:8, “But God commends his love toward us, in that,
while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” God is a God who is “good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.” (Psalm 86:5).

While God is a forgiving God, there are requirements necessary in order for the forgiveness to be bestowed on the basis of justice. Justice cannot be sacrificed on the grounds of mercy. Justice must be satisfied before mercy can flow to the offending party. God's forgiveness is not bestowed indiscriminately. There are two conditions necessary in order for God to forgive sin. **First:** as the offended party, God’s justice must be satisfied. Thus a life must be taken as a substitute for that of the sinner. In Leviticus 17:11 we are told, “*For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement (covering) for your souls: for it is the blood that makes an atonement for the soul.*” Also in Hebrews 9:22 we read, “*Without shedding of blood is no remission (forgiveness).*” **Second:** As the offending party, the sinner's attitude must be changed. The sinner must come to God’s sacrifice in a spirit of repentance and faith. God sent judgment upon Judah in Jeremiah’s day because “no man repented him of his wickedness. . .” (Jeremiah 8:6). Jesus said in Luke 13:3, “*Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.*” The Great commission in Luke 24:47 connects repentance with the forgiveness of sins. “*And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.*”
The idea of forgiveness in the Old Testament is summarized as such: God can on the basis of an atonement cover up and blot out sin, separating it from the offender by sending it away never to be brought up again, thereby releasing the sinner from the guilt associated with the past. While the deed is not denied to have occurred, the offender is no longer under judicial bondage and guilt. The result is reconciliation and freedom of conscience.


In the New Testament there are four words used in the Greek test to describe forgiveness. Two of these are only used one time each. They are (1) apolio: used only in Luke 6:37 where it means to “release, let go, dismiss.” It is used by Jesus in the relating of sin to a debt owed and denotes the discharge or release from the debt. (2) Paresis: used only in Romans 3:25 where it means “to pass over.” Paul uses it to refer to God passing over the sins of the Old Testament era without a permanent removal. Sins prior to Christ’s death on Calvary were temporarily covered awaiting the time when they were completely forgiven by Christ’s sacrificial death. (3) Aphesis: the forgiveness or discharge of a debt. (4) Chorizomai: “to grant generously, forgive, pardon” used only by Paul and Luke. It means “gracious giving,” or “the bestowal of favor.”

In the New Testament, forgiveness of sins is consistently associated with the person of Jesus Christ. (Acts 13:38). A perfect sacrifice for the peoples’ sins was necessary for forgiveness. (Hebrews 9:11-28; 10:10-14, 19, 20). Since He bore the law’s death penalty for sinners (Galatians 3:10-13), those who trust in His sacrifice are freed from that penalty. By faith sinners are forgiven or justified in Paul’s terminology (Romans 3:28). Those who are forgiven of sin’s penalty, also die to its controlling power in their lives. (Romans 6:1-23).

Christ’s resurrection is also related to forgiveness. Christ’s resurrection was an act by which God wiped away the false charges against Him. It was God’s declaration of the perfect righteousness of His Son, and the acceptance of His Son’s sacrifice. (I Timothy 3:16). Because He has been acquitted and declared righteous, this is true for all those whom He represents. Thus Christ’s resurrection was a necessary condition for the forgiveness of human sins. (I Corinthians 15:12-28). To be forgiven is to be identified with Christ in His crucifixion and resurrection.
The forgiveness of sins secures a reconciliation between God and man, restoring the severed relationship and creating the basis for fellowship. (Romans 5:1-11). Objectively the forgiveness of sin acquits the believer of the judicial guilt of sin and provides salvation and eternal life. Subjectively the forgiveness of sin delivers the repentant sinner from the evils of a guilty and condemning conscience. Even though the memory of sins past does not disappear, anxious guilt and fear of judgment are replaced by trust and love.

Forgiveness of sins, achieving reconciliation and restoration to fellowship with God, summarizes the whole nature of the Christian life. Justification is the foundation of the Christian life. Sanctification is the fruit, and glorification is its objective. In forgiveness, God remains God, and the erring sinner is brought home to the Father who has eternally loved him.

(3) Divine and Human Forgiveness

After having now examined the Old Testament and New Testament descriptions of forgiveness, we are now ready to look at the similarity between divine and human forgiveness. In the Bible, there are recorded instances of both human and divine forgiveness. This does not mean, however, that there is a basic difference between them. God is self-existent and infinite, while man is dependent and finite, but both are personal moral beings and as such are similar in their attitudes and actions. Therefore, in Matthew 6:12, Jesus could teach His disciples to pray, “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” At the conclusion of teaching on prayer, He would go further and say, “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).

Throughout the remainder of these studies we will be operating upon the premise that the method of our human forgiveness is to be patterned after the model of God’s forgiveness. In Colossians 3:13, we are told, “if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do you.” So in our bestowing forgiveness to others and receiving forgiveness from others, we are to follow the process in which God has shown forgiveness to us.

II. DEFINITION OF FORGIVENESS

In our description of forgiveness, we have up to now talked about what forgiveness does in what it achieves. But in defining forgiveness we are now ready to ask the question, “What is forgiveness?” Not what it does in its results, but what is its nature or essence? When the offending
party asks, “will you forgive me?” and the offended party says, “I forgive you,” what is being expressed? What is the essence of forgiveness? Is it a “feeling” of emotional release?

While there may be emotions involved in the transaction, is forgiveness a feeling? Most modern discussions of forgiveness focus on “having forgiving feelings” or “feelings of forgiveness.” But when we come to define forgiveness, the Bible does not use such expressions. Since our forgiveness is to be modeled after God’s forgiveness, what does God do when He forgives? When God hears the words of a sinner asking for forgiveness, does He sit in the heavens and undergo an emotional tremor? If so, how can I be assured that I have been forgiven since my natural senses cannot detect such a feeling occurring in God? If I ask God for forgiveness, must I not sense a wave of emotional release in my being in order to be assured I have been forgiven? What happens if I sincerely ask God for forgiveness and there is no emotional feeling forthcoming? Has God rejected my request? Are not feelings sometimes deceptive? How could I ever be assured of God’s forgiveness if I must wait until I “feel forgiven,” and hope that God has had a “forgiving feeling” develop toward me? If forgiveness is merely an emotional experience, we could not know that we were forgiven if the experience was lacking.

So we repeat our question - “What is forgiveness?” What does God do when He forgives? He goes on record in declaring that the matter of sin has been dealt with once and for all. What does God declare has happened when our sin debt is forgiven?

**One:** He has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west. Psalm 103:12, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

**Two:** He has buried them in the depths of the sea never to be brought up again. Micah 7:19, “Thou will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.”

**Three:** He has blotted them out as hiding them in a thick cloud never to be seen again. Isaiah 44:22, “I have blotted out, as a thick cloud thy transgressions.”

**Four:** He has promised to “not remember” them ever again. Isaiah 43:25, “I, even I, am He that blotted out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.”

So when God declares that our sins have been forgiven, He makes a promise. Forgiveness is a promise made to the offending party by the offended party. It is not a feeling, it is a...
promise! God promises not to remember our sins anymore. But a question may emerge at this point. How can God, who knows all things, past, present, and future, ever forget anything? The answer is “He doesn't.” God cannot forget, but He can choose to “not remember.” Forgetting is a passive expression; it requires no action. It is something which finite human beings do. To “not remember” is an active expression by which is meant, “I will never use these sins against you again. I will not bring these matters up to you or others in the future.”

The word, “remember” in this context means to bring up and deal with another's sins. In the book of III John and verse 10, John mentions an individual named Diotrephes, who was causing division in the church. In doing so, John makes use of the word “remember” when he says, “Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth.” Here John means that he will bring up and charge Diotrephes with the sinful deeds he had done. In Psalm 25:7, David asks God to “remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions: according to thy mercy, remember thou me for thy goodness sake, O Lord.” When David is saying remember not my youthful sins, he is saying, “do not deal with me on the basis of my past sins, but instead “remember me” or deal with me on the basis of your goodness and mercy. cf. Psalm 79:8, “O remember not against us former iniquities: let thy tender mercies precede us: for we are brought very low.”

Since God’s forgiveness is our model to follow, what are we saying when we say the words, “I forgive you?” We are making a promise that we will never again in the future ever bring up his or her offense to use against them. This promise covers three things.

(1) I will not bring the matter up to you.
(2) I will not bring the matter up to another.
(3) I will not bring the matter up to myself.

How often do we say the words, “I forgive you” to a person only to bring up the offensive act in the future when the person offends us again. How often we tell someone we have forgiven them only to continue to gossip to others about what they have done to us. How often we tell someone that we have forgiven them only to harbor bitter thoughts in the mind about how they have hurt us.

Now that we have been exposed to both a description and a definition of forgiveness in the Bible, we can begin to appreciate the difficulty of our sinful flesh to truly forgive another person. If the person truly confesses his sin and asks me for forgiveness, I must promise to forgive, whether I feel like it or not!
THE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS (3)

Forgiveness: Conditional or Unconditional?

For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee. --Psalm 86:5

He that covers his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesses and forsakes them shall have mercy. –Proverbs 28:13

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. – I John 1:9

Take heed to yourselves: if thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. – Luke 17:3

In our first lesson, we saw that the idea contained in forgiveness is the pardon or removal of an offense which has led to a broken or severed relationship, with the end goal in mind being to reestablish a reconciliation between the two parties involved. Christianity is the only religion which teaches a forgiveness true to the Bible. A Christian can be identified as a “forgiven person who is forgiving of others.”

In our second lesson we looked at descriptions of forgiveness in both the Old and New Testaments. We saw that in order to be forgiven by God we must identify ourselves with Jesus Christ in His crucifixion and resurrection. We saw that the model for how we forgive other humans is based on how God has forgiven us as believers. We learned that forgiveness is a promise rather than a feeling, so that we are duty bound to forgive someone, who seeks our forgiveness, whether we feel like it or not. I can control a promise, but I cannot always control my emotions.

When we say, “I forgive you,” we are promising the person or persons involved three things, (1) I will not bring the matter up to you again; (2) I will not bring the matter up to another; (3) I will not bring the matter up to myself.

We are now ready to discuss the question as to whether forgiveness is to be granted on the condition that the offender repents and asks for forgiveness, or if the offended party is to unconditionally forgive even when the offender refuses to repent. To state it another way, “Can God, or we who are offended, forgive the sin of the person who refuses to repent and seek forgiveness? Since God's forgiveness sets the pattern for our forgiveness, then let us
begin there (cf. Ephesians 4:32). The revelation of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ sets forth the truth that forgiveness by God rests upon clear unmistakable conditions. In the preaching of the Gospel, the Apostles did not merely announce that God had forgiven men, who should then acknowledge and rejoice in the fact. Instead they were sent forth to call upon men to repent in order to be forgiven. The Gospel is addressed to unforgiven, unreconciled men who are lost and under the wrath of God. It is not addressed to men who are already forgiven, but just not yet aware of it. This is the error found in both Hyper-Calvinism on one hand and Hyper-Universalism on the other. Both positions, from the motive of trying to exalt the sacrificial atonement of Christ, merge Christ’s purchase of forgiveness and the Spirit’s application of forgiveness into one single transaction occurring at the cross. The only difference between the two is that the Hyper-Calvinist believes that only the elect’s sins are forgiven, while the Hyper-Universalist believes that everyone’s sins are forgiven. Both hold to unconditional forgiveness. This error destroys the preaching of the Gospel to lost sinners. It also removes human responsibility and duty.

The Great Commission as given in Luke says, “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:47). In Acts 13:38, 39 we read, “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins, and by Him all that believe are justified from all things, from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.” The condition of repentance and faith must have occurred before forgiveness was bestowed in the message of the Gospel as preached by John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul and the Apostles.

The reason why this topic is divisive is due to the fact that some Scriptures do not specify repentance as a condition while others do. For example, the following scriptures refer to forgiveness without specifying repentance or faith. (Psalm 103:3; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; Mark 11:25, 26). Then there are the scriptures which specify repentance and/or faith to be in place before forgiveness is granted. (Proverbs 28:13; I John 1:9; Romans 10:9, 10; Luke 17:3). The best way to harmonize these passages is to assume that in the ones omitting the conditions, the conditions have already occurred, or the means of forgiveness have yet to be used. For example, we know that repentance and faith are conditions of God’s forgiveness of sinners. In some passages both conditions are mentioned (Acts 20:21). Sometimes only repentance is mentioned (Acts 17:30). In other places only faith is mentioned (Acts 16:31). In some places repentance and baptism are connected (Acts 2:38; Mark 1:4). In other places faith and baptism are connected (Acts 22:16; Mark 16:16). Would it not be best to understand that when forgiveness in the New Testament was granted, all of the required conditions were coexisting? I believe this is the best way to harmonize the
Scriptures. Thus, if we are going to retain God’s method of forgiveness, then all forgiveness is conditional, and there is no such thing as unconditional forgiveness.

I. GOD’S READINESS TO FORGIVE

If God only forgives on prescribed conditions which give evidence of a humbled attitude on the offender’s part, then what kind of an attitude does God possess toward sinful men? God has attributes both of love and wrath. Toward the proud, the arrogant, and self-righteous, James 4:6 says that “God resists the proud.” This is not due to His lack of mercy but to His moral character. Habakkuk 1:13 says, He is “of purer eyes than to behold evil.” For God to forgive without repentance would be like condoning sin or being indifferent to it. It would also mean that He would not deal with man as the responsible moral agent He has made him to be. While God is for man, He is not for him as an impenitent sinner, but as a potential saint. This is well expressed in Isaiah 59:1,2, “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened (limited), that it cannot save; neither His ear heavy, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear.”

James also tells us that God gives “grace unto the humble” (James 4:6). So God’s bestowal of forgiveness is based upon the type of attitude which is residing in the sinner. What then is man’s moral duty before God. He is told to “Submit yourselves therefore to God.” (James 4:7). Also to “Draw nigh to God, and He will draw night to you.” (James 4:8). Again in James 4:10, the offending party is told to “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up.” If a sinner approaches God for mercy and forgiveness, what kind of attitude can he expect to find residing in God? What motivation can be given to encourage the sinner to call upon the Lord? It is that he is approaching a God who has a “spirit of forgiveness” and is “ready to forgive” anyone who seeks His forgiveness! David rejoiced in this truth in his prayer recorded in Psalm 86. In verses 4 and 5 we read, “Rejoice the soul of thy servant: for unto thee, O Lord do I lift up my soul. For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.” In verse 15 he knew God’s character was such that He was “a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth.” Because of this he could pray in verse 16, “O turn unto me, and have mercy upon me.” God has an ear which is quick and ready to forgive all those who need and want forgiveness, but forgiveness is not bestowed until the offender humbly asks for it.

The order leading to God’s forgiveness is beautifully described in Isaiah 55:6,7, “Seek ye the Lord, while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near: let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” Notice the order, **One**: “Seek ye the Lord, call upon him” = confession. **Two**: “Let the wicked forsake his way and his thoughts, and return unto the Lord” = repentance. **Three**: “Our God will abundantly pardon” = forgiveness. God has such a spirit of readiness to forgive that He will not turn away from any who truly seek Him. That is His character and promise.

Now when a believer truly repents and is forgiven by God, God’s spirit of forgiveness is implanted in his soul. The result is, he, like God, possesses a spirit of readiness to forgive. Thus when he is offended and the offender asks for his forgiveness, the believer is duty bound to bestow it. His enablement to do so comes from the Holy Spirit residing within. His attitude of readiness to forgive is translated into an actual act of forgiveness.

This forgiving attitude or disposition is what Jesus was describing to Peter when Peter asked how often should he forgive his brother. Peter thought he would be very forgiving if he forgave his brother seven times. In Matthew 18:21, 22, Jesus said, “no, seventy times seven.” In answering this way, Jesus was saying that no limitations are to be placed upon one’s readiness to forgive. But one must not assume that this is an act of unconditional forgiveness. Jesus taught his disciples in Luke 17:3, 4 the necessity of a repentant attitude or disposition preexisting in the sinning brother before the act of forgiveness can be bestowed. We read, “If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him and if he trespasses against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.”

Forgiveness is part of a mutual relationship. The other part is repentance on the part of the offender. God does not forgive without repentance, nor is it required out of us. The effect of forgiveness is to restore to its former state the relationship which was broken by sin. Such a restoration requires the cooperation of both parties. There must be both a granting of forgiveness by the offended party and a seeking of forgiveness by the offending party. Thus we as believers are not under obligation to bestow forgiveness upon an unrepentant sinner, but we are obligated to be ready to forgive, and to attempt to bring him repentance by confronting him with his offense.

II  ERRONEOUS VIEWS OF FORGIVENESS

Today there are many Christian leaders who erroneously teach that we must forgive someone even when that person clearly does not intend to seek forgiveness. David Augsburger, a leader in the Mennonite movement wrote a best-selling book entitled “The
Freedom of Forgiveness: Seventy Times Seven.” His main motive in the book is to help relieve the bitterness and hurt from the conscience of the offended party. In the book he makes these statements:

Christ’s way was the way of giving forgiveness even before asked, and even when it was not or never would be asked for by another.

In support for such a model for forgiveness, he refers to Christ’s prayer on the cross. I quote again,

“While His enemies were driving spikes through His hands again and again, with every blow, He probably prayed, “Father, forgive them.” That’s forgiveness. Unasked, undeserved, yet freely given. To think that we needn’t forgive until we are asked is a myth to be punctured!” (Augsburger, The Freedom of Forgiveness, p. 36).

As of this writing (10/10/06) a tragic event occurred in an Amish community in the state of Pennsylvania in the United States. An angry man captured and held hostage a number of young Amish girls in a schoolhouse. He proceeded to shoot them all, killing five in the process and severely wounding several others. He then took his own life. The Amish leaders proceeded to announce they had prayed for and forgiven the dead man, and also forgiven his family. The family of the dead man was deeply moved. The Amish community was merely putting into practice what Augsburger had taught them. So what is the problem? First, you cannot pray for and forgive the dead. Second, the dead man’s family had done nothing for which to be forgiven. Here is a clear example of unconditional forgiveness. It was not a Biblical forgiveness, but a psychological technique to provide a therapeutic release of pain on the part of the injured parties involved. There was no promise made to the dead man that he could hear and his family had not asked for forgiveness, nor did they need to. They had committed no offensive act.

Betty Tapscott in her book, “Set Free Through Inner Healing”, is so insistent on unconditional forgiveness that she says, “There are times when we may even have to forgive an animal.” (Tapscott, Set Free, p. 140). I have had to rebuke my dogs and cats on numerous occasions, but I have yet had one to confess and repent of sin. This lady is talking about a forgiveness which is foreign to the writers of the Bible. Her concern is what forgiveness does for the one who forgives, not how to please God or show love to the offender.
Now what about Jesus prayer on the cross? (Luke 23:34). What about Stephen’s prayer on behalf of murderers in Acts 7:59, 60? Whatever is true of Jesus’ prayer is true also of Stephen’s prayer. Is the statement of Jesus a declaration of forgiveness or a prayer for forgiveness? I believe it is the latter. On several occasions Jesus declared to individuals, “Your sins are forgiven you.” (Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20; 7:48). His words on the cross contain no such declaration. They form a prayer of intercession. If Jesus unconditionally forgave those who crucified Him, then that would mean that they had been forgiven without hearing and believing the Gospel! That is heretical doctrine!

Did Jesus receive an answer to His prayer? Yes, but not apart from the means for forgiveness, but through the use of Gospel means. On the day of Pentecost, thousands of Jews were saved in response to the hearing of the Gospel message (Acts 2:37, 38). They were not forgiven of the sin of crucifying the Savior apart from believing that He was dying for their sins. How unthinkable it is that Christ was dying for the sin's of His people so that they could be forgiven, only for Him to ask for their forgiveness without the means of bringing them to repentance and faith? Was Stephen's prayer answered? Yes, a man named Saul was participating in his death, and was later converted on the road to Damascus when he repented and believed. Neither Jesus nor Stephen bore any personal resentfulness toward their persecutors, but prayed for the Father to forgive them. They both possessed a spirit which was ready to forgive. But the actual act of forgiveness awaited the repentance of the ones who were sinning. This is God’s model in dealing with us as believers, we are to copy it in our dealing with others. We close with Peter’s words describing our Lord’s attitude toward those who mistreated Him. “When He was reviled, He reviled not again, when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judges Righteously.” (1 Peter 2:23).

In our next lesson, we will examine the process of forgiveness and the end goal which forgiveness seeks to achieve.
THE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS (4)

The Process and Goal of Forgiveness (Part One)

A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle. --Proverbs 18:19

Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there remembers that thy brother has ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. --Matthew 5:23, 24

Then said he unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones. Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. --Luke 17:1-3

Or despise thou the riches of His goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leads thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasure up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; Who will render to every man according to his deeds. --Romans 2:4-6

In our first lesson, we saw that the idea contained in forgiveness is the pardon or removal of an offense which has led to a severed relationship, with the goal of achieving a reconciliation between the parties involved. In this setting, we defined a Christian as a “forgiven person who is forgiving of others.”

In the second lesson we defined the act of forgiveness as containing a promise to the offending party that involved three things: (1) I will not bring the matter up to you again; (2) I will not bring the matter up to another; (3) I will not bring the matter up to myself.

In the third lesson, we learned that forgiveness is conditioned upon the offender’s attitude toward the offended party. We looked at God’s forgiveness of us as the model whereby we are to grant forgiveness. While we are to maintain a spirit of forgiveness and always be ready to forgive, we cannot bestow the act of forgiveness until the offender asks to be forgiven.
We are now ready to observe the steps involved in pursuing forgiveness with the goal in mind being the restoration of the friendship or relationship.

Human relationships, in a sinful world, are some of the most trying of all of life’s experiences. The bumper sticker on the car oftentimes seems true, “The longer I am around people, the more I love my dog.” But even that statement betrays my sinful pride in that I have trained my dog to submit to my will. I can’t get humans to do that. The wise man Solomon observed in Proverbs 18:19, “A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city; and their contentions are like the bars of a castle.” Offenses can sever even the closest of ties. They separate like great walls in a city and bars on the doors and windows of a house. Communication ceases and the relationship dies. Starting with Cain and Abel, human history leaves behind a road cluttered with wrecked and ruined relationships. While Jesus said this was part of living in a sinful world, He warned against being the party which offends. In Luke 17:1, He said, “It is impossible but that offences will come; but woe unto him, through whom they come.”

When something occurs that endangers or severs a relationship, what is the duty placed by God on the two parties involved? It is to quickly seek a confrontation in which communication addresses the nature of the offense.

I. STEP ONE: CONFRONTATION

A. When you are the offending party - Matthew 5:23-26, “Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there remember that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.”

There are two expressions which stand out in this passage of scripture. “Go first” (v. 24) and “agree quickly” or “come to terms quickly,” with your brother or opponent. Both of these stress the priority of reconciliation, even before continuing one’s worship and service of God. Why is this? Because when one sins against their brother, they also sin against God. God insists that we must be on good terms with
our brother if we expect to remain on good terms with Him. Thus until we go and seek forgiveness from our brother our worship before God is unacceptable.

Also notice that the longer one delays the process, the more intense the issues become. The offended party may take the matter to a court of law or else bring you before church discipline. (cf. Matthew 18:15-17). But even if the offended brother does not come to you or utilizes church discipline, you are still exposing yourself to God’s punishment or chastisement, whatever the case may be. In I Corinthians 11:30-34, God brought judgment in the form of chastisement upon some in the Corinthian church for unconfessed sin. Paul said the way to avoid God’s judgment is to judge ourselves so that “we should not be judged.” (v. 31).

It is sometimes easy to go through the external forms of worship, such as the Lord’s Supper, and think this will offset our sin against our brother. Such is not the case. How many friendships have died because of not quickly addressing the issues? How many marriages have ended in divorce because this was not observed? How many churches have split because this was tolerated?

The question now arises “What about sins of the mind or heart?” Not all sins are outward transgression against others. When Jesus spoke of committing adultery in the heart (Matthew 5:28), He was referring to a heart sin. This sin is known only to God and the sinner. It is unknown by the party toward whom the thought is directed. Lust, envy, anger, etc. are to be confessed to God, not to others. In fact, confession of your sinful thoughts to the person who is unaware of what you are thinking may lead to additional sin and hurt. So if you are a man who has a lustful thought toward a certain woman, don’t walk up to her and say, “will you forgive me, I just had a lustful thought about you?” She may slap you, and her husband may beat you up, or maybe even kill you in a rage of anger. So any sin conceived in the attitude of the heart which does not develop in the outward act is to be confessed to God alone.

B. **When you are the offended party** - Luke 17:3,4. “Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.”

We now turn to the situation in which you are the one who is sinned against. You are not the source of the offense, but the victim or object. Now, how are we to handle
sins against ourselves? Do we begin by feeling sorry for ourselves? Do we invite others over for a pity party and tell them what so-and-so did to us? This is not what Jesus said to do. Do we become furious and go over and tell our brother off or ventilate our wrath on other people and objects? A popular psychological technique is to take a pillow and punch it while pretending it is the person who has offended you. Jesus did not say to take this approach either. No, the concern is not to be on our hurt feelings, or a desire to get even – it is on salvaging a friendship or relationship! How much does this relationship mean to me? How much to my brother? How much to God?

So what does Jesus say to do? Go to the one who offended you and talk to him about it. The question may now arise, “Why should I go? I didn’t do anything wrong. It should be his responsibility to come to me. After all this is what Jesus has taught in Matthew 5:23,24.” Yes, he is obligated to come to you, but here we are informed that you are to go to him. This is a dual command. You should go and he should come. Remember, when Adam sinned, God came to Adam and confronted him with the sin. Adam was fearful and ashamed. Many times the innocent party must initiate the confrontation if the relationship is to be maintained. Don't postpone your duty to confront the offender lest your neglect turn into a sin for which you must ask for God's forgiveness.

C. **To confront or not to confront.**

Before we move on into step two of the process of forgiveness, we need to address the issue of whether there must be a confrontation brought about by every offense which occurs. Living as sinful human beings in a fallen world, where imperfection rules the scene, we will be constantly offending others and others offending us. Must there be a continual confronting, rebuking, repenting and forgiving over everything that happens? Is there no time when the offended party should simply overlook or forbear the transgression? If not, then human relationships would not long endure. Some offenses are “petty” in nature and should be overlooked. If someone fails to say “thank you” for an act of kindness, should the person be confronted with a rebuke and censure? If you are driving into a parking spot and someone darts in front of you, should you rebuke the person and take him to a court of law? When someone is recognized at church for a good deed, and you are overlooked for the good deed you have done, is that a matter for church discipline? How long would a friendship endure if every petty offense brought about a confrontation? How could a husband and wife endure a marriage when at the end of
the day, a list of offenses was exchanged between them, and they had to work through the process of forgiveness for each offense? How long could a church family stay together if each petty offense were approached through the steps of church discipline set forth in Matthew 18:15-17? Obviously this approach is both impractical and unworkable. So what is the governing rule which determines which offenses should be overlooked and which should be confronted? The answer is that any sin or offense, which leads to a breach of fellowship and unreconciled condition, requires confrontation and forgiveness. Other offenses, in which we can tolerate or forbear, we simply overlook as long as the relationship can be maintained. This I believe, is the meaning of Paul’s exhortation in Romans 12:18, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.”

Now, another question arises, “Are these offenses which are overlooked to be viewed as forgiven? If so, then the idea of conditional forgiveness falls apart, and God’s model for how He forgives offenses does not stand true for how we are to handle human offenses. If we are going to abide by God’s model, then how does God relate to people who offend Him and do not seek His forgiveness? Does He bestow unconditional forgiveness upon them? We have seen that He does not. Does God then ask us to unconditionally grant forgiveness to others for their “petty” offenses without them asking for our forgiveness? If He does then He is asking us to be more forgiving than He is forgiving!

God’s ethical nature is such that He is not only a forgiving God to those who ask for forgiveness, but He is also a Being who is longsuffering, patient, and forbearing with sinful men who do not seek His forgiveness. Based on His infinite wisdom and purpose, He does not show the same level of longsuffering equally among men and angels. The angels who fell never were exposed to the longsuffering and patience of God, but were immediately judged by God. Meanwhile Adam and Eve were exposed to the longsuffering of God and Adam lived 930 years before he died. All of his offspring were exposed to differing degrees of forbearance, living various amounts of time, and experiencing differing trials and blessings.

The word “forbearance” comes into play in answering the question as to whether the offenses we overlook are forgiven or not. Forbearance is not the same thing as forgiving. In Colossians 3:12, 13 we are told to “Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any, even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.” Jesus freely forgave us
when we repented and called upon Him for forgiveness. In like manner we are to forgive others. But before we called upon Him for forgiveness, He displayed His forbearance and longsuffering toward us. This, like forgiveness, was an act of love. In a companion scripture in Ephesians 4:1-3, Paul encourages his readers to “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The word, “forsaking” comes from a family of words which are translated “tolerate, patience, suffer or permit, endure, overlook.” In classical Greek it means “a pause or delay.” It was often used in the sense of a truce associated with military actions. The meaning is the same in its usage in the New Testament. It means “a truce, or a temporary arrangement until a peace agreement can take place.” Paul makes use of the idea in Acts 17:30 where he says, “At the times of this ignorance God winked at (overlooked); but now commanded all men everywhere to repent.”

Paul also uses the word in Romans 2:4, 5 where he warns the impenitent person, “Or despise thou the riches of His goodness and forbearance and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasures up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”

So what is God’s purpose in forbearance with sinful men? It is to provide a pause or delay in His judgments with them in which they are granted an arrangement wherein a period of time is provided for their repentance and conversion. This does not mean that their sins have been forgiven, but His confrontation with them in judgment is only suspended. The execution of judgment is postponed to allow time for the possibility of a peace settlement. As it relates to forgiveness, we may say that God’s forbearance is the period of time preceding His forgiveness. In love He overlooks or patiently endures their offenses until at such time they ask for forgiveness. It is then in an act of love He covers or forgives their sins.

So how long does God suspend His judgments upon men? No one knows for sure how long God will tolerate or overlook their sinning. It varies from person to person and how much light and opportunity God has provided.

So how can we live as peaceably as possible in a world in which offenses are constantly occurring in our relationships? By following God’s model of forbearance
and forgiveness. The last question we will address in this lesson is, “How long should I overlook the offenses of others?” As long as you can patiently endure them. If and when you realize they have caused, or are about to cause, the loss of a good friendship, then it is time to move into the stage of confrontation. The maintaining of the relationship is the goal of forbearance and forgiving. True love for our brother or friend will motivate us to such conduct.
THE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS (5)

The Process and Goal of Forgiveness (Part Two)

Then said he unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones. Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. –Luke 17:1-3

“He that covers his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesses and forsakes them shall have mercy.” – Proverbs 28:13

Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow works repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world works death. –II Corinthians 7:9, 10

In our last lesson, we began to look at the process of forgiveness and its goal to restore a severed friendship or relationship. In doing so, we examined the first step in the process which we called the confrontation. We learned that God has placed a duty upon both parties to quickly seek a confrontation to address the nature of the offense.

In Matthew 5:23-26 we looked at the duty of the offending party to devote the highest priority to the matter. It should even take priority over one's acts of worship to God. We should do so because our relationship with our brother affects our relationship with our God.

Then in Luke 17:3,4 we looked at our duty if we happen to be the offended party. We saw that we should not begin feeling sorry for ourselves, neither should we start telling others what so-and-so did to us. Neither should we confront our brother in a fit or rage or take out our anger on others not involved. We also learned that our failure to confront the offender may turn into a sin for which we must ask God for forgiveness.

We then addressed the issue concerning whether we should confront others over every offense which occurs. Following God’s pattern of forbearing with sinful men until they ask for His forgiveness, we concluded that we should forbear and overlook the small daily offenses of others, until at such time as these offenses begin to harm our relationship. Then we must proceed with the confrontation.
II. STEP TWO: REPENTANCE.

In moving into step two of the process of forgiveness, we are instructed by our Lord in Luke 17:2 to confront our offending brother in the form of a rebuke. The motive for this rebuke is the desire to see the brother repent and receive the forgiveness which restores the relationship. We are not to go with the attitude of getting even or making the individual pay for his or her actions. In Galatians 6:1 we read, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” The spirit of approaching the brother is to be that of meekness and humility considering our own personal weaknesses. The goal is restoration, not vindication.

We must rebuke with caution. We are to approach the matter as a fact finding inquiry into the reason for the brother’s action. We are to present the facts as we see them, then wait for any explanation that might clear up any misunderstanding. If the brother gives a satisfactory answer, then the issue is settled, and the friendship is restored. If the brother acknowledges an offense has occurred and repents by asking for forgiveness, then forgiveness is to be granted and the friendship is restored. If he refuses to acknowledge an offense, the next step may be a formal church hearing or a severing of the relationship. But the effort on the part of the offended party has been made. There is no more that can be done until the offending brother repents. In dealing with sin in our relationship with others, we have a twofold duty. First, we are not to be the source of causing others to sin. Second, we are not to ignore sins in others which have led to a severed relationship. Our failure in either of these two duties constitutes sin on our part which needs God’s forgiveness.

In confronting the brother with the sin or offense, we are seeking to produce a conviction of sin which will lead to repentance. In a loving way, we are trying to cause the brother to see that what he or she has done is wrong, confess it as wrong and turn from it. This necessitates an understanding of the meaning of repentance on the part of both parties.

The Old Testament word for repentance means “to turn.” It conveys the idea of doing an about-face in one’s thinking, that leads to an about-face in one’s ways or actions. This idea is clearly defined for us in Isaiah 55:7,8, “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.” In these verses, God, through Isaiah, is calling Israel to repentance. He commands that she “forsake” (turn from) her thoughts (thinking) and ways, and turn to His thoughts and ways. Repentance is a converting from how we have viewed a matter and embracing God’s view of the matter. It is a turning from wrong to right, from error to truth.
The New Testament word means “to change one’s mind.” This small phrase describes a radical change in the individual’s disposition or attitude toward himself, and how his actions or ways have offended either God or his neighbor. So what are we doing when we are trying to bring our brother to repentance? We are trying to show our brother how his ways have wronged us, and for his need to change his thinking about the action, and see it as sinful. Then he needs to do a turn-about in the way he has been behaving toward us.

Repentance is a prerequisite to forgiveness in that, until a person rethinks his attitudes and actions, and begins to think and act like God, there is no possibility for a change of one’s lifestyle, which is implied in the words, “will you forgive me?” Until repentance occurs, neither reconciliation nor fellowship with God or one’s neighbor is possible. When the offended party hears the offending party say, “I repent,” he understands him to mean, “I have been wrong, I have done you wrong, I do not want to do this again, will you forgive me? It is only to this attitude and request that the offended party can make the verbal or written promise, “not to remember” the issue again. It is settled, the friendship is restored. The offended brother is promising to never bring up the matter again, and the offending brother is promising to never repeat the offense.

Due to false teachings there remains much confusion still existing today regarding repentance. Some view it as a feeling of deep sorrow and grief over some wrong thought or act that has occurred. Some view it as “doing penance” which is a form of self-inflicted punishment for a wrong deed with the hope of obtaining forgiveness.

Some of this confusion has been caused by the translators of the King James Version of the Bible when they translated two Greek words as “repent” when they should have been translated as two separate words, namely, “regret” and “repent.” As we have seen repent means to change one’s mind. But the word regret means a feeling of remorse or sorrow.

Repentance is not a feeling. A person may regret something he has said and not be repentant. A person may sorrow over a deed he has done and not be repentant. In Hebrews 12:16, 17 we read how Esau sought to regain the birthright he had sold in his earlier life. In spite of his regret or remorse over the loss, he could not get his father Isaac to repent or change his mind, even though he shed tears in making the attempt.

The account of Judas in his betrayal of his master is a tragic illustration of regret without repentance. In Matthew 27:3-5 we read, “Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to
us? see thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.” The word translated “repented” in the KJV is the word for “regret” denoting a feeling of remorse. It is not the word for repentance which means a change of mind. The NKJV makes this improvement when it translates the words in this manner; “Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that he had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders saying, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’” Notice that one can regret their actions and even view them as sinful, and not truly repent.

The Apostle Paul contributes to our understanding of the distinction between regret and repentance in II Corinthians 7:10 which reads, “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.” The NKJV catches the meaning of Paul more correctly when it translates the verse, “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation (forgiveness), not to be regretted, but the sorrow of the world produces death.” Here Paul stresses that sorrow, be it godly or worldly, is not repentance. In fact, only godly sorrow works toward repentance. This sorrow is from God, produced by the Holy Spirit. It is directed toward God for having offended Him through sin.

King David felt godly sorrow after His sin with Bathsheba. This sorrow led him to change his attitude toward his affair with Bathsheba. In Psalm 51:3,4, we have his prayer of forgiveness, “For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight.” It is with that attitude that he found forgiveness with God. Sorrow that accompanies repentance is a sorrow over one’s sin against God.

By contrast, the sorrow of the world regrets the exposure of one’s sin and leads to fear of the consequences of the sin. Since it does not work repentance, it ends in eternal death. It can also adversely affect a person’s health in this life and lead to physical death. Depression flowing from worldly sorrow can result in suicide.

King Saul sensed this worldly sorrow over his being rejected by God. It caused him concern lest he lose respect in the eyes of the men in his army. When the prophet Samuel refused to help him maintain his status, Saul sought to restrain Samuel (I Samuel 15:22-30). In the end, he committed suicide (I Samuel 31:4). We can now begin to see the reason why there can be no true forgiveness from the offended party if there be no true change of attitude within the offending party.
III. STEP THREE: CONFESSION.

Confession is the third step in the process of forgiveness. Confession is inseparably linked with repentance. It is an outward expression to the offended party, be it God or man, of the inner admission that one has been wrong in either thought, attitude, word, or deed. It is a verbal or written admission of wrongdoing made to the person who was wronged.

The word “confess” means “to say the same thing.” It is an expression of the offending party saying to the offended party, “you are right, I agree with you. I did wrong you. I did sin against you.” It is admitting to what one has been charged with as being true. In confession, a person should never confess as sin what he is not sure is sin as defined in the Bible. Neither should one confess to sins that he does not believe he has committed, just to merely appease another who has charged him with wrong-doing. Job refused to confess to sins of which he was not guilty, even though his “friends” were charging him with sinning. Confession must be the genuine conviction existing in a repentant heart or attitude.

Since the offended party must wait upon repentance and confession before he can grant forgiveness, what can be expressed to help the offending party know how to perform his duty? If the offending party appears to be convicted of his wrong action, but is unsure how to express it, the offended party can say, “John, do you agree with me that you have wronged me in what you have said or done, and that I have a right to be offended?” If John says yes, then you should ask “John, do you not then think that you should ask me to forgive you?” When John says “Yes, will you please forgive me?” Then your forgiveness should flow like water from a faucet. It is then that you state, “John, you are forgiven. The matter is settled, I will never bring up the action again and charge you with wrongdoing.” It is usually at this point that an emotional wave flows over both parties and they embrace each other with a sense of cleanness in their souls. No offense on the part of the offended party, and no guilt on the part of the offending party.

IV. STEP FOUR: FORGIVENESS.

Inasmuch as we have covered the definition and description of forgiveness in the previous lessons, and have repeatedly referred to it in steps one, two, and three, we will not enlarge any further upon it. I do wish to now address the way in which the people of the world handle offenses and show why they never reach the Biblical depth of repentance and forgiveness.

In the place of forgiveness the world has substituted apologizing or saying, “I’m sorry.” The English word “apologize” has a meaning today which is totally opposite of what it originally meant. An
“apologia” was originally a defense made in a court trial in ancient Greece. Rather than pleading guilty to the charges and admit wrong, it was the means of defending oneself against a charge of wrongdoing. This is of course exactly the opposite of confessing sin and asking forgiveness. It is the word from which the Christian term “apologetics” comes about. Apologetics refers to the branch of Christian theology devoted to the defense of the faith.

In Noah Webster's original dictionary of the English language compiled in 1828, an apology is defined as an “excuse; something said or written in defense of what appears to others wrong or unjustifiable.” In the modern Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of 2003, we find its meaning to have radically changed. There we read that it means “a written or spoken expression of one’s regret, remorse, or sorrow for having insulted, failed, injured, or wronged another.” In essence it is an expression of the words, “I'm sorry,” which means “I regret what I have done.” But to say, “I'm sorry” and to say “I have sinned against God and you, will you forgive me?” are two different things. How so? When one apologizes or says, “I'm sorry,” what has he done? All he has done is tell me how he “feels.” He has not asked me to do anything! When someone says, “I have sinned, will you forgive me?” he is asking me to promise him that his offense has been buried once and for all.

In the method of apologizing or saying “I'm sorry,” no commitment is made, the matter is not resolved. The wrongdoer has not even admitted his wrong. He has simply said he feels sorry for what has happened, and the person who was wronged is not required to put the matter to rest. The issue is unresolved or unsettled by God’s standard, but considered settled by the world's standard.

The fleshly nature of sinful men is uncomfortable in having to deal with sin and forgiveness because the unbeliever has never been brought to repentance, and experienced God's forgiveness. Therefore, the unbeliever cannot be a forgiving person. Remember we are defining a Christian as a “forgiven person who is forgiving of others.” It is because the unbeliever cannot be a forgiving person that he is forced to operate on a lower standard than God's standard when dealing with offences of others.

Multitudes of people within the professing Christian community have never dealt deeply with sin, repentance, and forgiveness and therefore are unforgiven themselves. Thus they cannot grant forgiveness to others. This is why there is no noticeable difference in their conduct or way of life than those who are not religious. In America, there are just as many divorces among professing Christians as non-Christians. Note: I am not saying that a divorced person is not a Christian. And there are so many serious divisions in our churches that many times the secular business world operates more efficiently than our churches.
I maintain the source of these problems can be traced to the way in which converts are being recruited into the church. Two errors are being committed. On the one hand there is the error of rationalism which maintains that one enters the kingdom by correctly answering a series of questions or propositions. This approach seeks to avoid emotionalism or feelings, believing that our feelings or senses are deceptive. This error can take place in paedo-baptist churches which use the confirmation class as the means of introducing inquirers into the church. Christianity does contain propositions which are essential to be embraced, but one can learn the concepts and yet be a stranger to the exceeding sinfulness of one's sin. They may never have known the godly sorrow which leads to repentance. Their hearts may never have yet agreed with God about their sins being wrong in God's sight. They want to have their sins and God's benefits at the same time. When these people are offended, they cannot forgive, as we have defined forgiveness, because they are yet unforgiven. This creates havoc in the Christian family or community.

On the other hand, there is the error of emotionalism which maintains that reality can only be known through the senses. It is basically suspicious of a rationalistic definition of doctrinal themes, believing this to be but human wisdom. One thus enters into the kingdom through exposure to a wave of emotional feelings such as regret, remorse, grief over loss, fear of sins' consequences, expectations of a better life, etc. This error may take place in Baptist churches which practice a revivalistic or evangelistic approach, wherein high levels of emotional appeals are given, while low levels of doctrinal understandings are conveyed. These emotions may flow from a worldly sorrow over loss of gain rather than a godly sorrow over a loss of fellowship with God. While emotions will certainly be present in Christian conversion, if these be not based on a sound doctrinal understanding of God, sin, Christ, repentance, faith and forgiveness, they will soon fade away with no power to live the Christian life. These people also find they cannot forgive others on the level of God's forgiveness. They likewise cause confusion within the Christian community. The great need is to present the whole gospel to the whole man in order to achieve a whole conversion.

V.   STEP FIVE: RECONCILIATION.

We move now to step five wherein the goal of forgiveness is reached. Forgiveness is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end. The end is a restored relationship with someone with whom we have been alienated.

Reconciliation is the positive relationship that forgiveness provides. Forgiveness removes something: Guilt. Reconciliation restores something: Fellowship or communion. In staying with God's model of forgiveness, He does not merely forgive us by removing the guilt of our sin and promising never to bring up our wrongdoing, but He establishes a relationship with us, which is
designed to draw us closer to Him. The very idea of reconciliation being the goal of forgiveness excludes the doctrine of unconditional forgiveness. If the idea of unconditional forgiveness is correct then the person who is wronged need not confront the offender, or make a personal promise to him, and the offender does not need to repent, and neither party is responsible to work at building a new relationship!

The meaning of reconciliation is to restore to friendship the affections which have been alienated. The great example of this is found in the story of the Prodigal Son as recorded in Luke 15:11-32. After the son separated himself from his father and wasted his inheritance with riotous living, he repented as recorded in verses 17-19. Upon his return to his father's house, the father demonstrated his readiness to forgive by running toward and embracing him. (v. 20). The son then confessed his sin to his father and asked for his forgiveness (v. 21). The father forgave him and gave evidence of the forgiveness by celebrating a ceremonial feast in honor of the occasion (vs. 22-24). Jesus' comment on this occasion of the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son was that “joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repents.” (Vs. 7, 10).

So how does one know when forgiveness and reconciliation have taken place? When the feeling of joy and gladness occurs! There ought to be joy over the forgiveness of sins and wrongdoing. While the whole process may be a painful and tearful experience, the outcome ought always to be joyful. Joy is that which gives pleasure and satisfaction. If there is no joy over reconciliation, something is yet lacking in the process. What is it that causes this lack of joy? It is insincerity either in the one confessing sin or in the one promising forgiveness. Who can be joyful while secretly retaining grudges? Who can be glad over a reconciliation in which one does not wish to celebrate? If the attempt to be reconciled through confrontation, repentance, confession and forgiveness does not produce joy for both you and the other party, then you need to ask why? God rejoices when a sinner repents and is forgiven. The angels rejoice when a sinner repents and is forgiven. Then whenever true forgiveness takes place, both parties will know it in the joy that floods the soul.
THE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS (6)

Judicial and Parental Forgiveness

*What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he has whereof to glory; but not before God. For what says the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him who works is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him who works not, but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describes the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputes righteousness without works, Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.* – Romans 4:1-8

*Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.* – Romans 5:1,2

*There is therefore now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.* – Romans 8:1

*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors... 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 6:12, 14, 15

*And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him: For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chastens not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening for the present seems to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.* – Hebrews 12:5-11

Our study on forgiveness has thus far led us to see that the idea contained in forgiveness is the pardon of an offense which has severed a relationship, with the goal of restoring the relationship. We have defined a Christian as “a forgiven person who is forgiving of others.” This we covered in lesson one.
We have defined forgiveness as the expressing of a promise to the offending party that the issue is settled and will not be brought up again in an accusing manner. This we explained in lesson two.

In lesson three we looked at God’s forgiveness of us as the model whereby we are to grant forgiveness to others. We learned that while God is ready to forgive, He does not bestow the act of forgiveness until the offender repents and asks to be forgiven. Forgiveness is part of a mutual relationship. There must be both a granting of forgiveness by the offended party, and a seeking of forgiveness by the offending party. God does not forgive without repentance, nor is it required of us. There is no such thing as unconditional forgiveness. The effect of forgiveness is to restore the relationship to the former state prior to its being broken by sin.

In lessons four and five we worked our way through the process and goal of forgiveness. We saw that both the offended and the offending parties have the mutual responsibility to quickly seek a confrontation to address the nature of the offense. One is not to wait for the other. The confronting of the issue is the first step in the process of forgiveness. We saw that not all offenses require confrontation, but only those which lead to a severing of the relationship. We, like God, are to be longsuffering and forbearing toward others until at such time wisdom dictates a confrontation is necessary.

The second step in the process requires repentance on the part of the offending party. This means that he or she changes their mind about the action, and makes a turnabout in their attitude and action toward the offended party. Until this inward change occurs, the offending party will never ask or seek forgiveness. Repentance is more than a feeling of remorse, it is a radical change wherein the wrongdoer sees his actions as sinful or wrong.

The third step is confession wherein the offending party outwardly expresses to the offended party that they agree with the charge, and that they have been wrong in their attitude or action, or both. Included in this confession is a request for forgiveness.

The fourth step is then forgiveness wherein the offended party freely and gladly promises to drop the charges and will never bring the matter up again.

The fifth step is the end goal of reconciliation in which the relationship is restored. Wherever true repentance and forgiveness occur, a restored relationship occurs. There is no such thing in the Bible as a forgiveness which does not restore the relationship. One knows when forgiveness and reconciliation has taken place when a feeling of mutual joy and gladness floods the souls of both parties.
I. A PROBLEM PRESENTED.

We are now ready to discuss the difference between judicial forgiveness and parental forgiveness. Before we define the terms, let us clarify the problem which is now before us. The Scriptures teach that when a person repents and asks God for forgiveness on the basis of Jesus Christ’s work on their behalf, that God declares the person to be forgiven. This is known as justification, and takes care of the penalty for all sin past, present, and future, so that there is “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” who are walking in the realm of the Spirit and not the flesh. (Romans 8:1). They “shall not come into condemnation, but are passed from death unto life.” (John 5:24).

The Scriptures also teach that this forgiven person is to confess his sins committed on an ongoing basis to God, and ask for His forgiveness. In the Lord’s Prayer or model prayer, Jesus said the believer is to ask God to “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” (Matthew 6:12). The question is why must we continue to seek God’s forgiveness if He has already granted us forgiveness in justification? Aren’t we praying for something that is already ours, and is it not an expression of unbelief to continually ask God for forgiveness if we are already forgiven? This problem has caused many Christians to doubt whether all their sins have been forgiven, and question whether they have peace with God or not. It has caused others to neglect confession of their daily sins to God.

II. A SOLUTION PROPOSED.

Is there any solution to this apparent problem? There are three ways in which Bible teachers have tried to solve the problem.

1. First, by asserting that there is no such thing as completed justification in the life of a believer. Instead, their standing before God depends upon an ongoing repentance, confession and seeking forgiveness. If this ceases, then God revokes their forgiveness and they return to a state of condemnation. This contradicts many other passages of Scripture.

2. Second, by asserting that it is wrong for a believer to confess a sin after they have once been forgiven in justification. This also clearly contradicts other passages of Scripture.

3. Third, by asserting that the Bible presents two aspects or dimensions of God’s forgiveness. The first is that of a judicial forgiveness which God grants as a Judge in a system of law. The second is that of a parental forgiveness in which God oversees His children in the capacity of a Father.
God relates with men both in the capacity of that of a Judge and a Father. Human beings are born into this world relating to God only as a Creator and Judge. They are not born as a part of His redeemed family. Being sinners by nature, relating to their earthly father Adam, they stand in a state of condemnation to everlasting punishment. If and when they hear the Gospel and trust Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, He forgives their sins once and for all as Judge. This is the forgiveness that was purchased by the death of Christ on their behalf. This kind of forgiveness removes us from the guilt charged to our account, and frees us from any future threat of condemnation. It is the forgiveness of justification. Such forgiveness is immediately complete and irrevocable. It never needs to be sought after again. It is a legal forgiveness which removes us from the wrath of an offended Judge.

Those who are born again by the work of the Spirit are placed in the family of God and given the right to be called His sons (John 1:12). Being now part of the family of God, they also relate to Him as Father. Their regeneration and justification do not however, perfect their moral character, which is yet capable of sinning. This sinning capability continues on an ongoing basis throughout the remainder of their earthly life. This sinning grieves God as their Father and they are responsible to confess their sins and seek His daily or ongoing forgiveness. This is the parental forgiveness which God grants as their father.

God now relates to believers in two different ways. As Judge, He looks at our record and sees it as spotlessly clean because our sin and its penalty have all been forgiven, that is, they are remembered against us no more. And in its place is recorded the perfect record of the sinless life, death and resurrected life of Jesus Christ. Thus the believer can rejoice in the words of the song:

Free from the law, O happy condition,
Jesus hath bled, and there is remission.
Cursed by the law, and bruised by the fall,
Grace hath redeemed us once for all.

Now we are free, there’s no condemnation,
Jesus Provided a perfect salvation.
“Come unto me,” O hear His sweet call,
Come, and He saves us once for all.

“Children of God,” O glorious calling,
Surely His grace will keep us from falling;
Passing from death to life let His call,
Blessed salvation once for all.
Once for all, O sinner, receive it,
Once for all, O brother, believe it,
Cling to the cross, the burden will fall.
Christ has redeemed us once for all.

The second way in which God relates to believers is that of a Father. In this capacity He conducts an ongoing training process designed to produce obedient children. This process is described as disciplining or chastening. It involves a rebuking and scourging process when the believer sins and does not seek forgiveness. This is described at length in Hebrews 12:5-11. In verses 5, 6 we read, “And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks unto you as unto children (sons), My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him: for whom the Lord loves he chastens (disciplines) and scourges every son whom He receives.”

The disciplining process is a result of God’s special love for His sons. The discipline is described as scourging (mastigoi) which means “to punish by whipping.” It is used to describe the punishment which Pilate inflicted upon Jesus in John 19:1 where we read, “Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him.” Every son in the family of God is subject to such discipline. God does not overlook the sins of His children. He whips them in love that they might be made partakers of His holy character (v. 10). This process is not a pleasant experience but it produces the fruit which God desires (v. 11). The entire passage conveys the idea of a parent-child relationship.

This process of parental discipline is for the purpose of correcting the wayward child and preventing the apostasy which would result in its being condemned with the world of unbelievers. This is stated in I Corinthians 11:31, 32, “If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.” Note: God does not throw His children out of the family when we sin but He does whip us.

So how do we as believers avoid the chastening rod of the Father? By confessing our sinful acts to the Father, and asking for His forgiveness! When we do, what can we expect to occur? I John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Again and again God’s model for forgiveness holds true. He forgives those who ask Him. And what happens when one of His children neglects or refuses to ask for forgiveness? God whips them until they are humbled to the point where they will repent and ask. So God does expect His children to repent, confess sin and receive His forgiveness. This is why the Bible teaches us to be continually confessing our sins and seeking God’s daily forgiveness and cleansing. He is both faithful and just to forgive. He is
faithful to us because it is His promise in the covenant relationship He has with us as Father. He is just because, as a Judge, He has already accepted His Son’s atonement for our sins. The important distinction to keep in mind is that there is both judicial forgiveness and parental forgiveness. The first is complete and over with, while the second is incomplete and ongoing. The first relates to our justification; the second relates to our sanctification.

This distinction is not some new idea - it if found in several of the historical creeds of the church. The Westminster Confession of Faith gives this precise distinction:

God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified (Matthew 6:12; I John 1:7,9; 2:1,2); and although they can never fall from their state of justification (Luke 22:32; John 10:28; Hebrews 10:14), yet they may, by their sins, fall under God’s fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of His countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance (Psalm 89:31-33; 51:7-12; 32:5; Matthew 26:75; I Corinthians 11:30-32; Luke 1:20).

This parental forgiveness on the part of our heavenly Father is set forth in Jesus’ teachings on prayer in Matthew 6:12, 14, 15. This is known as the Lord’s Prayer in that it was given by the Lord Himself, but it is also the model prayer for a believer. Our Lord never prayed this prayer Himself because it contains the ingredient of asking for forgiveness of sins. Our Lord had no sins to confess. Neither is it a prayer to be used by an unbeliever. Until the unbeliever becomes a believer, he cannot address God as his Father. He is outside of the family of God and under the wrath of God as a Judge. Neither is he experiencing chastening for his sins in that he is not a son.

The prayer is addressed to “Our Father” denoting that it is a prayer for the child of God. In the footnote to the petition on forgiveness, the word, “Father” is used twice in verses 14 and 15. It is a commentary on how the Father relates to His children and how they are to relate to each other within the family of God. Since forgiveness is connected to asking, Jesus states there are times when God withholds forgiveness from His children. This is due to the fact they are withholding forgiveness from someone who has asked for forgiveness. Cf. vs. 12, 15.

Now, why does God do this? It is not that God does not want to forgive. We have seen from many passages that He is rich in mercy and delights in forgiving. The answer is that when we withhold forgiveness from others, God wants us to see how exceeding sinful this is to God. Again, God is our model for forgiveness. In Luke 6:36, 37, Jesus said, “Be ye merciful, as your Father also is merciful... forgive, and you shall be forgiven.” This causes us to realize that if we need forgiveness for some wrong act we have done against God, our brother needs to be forgiven for the act in which he has wronged us. It makes me stop and say, “I am just like the
person who has wronged me! Has he hurt my reputation? Well, have I not done the same to God’s name? Has he been unthankful toward me? Have I not been unthankful toward God?"

At this point, my conscience will not allow me to dare ask for God’s forgiveness, until I hunt up my brother and grant him the forgiveness he had asked of me. So when God withholds His forgiveness from His children, it produces a two-fold effect in us. One, it causes us to see the seriousness of our sin against God, and two, it develops compassion and tenderheartedness in us toward other members of God’s family.

One time Jesus was invited into the house of Simon the Pharisee for a meal. As they were eating, a woman of bad reputation entered the house, and in an expression of emotional affection and thankfulness, began to wash and message the feet of Jesus. As Simon observed the activity, he was repulsed within himself in that Jesus was permitting this sinful woman to touch Him. Simon was comparing the woman’s reputation for unrighteousness with his own reputation for righteousness. He was also comparing the way Jesus was reacting to the woman in the way he would have reacted had she made such an approach unto him.

Jesus, knowing Simon’s thoughts, gave him a parable of a banker who had loaned money to two men. The one debtor owed an amount equal to about two years’ wages for a day laborer. The other debtor owed an amount equal to about two months of wages. Neither man could pay his debt. The banker showed grace and forgave them both of their debts and gave them a new start in life. Obviously both gained new affections and thankfulness for the banker. Then Jesus asked Simon a questions: which of the two men loved the banker the most? Simon replied, “I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most.” (Luke 7:43). Jesus said that Simon had answered correctly.

Then Jesus turned the tables on Simon, comparing the sinful woman to the proud Pharisee. Proud Simon had no fear of being compared with the woman, but Jesus introduced a new standard of comparison. In preparing for the banquet, Simon the host, had forgotten or neglected the basic actions for showing politeness to the guest of honor. He had not provided water for washing the feet of Jesus. The woman used her tears to do so. Simon had not even greeted Jesus with the customary kiss on the cheek. The woman kissed His feet. The woman had poured expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet. Simon had neglected to honor his guest by anointing His head with oil.

Jesus explained that the woman’s actions were acts of love for Jesus, flowing from a deep awareness of having been forgiven by Him. You see, she had already been forgiven before
the banquet began, this made her loving and merciful toward others. Simon felt no need of 
forgiveness, therefore his lack of love toward Jesus proved he was unforgiven. This 
establishes the principle on which we have been operating within this series of teachings on 
forgiveness: namely, a forgiven person becomes a forgiving person. This holds true in the 
need for both judicial and parental forgiveness. Since our forgiveness in justification does 
not make us sinless in our moral behavior, there will be seasons or times when God’s child 
may fall into sin and become hardened in heart toward another member of the family. The 
way in which God restores the compassion and tenderheartedness of the child is to make 
him or her remember how great a debtor they are to God and how much God has forgiven 
them. We can now see how God has structured the process of forgiveness in a way that 
produces good for all of His children. The offending children seek forgiveness from the 
offended children, and the offended children grant forgiveness as they are reminded how 
much God has forgiven them.

The Puritan commentator, Matthew Henry, describes the Christian faith in this way:

The Christian religion is the religion of sinners, of such as have sinned, and in whom in 
some measure still dwells. The Christian life is a life of continued repentance, 
humiliation for and mortification of sin, of continual faith in, thankfulness for, and 
love to the Redeemer, and hopeful, joyful expectation of a day of glorious 
redemption, in which the believer shall be fully and finally acquitted, and sin 
abolished for ever. (Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Bible, 4 vols., p. unknown).
THE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS (7)

Corporate Rebuke, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation (Part One)

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

– Matthew 18:15-20

Up unto this point in our study of forgiveness, we have focused on how God forgives us as believers, and how we as individual believers are to forgive others. We have seen the difference between God’s judicial forgiveness in justification, and His parental forgiveness of His children in sanctification. We have worked through the process and goal of maintaining forgiveness in our personal relationships within the community of believers.

We now come to the matter of corporate rebuke, forgiveness and reconciliation, as it is carried out within a body of believers known as the church. This process is also known as church discipline. This is a proper name because, as with parental discipline, the main goal is correction. Church discipline is successful when it brings about repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. When it is unsuccessful, it ends in excommunication, but that is never the desired goal.

I. THE PURPOSE FOR CORPORATE DISCIPLINE

The Biblical goals for church discipline are threefold:

One, to preserve the honor of God’s name;
Two, to maintain the purity of the church; and
Three, to reclaim and restore the offender.
It is not possible to seek the glory of God in discipline when we fail to abide by God’s goals and methods. The welfare of the church is not served by selfishly “getting rid of trouble makers.” Neither is it served by just tolerating those who cause strife and division.

Church discipline has but almost disappeared in our modern churches. This is true not only of liberal but conservative churches as well. In its place has been substituted the world’s methods of solving disputes. This takes place in various ways, such as replacing repentance with saying, “I’m sorry,” or by accepting and condoning sin rather than confronting and correcting it, or by hoping the matter will just die down rather than causing more trouble in confronting it. None of these approaches secure a reconciliation.

It is also believed that church discipline is unchristian in that it is unloving and unforgiving. It is this same permissive misunderstanding that has led to the idea that disciplining a child by spanking is wrong, and even becomes a form of child abuse. Many more reasons are given for the non-use of church discipline. But no matter how long the list becomes, we are still faced with this one undeniable fact: Jesus, the founder of His church, commands that it be implemented! He knows how to raise children better than we do. The church is not our church, it is His, and He has the right to insist that it be governed by His rules and methods.

In Matthew 18:1-20, Jesus’ subject is the likeness of believers to children. In answer to the question of who is the greatest in the kingdom (v. 1), Jesus called a young child out of the audience (v.2). He then declared that a person enters into and is considered great in the kingdom by becoming like a little child (vs. 3,4). Then, once in the kingdom, believers are to be protected like little children (vs. 5-9) and cared for like little children (vs. 10-14). Then in verses 15-20, He insists they must also be disciplined like little children.

In the disciplining of children, God says, “He that spares his rod hates his son, but he that loves him chastens him betimes” (diligently). (Proverbs 13:24). Also in Proverbs 19:18, “Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying.” Again in Proverbs 22:15, “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child: but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.” Once more in Proverbs 23:13, 14, God says, “Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beat him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shall beat him with the rod, and shall deliver his soul from hell.” Lastly in Proverbs 29:15, we are told that “the rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself brings his mother to shame,” and verse 17, “correct thy son, and he shall give thee rest, yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul.”
Once again we have God’s model set before us to follow in our relationships with others. As a Father, He first instructs His children in the way they should act. If they rebel, then He spansks them in order to correct their misconduct. He warns that permissiveness will lead to chaos when discipline is neglected. Children must not only be told what is right, but must be led to do what is right by correction, rebuke, and punishment if necessary. This is as true in the church as it is in the family. No adult can enjoy being around children that are never disciplined. In the same way, a church that is lax on rebuking sin in the body, will become intolerable to all mature believers. Failing to practice church discipline will insure that the flock will become spoiled and stunted in its growth. It is also a sure way to attract God’s displeasure, and the world’s rebuke as being hypocritical.

In order to illustrate the attitude which exists in today’s average church toward the use of church discipline, I refer to a letter received by John MacArthur, Pastor of the Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California. After setting forth the duty of using church discipline on one of his radio broadcasts, a lady wrote the following:

The whole process of church discipline sounds incredibly controlling and uncharitable. I cannot believe that any church would ever threaten to excommunicate its own members for what they do in their private lives. And I cannot imagine a church making a public pronouncement about someone’s sin! What people do on their own time is their business, not the whole church’s. And the church is supposed to be where people can come to learn how to overcome sin. How can they do that if they have been excommunicated? If we shun our own members, we are no better than the cults. I cannot imagine that Christ would ever excommunicate someone from His church. Didn’t he seek out sinners and avoid those who were holier-than-thou? After all, it is not the people who are whole that need a physician. I’m glad my church does not excommunicate members who sin. There’d be none of us left! I thought the gospel was all about forgiveness! (John MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, pp. 137, 138), Crossway Books).

This woman’s comments set forth some of the common and widespread misunderstandings about the subject. She reveals she has some familiarity with the Bible, but is selective of the data in the Bible. In order for her to be justified in her rebuke of Pastor MacArthur, she is responsible to explain the meaning of the Matthew 18:15-20 passage, plus numerous others. What is her mistake? First, she has an unbiblical view of the moral character of Jesus. She says she “can not imagine that Christ would ever excommunicate someone from His church. Yet it is Jesus who commands His church that if the unrepentant brother remains such after admonition, he is to be viewed by the church as a “heathen man and a publican.” These were descriptive terms of those who were not within the family of God, but were instead outsiders.
Secondly, while she uses Biblical concepts, she attaches unbiblical and worldly definitions to them. She does this with the concepts of love and forgiveness. She first believes that love and discipline are incompatible. Yet we have seen that the heavenly Father disciplines every son whom He loves (Hebrews 12:7-11). She maintains that the private lives of others are none of the church’s business. The very opposite is true. In Leviticus 19:16 God warns against gossiping about others rather than rebuking them. “Thou shall not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people.” Then in verse 17 we are told the refusal to confront and rebuke the sinning brother is a manifestation of hatred rather than love. “Thou shall not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shall in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him.” Then in verse 18 we are further told that “Thou shall not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the Lord.”

Notice that true love gets involved in the life of a sinning brother. It takes the action of confronting him with his sin so that he might be corrected and not suffer the consequences of his sin. In contrast, hatred does two things. First, it gossips behind the brother’s back. Second, it harbors a spirit of bearing a grudge against the brother, and fantasizes how it could get even if it could. God’s love is a giving love. He so loved that He gave His only begotten Son. He became involved in the private lives of men. The Godhead did not stand aloft from Adam’s sinful race and gossip about how wicked it was. They did not plan on how they could take out vengeance upon the race. Instead God’s Son became a man and got involved in the process of rescuing men who were perishing in their sins.

The lady makes another mistake. She believes that forgiveness and discipline are also incompatible. She has bought into the world’s view of unconditional forgiveness apart from repentance. You see, the world is not a forgiving community, it is a condoning one. The world cannot forgive because it is unforgiven. Instead it coins the word, “acceptance” and makes it synonymous with forgiveness. We are told that we are to “accept people as they are.” But the words have opposite meanings. Acceptance is a nonjudgmental reception of a person as they are. It amounts to condoning sin. Forgiveness, on the contrary, confronts sin as sin, refuses to condone or ignore it, but gladly forgives it upon the condition of repentance.

Jesus is even described by this worldly view, as an “accepting” Person, and Christians are urged to imitate Him in this manner. Thus a person becomes a Christian and enters the kingdom on the foundation of learning to accept people as they are. This distorts the truth about Jesus. While Jesus was a forgiving Person, He never accepted, ignored, or condoned sin. He made statements like, “Your sins are forgiven you” and “Go and sin no more.” Jesus forgave sinners, He never accepted them as they were. He confronted, rebuked and
corrected others. He never accepted and left sinners as they were. Remember a Christian is a changed person. He is now forgiving because he has been forgiven.

Jay Adams, in his book, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, makes his statement:

It is certainly easier to ignore or condone sin than to forgive it. Doubtless, that is why the world adopts this stance. Those who ignore or condone sin need make no judgment about the sinner. Those who forgive hold him guilty, rebuke him, call him to repentance, and on confession of sin, promise never to bring up the matter again. Forgivers, in contrast to condoners, become deeply involved with the sinner - at the very point of his sin. They seek to do him good at great cost to themselves. Forgiving is not easy, it costs. Unquestionably, even many Christians shy away from the process of forgiveness and adopt other measures for this very reason. (Jay Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, p. 113, Calvary Press).

II. THE PROCEDURES FOR CORPORATE DISCIPLINE

We are now ready to follow the procedure which Christ has given for handling offences which arise within the church family on a local level. The case begins by considering you as the offended party, and a family member who is the offending brother. The procedure follows a four step outline.

A. The fourfold outline revealed:

1. Step One: A private confrontation - v. 15: “if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him.”
2. Step Two: A semi-private confrontation - v. 16: “take one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.”
3. Step Three: A public confrontation within the church - v. 17a: “If he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church.”
4. Step Four: A public dismissal from the church - v. 17b: “But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be as an heathen man and a publican.”

B. The fourfold outline unfolded:

1. **Step One: The private confrontation** - v. 15.

The person who is a candidate for confrontational discipline is any Christian who sins. The implication is that it is a sin that is continuing in one’s life and remains unconfessed. The sin is of such a magnitude that it is causing a breach in fellowship,
and either one or both parties are beginning to withdraw from each other, or have already done so. It must be of such a serious nature that you are willing to follow through with the other steps should the first one fail.

Before you ever engage upon the task, you must carefully consider your motive for doing so. It is to bring about the brother's repentance thereby lifting guilt from off of his shoulders. Your goal is to regain your brother because you love him and value his friendship. If you have been abused, cheated, deceived, or lied about then you must go and rebuke your brother and be ready to forgive if he repents. This requires that you be in control of your spirit or emotions. When we are offended, there are four wrong responses of which our human flesh is capable. These must be guarded against before we can begin to correct our brother. They are:

a. **A self-centered response:** This is the martyr complex; brooding, hatching, and pondering the evil and hurt done to us; being consumed with the wrong done; keeping our minds on the personal injury until the whole divisive affair poisons our hearts and minds.

b. **A gossiping response:** This springs from a spirit of self justification and self-vindication; a tendency to share our hurt and wrong with others; the motive is to picture ourselves as blameless in the eyes of others while showing how blameful our brother has been.

c. **A retaliating response:** This is a getting back at the wrongdoer; a desire to make him pay for his sin; we end up becoming a wrongdoer ourselves; we react and lower ourselves to the level of the wrongdoer who has offended us.

d. **A withdrawing response:** This occurs when we become uncomfortable and apprehensive in the brother's presence, and seek to avoid him. We may become fearful of having to face or associate with him; it is a showing of displeasure or getting back at him by ignoring or neglecting him.

After you have cleansed yourself of these improper responses, you are to go and confront your brother in private and tell him his fault. The word, “go” is a verb in the imperative mood, meaning it is a command, not an option. It is a matter of obedience to God. A Christian who is not deeply concerned about recovering a fellow Christian from his sin stands in need of spiritual help himself. Indifference and self-righteousness has no part in the Christian life. But neither does a cowardly spirit which hides behind a false humility. James 5:19, 20 tells us, “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him: let him know, that he which converts the
sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.”

The word “reprove” in the text means to convict by exposure to light. It suggests that the brother be clearly shown his sin in such a way that he cannot escape being convicted that he is in the wrong. It is used to describe the response of the men who were charging the woman caught in adultery. After Jesus wrote something in the dirt, we read, “And when they heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one.” (John 8:9).

It is to be done in private between you and him. You are to give the brother a chance to correct his wrongs and tell his side of the story before you tell someone else. Don't gossip about the offense with others even under the pretense of seeking their prayer support about the matter. The brother may become resentful when he learns that the matter has been discussed with others. Even more so if it turns out that you were mistaken in your charge against him. Nine-tenths of the gossip, ill-feeling and broken relationships among Christians could be avoided, if Christians resolved never to tell others about someone’s sins until they first honestly and kindly approached the offender to hear his side of the question.

Jesus then said that if your brother hears you, or agrees with you and makes it right, you have gained or won your brother. The word gain was originally a term of commerce referring to financial gain or profit. Here it is used to describe the gaining back of something of great value that had been lost, namely your relationship with your brother. In verses 11-14, Jesus had described the shepherd going to great lengths to locate and recover the one lost sheep. He did so because of the value He placed upon the sheep, not desiring to see it perish. In like manner it should not be the desire of any Christian to see even one of their brothers or sisters lost to the fellowship of the church. Every member of the church should have a shepherd’s heart.

How much value do you put on your church family? Do you value it enough to do everything within your duty and ability to maintain and restore your relationship with those who sin against you? It reflects an unloving concern and ungodly indifference when someone says, “What people do on their time is their business, not the whole church’s.” What if Jesus had such an attitude toward us? What if He had said, “Well there goes that one sheep. He did not appreciate me as a shepherd. Well, what he
does is his own business. After all I have ninety-nine left in the fold. He is not that valuable to waste the time and effort upon.”

2. **Step Two: The semi-private confrontation** - v. 16.

Unfortunately, there are times when the offending party will not agree with the charge and/or not desire to be reconciled. He may deny his guilt and choose to continue in sin. He may try to cover up his guilt. Proverbs 28:13 has described such a case, “He that covers his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesses and forsakes them shall have mercy.” Whatever his response, if it is not repentance, you must now take one or two other believers with you and confront him again.

There is sometimes a tendency to give up after a guilty brother refuses to repent, and let him suffer the consequences of his sin. But you should not give up if you do not succeed on the first attempt. Try again! Jesus did not give up after the first try. In Matthew 23:37, He laments, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stoneth them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” Jesus displayed much patience and longsuffering with those who refused to repent, and the church is to do likewise. But note again: no forgiveness without repentance!

The primary reason for bringing one or two others along with you is that they are enabled to serve as witnesses. They are to listen in an unbiased manner. They are then to confirm two things:

**One:** That there was indeed a sin committed. After hearing the charge and the offender’s response, they may become convinced that the offender has clarified the matter to the extent that the offended brother should drop the charge, and renew the friendship. On the other hand, they may agree with the offended brother and ask the offending brother to repent and ask for forgiveness. If this occurs the offended brother is to grant forgiveness and reconciliation is achieved.

**Two:** The second thing which the witnesses are to confirm is that the sinning brother was rebuked, and did or did not repent. If he did not, then the witnesses must be willing to become public witnesses before the church,
testifying that the first two stages have been properly followed, but the sinning brother refuses to repent and seek forgiveness.

The principle of two or three witnesses had been set forth in the Mosaic law for the purpose of establishing the facts in a dispute or charge of wrongdoing. In Deuteronomy 19:15 we read, “One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.” This served to protect an innocent person against a false accusation. If this purpose be understood by both parties, it will help the offending brother to realize that the goal of the confrontation is to verify the truthfulness of the accusation, and that they have not come along just to reenforce the accuser’s position. They are merely witnesses to the fact that the discipline process has been properly followed. This not only protects the accused party, but it also protects the offended brother from being misrepresented by the offending brother. There will be witnesses to the statements made by both parties so that neither party can leave the confrontation and misrepresent the statements made by the other. If they do so, they know they will be subject to rebuke by the witnesses.

Also, if one agrees to serve as a witness in the process, he must be willing, if necessary, to testify before the entire church that the offending brother has refused to repent after a sincere effort has been made to get him to do so. But the possibility remains that he will not yet be restored. In that case the matter will have to be reported to the church. This shows the reason why the visit by two or three must follow the private confrontation. No charge should be made to the church against a brother until the first two stages have been proven unsuccessful. This is especially true as it relates to charging a church leader with wrongdoing. In 1 Timothy 5:19, 20, we read, “Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.” The “all” refers to the third stage of discipline which takes place in public before “all” the church.

Let us all carefully evaluate our church relationships and follow Jesus’ method of handling corporate offences within the family of God. We will continue our study of church discipline in our next lesson.
THE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS (8)

Corporate Rebuke, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation (Part Two)

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

-- Matthew 18:15-20

We are now ready to resume our study of the manner in which Jesus instructs His church to handle the matter of corporate rebuke, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This procedure is known as church discipline and involves four stages. The first stage involves the private confrontation between the offended brother and the offending brother in which the offended brother goes and clarifies to the offending brother the issue which has occurred. The goal is to try to achieve a reconciliation with the offending brother. If stage one is successful, then there is no further need to pursue the matter. If the first attempt is unsuccessful, then stage two must be enacted which involves a semi-private confrontation in the presence of one or two more witnesses. If this proves unsuccessful, we move to stage three.

II. THE PROCEDURES FOR CORPORATE DISCIPLINE.

B. The fourfold outline unfolded.


So what is to be done with the offending brother if he still refuses to repent, or else believes himself to be innocent of the charges? The offended brother, along with the witnesses, are responsible to “tell it to the church.” Bear in mind that the main purpose in all discipline is to try to win the offending brother back again. This is the goal of this step as well. The purpose in this stage is to achieve two things. First: It is to enlist the entire congregation to hear out the matter and appeal to the offending
party to repent and seek forgiveness and reconciliation. Second: In the event the offending party believes himself to be innocent of the charges, he can avail himself of the opportunity to present his case before the entire congregational body.

In the United States, our court system has several levels of appeal. We have the local or city courts, followed by the county courts, then the state courts. Beyond these are the federal courts headed up by the Supreme Court of the land. In many cases if a person is convicted in a lower court, he may be able to appeal to a higher court in hope of getting the verdict overturned. The offending brother in the case now before us stands convicted of a sin in the eyes of the offended brother. He also is viewed as guilty of the sin of impenitence in the eyes of the witnesses. In theory, since the church is the offending brother's final court of appeal, he should welcome this opportunity to clear his name, if he believes himself to be innocent. In practice, this is rarely the case. By this time the offending brother has often become hardened and offended by the charges against him, and has no desire to be reconciled. He often refuses to attend the hearing before the church, and separates himself from its fellowship. This in turn gives evidence to all the church that the offending brother is guilty as charged by the offended brother, and the witnesses. He has proven himself to be an impenitent person for whom no forgiveness can be granted, thus severing the relationship. His lack of repentance displays an act of disdain for the church of which Jesus is its Head and Founder. And Jesus will have something to say about this person and the process in verses 17-20.

The church or “ekklesia” refers to a New Covenant local congregation of believers who call themselves by the name of Jesus Christ. They are enabled to receive members and withdraw from members. A church must have order and discipline, because its faith and conduct must be founded upon the Word of God. A lack of spiritual discipline underminds the authority and respect for the church. The church is portrayed as the entire body, not just its leaders. There is no reference to a bishop, a body of elders, or deacons, nor a conference, council or committee. There is no higher court beyond the local congregation to whom church discipline has been entrusted. To delegate discipline to an individual or group beyond the local congregation is to go beyond the Word of God.

Church discipline is a corporate duty which involves the whole church in the process. After all, the entire church is affected by the offender's sin and impenitence. Every member is responsible to be involved in the process. To refuse to participate in the process is to insult Jesus Christ, the One who instituted the process. It is never
proper to take a matter of church discipline before a secular court for resolution. Paul strongly rebuked the Corinthian church for resorting to such measures. In I Corinthians 6:1-5 we read, “Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do you not know that the saints shall judge the world? And if the world shall be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? How much more things that pertain to this life? If then you have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? No, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers.”

Christ wants differences and diversity settled among His people in the church, and not by the world’s legal system. This does not mean that a Christian cannot get a fair trial in a court of law. It does not forbid the believer from appealing to and using the legal system in other matters. But the atmosphere of the law courts does nothing to secure a forgiveness and reconciliation. It settles nothing, but instead it produces deeper feelings of anger and hurt.

Why would Christ say that personal offences are to be taken before the church and made public? Several reasons can be given. First; Christ wants the two brothers to be reconciled with each other, and with Christ and His church. Second; Christ wants to keep sin, division, and devastation from spreading and destroying the lives and testimonies of others. The offending brother’s refusal to be reconciled is a serious threat and danger. If the matter remains unresolved, it will cause more division and harm within and without the church. The testimony of the church will become weakened and the inquiries of the unsaved will be quenched. Because of this, the matter has to be dealt with step by step. It cannot be ignored and left unresolved.

Third; Christ wants the church to build a strong witness, not a divisive witness. This requires that each member work to build up, and not tear down the church. Jesus said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” (Matthew 12:25). The church exists for the purposes of worship, fellowship, ministry, and witness. Harmony, unity, peace, and love build up the church. Sin, impenitence and deviseness destroy the church. For this reason, deviseness and impenitence must not be allowed to prevail within the church. It has to be dealt with if the church is to remain the Lord’s church. A refusal to do so will attract the Lord’s displeasure, and may even lead to
the removal of the church’s candlestick resulting in its closure. Compare Christ’s warnings to the churches in the book of Revelation, chapters two and three.

4. Step Four: A public dismissal from the church - v. 17b

We come now to the fourth or final stage in which the impenitent brother is to be dismissed from the fellowship of the church. He is dismissed not primarily for his original sin, but for his refusal to repent and seek forgiveness. After three attempts at reconciliation, he continues to be bound by his sin and refuses to be reconciled. He now exposes himself to the rebuke and discipline of the church.

What is the discipline? The church is to treat him as an outsider. He has excluded himself because of his refusal to listen to the local church. Because believers are “members one of another” (Romans 12:5), it is important that they be willing to listen to each other, especially the consensus of the assembly as a whole. If anyone refuses to listen, it shows that the church, the body of Christ, is not important to Him. Therefore no matter what he professes, he is not treating Jesus as the Head of His body, the church. The life that the impenitent brother has chosen to live is his discipline. It is his decision to be an outsider instead of being reconciled with his brother and his church. It is his decision to live in the world of “sinners and publicans” instead of living in fellowship with God’s people.

The term ”heathen” can also be translated Gentile or pagan. It was someone who was born outside of the Jewish family or race. The “publicans” were Jewish tax collectors. They collected Jewish taxes and gave them to the Roman authorities. This caused them to be looked upon as apostates from the Jewish family because they chose such an occupation. Both categories were considered by devout Jews as outsiders. In using these terms, Jesus is saying that here is a person who is acting like he has never been born into the family of God, and has chosen to insult the people of God. Let him go his own way. Treat him as “someone outside of the church.”

Now what is the nature of this treatment? It does not call for scorn and ill-will. Jesus’ mission viewed the Gentiles and the tax collectors as prospects for evangelism. Thus while the offending party is to no longer be viewed as a brother in the Lord, even yet he is not to be given up on. There is yet hope of restoration if he repents. While he is not to be treated badly, it is essential that his membership be revoked. He loses all privileges and benefits of being in the Christian assembly. In particular, he must not o
permitted to partake of the Lord’s supper or communion. This is the precise meaning of the term excommunication.

As long as he remains unrepentant, the church members are not even to carry on a social relationship and act as if there is nothing wrong. In Paul’s dealing with a discipline problem in the church at Corinth, he wrote in I Corinthians 5:9-13, “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters, for then must you needs to out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them that are within? But them that are without God judges. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.”

In this section of scripture, Paul is emphasizing the distinction between everyday unbelievers and professing Christians who live like unbelievers. No Christian fellowship is to be extended to these latter individuals. In another case of church discipline, Paul wrote in II Thessalonians 3:6, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw yourselves from every brother that walks disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us.” By withdrawing Christian fellowship from the offender, he is to be put to shame. Later on in the same chapter of II Thessalonians 3, we read in verse 14, “If any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.”

The point to be made is that willful sin unrepented of is incompatible with Christian fellowship, and requires a separation of fellowship.

The withdrawal of Christian privileges and social contact does not exclude all contact with the unrepentant brother. The withdrawing of Christian fellowship is not the end of the discipline process. It should not end until the brother has repented or died. When there is opportunity to admonish him and to call him back, that opportunity should be taken. But the contact should be for purposes of admonishing and evangelizing and no other. The welfare of the brother is still to be considered. The purpose of the discipline process at this stage is to awaken him to see his need of repentance and forgiveness. This is why Paul would say of the disciplined brother in II Thessalonians 3:15, “Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” No spirit of hatred or self-righteousness is to be conveyed to the offending
The fourth step in the discipline process is twofold. It is to put out and to call back. To put out of fellowship the sinning brother until he repents, and to keep calling him back in the hope that he will repent. The point to be observed through the whole process is that no forgiveness can be granted until the condition of forgiveness has been fulfilled. The teaching of unconditional forgiveness is entirely incompatible with Jesus’ teaching on church discipline.

Many Christians and churches find the matter of church discipline to be so repulsive to their fleshly natures that they avoid the procedure entirely. Some say it is unloving, and may offend the person who is excommunicated. I really wonder if in doing so, they realize they are offending Christ by insulting His wisdom in establishing the process! They are also condoning and accepting the sin of the offending brother. So who should a church be most concerned with in offending – Christ or the offending person? The purity of Christ’s name and His church are at stake!

The church at Corinth is the classic example of a church which felt it was too spiritual to exercise church discipline, even upon a member who was living in incest with his step-mother. The outside community did not even condone such behavior, yet the church in essence felt that what the man did in his own private life was his business and not the church’s. Paul condemned such an attitude and commanded that he be excommunicated. In I Corinthians 5:1-5 he said, “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife. And you are puffed up (proud), and have not rather mourned, that he that has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leavens the whole lump. Purge out therefore the old leaven, that you may be a new lump. . .” By condoning the action of the offending brother, the Corinthians’ pride had reached such a point that they considered themselves above the standards of God. Note: It is not a mark of love and spirituality to place human standards of conduct above God’s standards for human conduct.
Excommunication may seem harsh to many church members, but Paul's words give meaning as to what its purpose is about. He says the sinning person is to be delivered to “Satan for the destruction of the flesh.” This means he is fully exposed to Satan's system of sin and the consequences which he will reap from his sin. If the person is a true child of God, God will use Satan as a chastening instrument in His hand to humble him unto repentance. In doing so, the excommunicated person may descend into the depths of sin, like the Prodigal Son, before he repents. This often takes a physical toll upon the sinner’s life. The natural consequences of sin are loss of self respect, loss of reputation, financial difficulties, illnesses, and in extreme cases, death (1 Corinthians 11:30). But these may be remedial and result in repentance and forgiveness that “the spirit may be saved.” In I Timothy 1:20, Paul described two individuals whom he personally withdrew fellowship, to allow them to suffer the consequences of their sin in the hope they would learn how exceedingly sinful sin really is. “Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.” The church must understand that church discipline is one of the instruments that God uses to discipline His sinning children.

III. THE PRESENCE AND PARTICIPATION OF JESUS IN THE PROCESS. Vs. 18-20

It is a serious thing to be identified with the church of Jesus Christ and to act as His representatives here on earth. These verses are often taken out of context and applied to prayer requests of every kind. But they are addressed to the subject of church discipline. “Whatever you bind” and “whatever you loose” are terms referring to the church’s verdict in a discipline case. Jesus is saying that God’s will in heaven is in agreement with His will done on earth, as the church properly handles the process of church discipline. This is a promise not only of Christ’s presence in the discipline process, but of His participation as well. This promise serves to encourage and reassure the church that what they are doing is right in the sight of heaven, or God. Sometimes people are fearful of the serious procedure of church discipline on the grounds they have no right to take such action. They say, “Who are we to take such action? We are sinful also.” True, but the keys to the entrance and exit doors of the local church are given to the church. Though its members are yet imperfect, they are given the authority from Christ to include and exclude members based upon their repentance. When a church has faithfully followed the process (v. 18) and has prayed in unity (v. 19) that God would honor its obedience here on earth, Christ promised to honor its request by His presence (v. 20). The church is not acting alone, but is backed up by the One who has been given “all power . . . in heaven and earth.” (Matthew 28:18). And as the church observes all things whatsoever He has
commanded them, they are assured of His participation and presence in His words, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” (Matthew 28:20).

Thank God, there is forgiveness to all who will repent and ask to be forgiven!
THE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS (9)

The Unforgivable (Unpardonable) Sin (Part One)

“And the scribes which came down from Jerusalem said, He has Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils. And he called them unto him, and said unto them in parables, How can Satan cast out Satan? And if a kingdom be divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan rise up against himself, and be divided, he cannot stand, but hath an end. No man can enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he will first bind the strong man; and then he will spoil his house. Verily I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewithsoever they shall blaspheme: But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation: Because they said, He hath an unclean spirit.” – Mark 3:22-30

“But he that denies me before men shall be denied before the angels of God. And whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but unto him that blasphemes against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven.” – Luke 12:9-10


INTRODUCTION: As we come to the close of our study on the Biblical doctrine of forgiveness, it would not be proper to overlook the Bible’s teaching on the interesting, yet sobering subject of the one sin for which there can be no forgiveness. We have seen that all forgiveness is conditional upon repentance on the part of the offending party. We have seen that the offended party is to be ready to grant forgiveness to the one who asks for it. We learned that God is “good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon Thee” (Psalm 86:5). If forgiveness is conditional upon repentance, then why is there a sin which God will not and can not forgive?

Because of the mysterious nature, the subject has caused much discussion and concern by those within and without the Christian community. In my forty-five years of ministry (1963 to 2008), I have only encountered about five or six cases where people were either concerned or convinced they had committed this sin. I did not regard any of them as having done so because of their possessing a concern and remorse over the possibility that they had sinned in this manner. On the other hand, there have been about the same number in my experience of whom I have reason to believe they had done so.
This sin has been alluded to in various articles of literature outside of the Bible. One of the more notable places is in the book of Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan in which he describes the misery of “The Man in the Iron Cage,” who thinks he has committed this sin.

I. THE DEFINITION OF BLASPHEMY

In examining the subject we will begin by defining the meaning of the word “blasphemy.” The word comes from a combination of two Greek words, “blaspto” meaning “to hurt, harm, or injure.” The other word is “pheme” meaning “speech.” The resulted meaning is “injurious speech.” Its classical meaning is evil or profane speech with the intent to mock, slander or defame. In a general sense it can be used to refer to any kind of slander including words or actions designed to insult or devalue another being.

In its religious and purest form, blasphemy is “a deliberate attack upon the honor of God with the intent to insult or slander Him.” Under the Mosaic Law it was a capital crime which carried with it the death penalty in the form of stoning (Leviticus 24:10-16).

II. THE PERSONALITY AND MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

A. His Person

In the Biblical data before us, the Holy Spirit is equal to the divine person of God. In Matthew 12:28 Jesus refers to Him as “the Spirit of God,” and in 12:31, 32, He is called “the Holy Spirit.” In light of Jesus’ assertion in 12:31, 32 that all kinds of sin and blasphemy against the Son of Man are capable of being forgiven, but blasphemy or speaking against the Holy Spirit is a sin of the greatest magnitude, the Holy Spirit must be seen as a Person, not just an impersonal influence or power. Only the person of God can forgive sin. Blaspheming the Holy Spirit is a sin against God because the Holy Spirit is God! The Holy Spirit is a “person” not an “it.”

B. His Ministry

The ministry of the Holy Spirit is multiple and varied, but for our immediate concern, the best summation of His ministry is found in John 16:8 where Jesus says, “When He is come, He will reprove the world of sin and of righteousness, and of judgment.” In verses 13-15 He adds, “When He, the Spirit of truth is come, He will guide you into all truth: for He shall not speak of Himself; but whatsoever He shall hear, that shall He
**III. THE SIN IDENTIFIED**

**A. The recorded accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke.**

The statements of Jesus have been recorded in two forms. Luke records it in the context of a public denial of Christ in the face of persecution. In 12:10 we read, “Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but unto him that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost (Spirit) it shall not be forgiven.”

Mark records it in the context of the Scribes and Pharisees accusing Him of being demon possessed. Mark 3:22-30, “And the scribes which came down from Jerusalem said, He hath Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils. And he called them unto him, and said unto them in parables, How can Satan cast out Satan? And if a kingdom be divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan rise up against himself, and be divided, he cannot stand, but hath an end. No man can enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he will first bind the strong man; and then he will spoil his house. Verily I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme: But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation: Because they said, He hath an unclean spirit.”

Matthew’s account enlarges the description found in Mark and Luke. In Matthew and Mark’s account, the warning given by Jesus takes place in the context of Him being charged with being demon possessed. This occurred while in Galilee. It is proper to note this was not the first time in which He was charged with such a sin. In Matthew 9:27-34 we have an earlier account of such a charge. Here he healed two blind men and performed an act of exorcism.
This was also in Galilee. The purpose behind these healings were to demonstrate that the Messianic Kingdom of God had arrived and that He was the Messiah.

Now when we come to the accounts given in Luke, it is about one year later and He has left Galilee and moved into Judea on His path to Jerusalem. In Luke 11:14-23, “And he was casting out a devil, and it was dumb. And it came to pass, when the devil was gone out, the dumb spake; and the people wondered. But some of them said, He casteth out devils through Beelzebub the chief of the devils. And others, tempting him, sought of him a sign from heaven. But he, knowing their thoughts, said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth. If Satan also be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand? because ye say that I cast out devils through Beelzebub. And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your sons cast them out? therefore shall they be your judges. But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you. When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace: But when a stronger than he shall come upon him, and overcome him, he taketh from him all his armour wherein he trusted, and divideth his spoils. He that is not with me is against me: and he that gathereth not with me scattereth.” Here Jesus casts out another demon and is charged again with being demon possessed. But while defending Himself against the charge, He makes no reference to the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

It is important to observe what is occurring in Jesus’ ongoing ministry. As the miracles are adding up, the hostility and rejection on the part of the Jewish leadership is increasing. In other words, as more and more light is being given to the understanding of men, the more their wills are being darkened and hardened. They are truly “loving darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.” (John 3:19). In the same setting in Luke 11, Jesus calls His opponents “an evil generation.” (11:29), and said that “The men of Nineveh shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, a greater than Jonas is here.” (Luke 11:32) Here He introduces the duty of repentance if one desires to have their sins forgiven. Forgiveness of sins does not occur apart from repentance. Hold on to that truth as it will later help explain the sin we are discussing, and why it is unforgivable. He then gave a saying on how men are responsible for processing the information to which they are exposed. He explains it in the context of moral judgments made by the will. He said in verses 34, 35, “The light of the body is the eye; therefore when thine eye is single (clear), thy whole body also is full of light; but when thine eye is evil (bad), thy body also is full of darkness. Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee by not darkness.”
As the cataracts grow slowly on the physical eyes of men, the light which they formerly had grows dimmer, until at some point blindness will occur unless the cataracts are removed by surgery. In like manner as more and more evidential proofs were being revealed to the critics of Jesus, the more repulsed they became toward His Person and gospel (message). They were continually asking for more signs (information) but the problem was in their perception, not in a lack of light. They did not need more signs, they needed to embrace the light they had been given, repent and believe the message, and receive the forgiveness of sins being extended by Him who claimed that He could forgive sins.

In Luke 11:39-44, Jesus proceeds to pronounce woes of judgment upon the Pharisees. At that point, He is rebuffed by one of the experts in the Jewish law who said, “Teacher, by saying these things you reproach (insult) us also.” (Vs. 45). Whereupon Jesus pronounces a curse upon the whole body of Jewish lawyers by saying “Woe unto you lawyers! For you have taken away (rejected) the key of knowledge (understanding); you entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in you hindered.” (vs. 52). This only enraged the Scribes and Pharisees even more. (vs. 53, 54).

In chapter 12:1-3 Jesus addressed a large number of people in which He warns them against the leavening influence of the Pharisees’ teaching. Evidently, there were some who were sympathetic to His claims, but were also being drawn to the position held by His critics. They were halting between two opinions. Which side possesses the truth of God, Jesus or the Jewish leaders? In verses 4-9, Jesus encourages his supporters to publicly confess or identify themselves fully with His ministry, even if it meant being killed for doing so. It is better to fear God who can destroy both soul and body in hell, than those who can only kill the body.

Then in verses 9-12, we read, “But he that denies me before men shall be denied before the angels of God. And whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but unto him that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven. And when they bring you unto the synagogues, and unto magistrates, and powers, take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer, or what ye shall say: For the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say.” Jesus states the stern reality that one’s willingness to persevere in a public confession of faith and devotion to Christ, is indicative of where one will spend eternity. He forewarned His followers of impending opposition and persecution if they side with Him. It may result in loss of membership in the Jewish community, fines and imprisonment, or even death. But if they continue to depend upon the ministry of the Spirit to keep them faithful to Christ, they will persevere unto eternal life. It is in this context of
one’s duty to continue on in public identity with Christ as one’s Lord and Savior, that Jesus reintroduces the sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

So we have two different settings in which the sin is committed, and two different classes of hearers who commit the sin. In Matthew and Mark the ones who were in danger of blaspheming the Spirit were the hearers who had never expressed an interest in having their sins forgiven by embracing Christ as the Messiah. While in Luke it is those who have professed an interest in Christ but who were in danger of apostatizing and returning to their previous way of life.

The failure to distinguish the accounts in Matthew and Mark from the account given in Luke has caused many Bible teachers to err in identifying the sin and its nature. For example in Mark 3:29, 30 we are told, “But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit has never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation: because they said, He has an unclean spirit.” Here the sin is clearly described as an act of slandering Jesus by ascribing His ability to perform His miracles to the fact that He was the devil Himself. Based on this description alone, many Bible teachers then go on to define the sin as that, after seeing Jesus miracles, His opponents explained that His powers came from a supernatural evil demonic source. And since this required that one see the miracles with their physical eyes, the sin could only occur during the lifetime of Jesus while He was here on earth. Thus no one needs to be warned of the possibility of committing the sin today. If this be true, then no further study into or concern with the matter need be given.

Meanwhile we are still left with Luke’s description of the sin being a denunciation of the mission of Christ Jesus in the face of persecution. Are there then “sins” (plural) against the Holy Spirit, or is there “a sin” (singular) against the Holy Spirit? Or to express it in another manner: Can the sin (singular) of blaspheming the Holy Spirit express or manifest itself in different ways?

I believe we have now entered a turning point in which the subject can be greatly clarified. When Jesus said in Mark 3:24 that all kinds of sins and blasphemies are capable of forgiveness, but the sin of blaspheming the Spirit is not, the experts in the Jewish law would have known where He was coming from.

The Old Testament law made reference to man’s sin by nature, and his personal transgressions. It referred to sins of ignorance, and knowledgeable sins. It distinguished sins of infirmities done in passion, and sins of wilful premeditation or presumption. The sacrificial
system provided for the covering of all kinds of sins but one, that being the wilful sin done in premeditation. There was nothing in the atonement system which covered such a sin. Its penalty was death.

Man's sinfulness could reach such slanderous proportions that in the days prior to Noah's flood, God said "My spirit shall not always strive (influence) with man." (Genesis 6:3). And the tribe of Ephraim so gave themselves over to idolatry that God withdrew His influence from them and said in Hosea 4:17, "Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone." Note that the sin was an identifiable sin!

So when Jesus said to the law experts, “under my administration of the kingdom, you can yet find forgiveness for all kinds of sins and blasphemies against me, but there is one sin that is not covered by my system of forgiveness; that is the slandering of God’s Spirit.”

It is the Spirit’s work to subjectively enlighten or illumine the minds of Gospel hearers so that the objective element of forgiveness of sins in Christ becomes understood. When a person turns away from that influence and hardens his heart, his conscience becomes seared, and what the Spirit says is good, he sees as evil. What the Spirit transmits as light, he receives as darkness. What the Spirit conveys as essential, he receives as non-essential. When this occurs the Spirit withdraws His convicting influence and the individual’s case becomes hopeless for this life and the life to come. How long this process goes on before the Spirit withdraws His influence is known only to the Holy Spirit. It can only be known by onlookers as having occurred by observing the person’s willingness or unwillingness to publicly identify and confess Christ before men.

IV. THE SIN’S CONSEQUENCES

The result of having committed the sin is that there is no forgiveness for it, and an eternal condemnation settles upon the individual. But the question now arises as to why there is no forgiveness for this sin? Or to put the question in this manner, “What would happen if one were to repent of blaspheming the Holy Spirit?” The answer is, that due to the subjective nature of the sin, the person does not view sin as something he or she must repent of! Thus true repentance will never occur. In the economy of redemption for sins, it is the blood of Christ which lays a foundation upon which the mercy of God can be justly given. But in the application of forgiveness, God had established the conditions of repentance and faith to be in existence before He grants forgiveness. There is no such thing in Scripture as
unconditional forgiveness! Unconditional election, yes! Unconditional forgiveness! No!
“Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin.” (Hebrews 9:22; Matthew
26:28). Without the shed blood of Jesus, there is no ground upon which God can justly
forgive sin, and without repentance manifested there is no ground upon which God can justly
apply the forgiveness of sins.

Spurgeon expresses it like this: “He who is guilty of this outrageous crime has sinned himself
into a condition in which spiritual feeling is dead, and repentance has become morally
impossible.” (Spurgeon, Matthew, p. 91, Zondervan).

This sin, being not a sin of ignorance, but a wilful sin against knowledge, is descriptive of the
apostate Jewish hearers in Hebrews 10:26-29, “For if we sin wilfully after that we have
received the knowledge of the truth, there remains no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain
fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He
that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much
sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the
Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an
unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?” Notice that the wilful sin of
abandoning the way of forgiveness in Christ is a slander to the ministry of the Spirit’s
gracious work of enlightenment. This is the one sin for which Christ has made no provision in
His atoning sacrifice. Therefore, this sin must be the blaspheming of the Holy Spirit since that
is the only sin which Jesus said was unforgivable! Since Jesus was not on earth during the
events taking place in Hebrews, the sin was an ongoing sin, not confined to the era of Jesus’
earthly miracles!

It is a sin which can still be committed today and we will see more clearly in the next message
just how this occurs, and how to identify both the sin and the persons who are guilty of
committing this sin. May God grant us mercy to eagerly receive the light or understanding of
Christ and His gospel, and not harden our hearts against it.
THE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS (10)

The Unforgivable (Unpardonable) Sin (Part Two)

“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.” – Hebrews 6:4-6

“And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him. If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death. We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not.” – I John 5:14-18

INTRODUCTION: In this message we will continue to examine and enlarge upon the one sin for which there can be no forgiveness. In the previous message we saw how Jesus identified the sin as occurring when someone blasphemes the Holy Spirit. We saw how the Greek word for blasphemy means injurious or insulting speech. Under the Mosaic law it was a capital crime to curse or blaspheme the name of the Lord (Leviticus 24:10-16). We learned that it is the primary ministry of the Holy Spirit to glorify or reveal the Person and work of Jesus Christ. This is known as enlightenment.

During Jesus’ ministry there were two groups of people who either committed the sin or were close to doing so. Mark records it in the context of the Jewish leaders slandering Jesus by accusing Him of being demon possessed. They did so in spite of the miracles which He performed which served to prove His claims, thus enlightening them (cf. Mark 3:22-30). This sin is committed by those who refused to enter the Christian community and sought to prevent others from doing so.

The second reference to this sin involves a second group of people who were in danger of committing the sin by refusing to publicly identify themselves with Christ. This account is recorded in Luke 12:1-12. This group had also been enlightened to the claims of Christ and were sympathetic to His claims, but were also influenced by the position held by their Jewish leaders – was this man of
God, or the Devil? Jesus warns them that by rejecting His claims and embracing the claims of the Jewish leaders, they would also be blaspheming the Holy Spirit. This group would also be outside of the Christian community.

We saw that the sin is a wilful sin of insulting the Holy Spirit after He has clearly revealed the ministry of Jesus Christ to a person. When a person speaks slanderous words against the Gospel of Christ, after having understood its nature, he commits the sin for which there is no forgiveness. It is not a sin of ignorance, but a sin against knowledge.

The reason why it is unforgivable is that there will be no repentance on the part of the one who commits it. And without repentance, there is no forgiveness. After being insulted, the Holy Spirit ceases to convict of sin, and God gives the person over to a reprobate mind. We stated that the sin can still be committed today.

There are two other references to the unpardonable sin. They are found in the books of Hebrews and I John, and are identifiable as the sin of apostasy. Some Bible teachers say these references are different from the sin mentioned by Jesus. If this is true, then we have two unforgivable sins, namely blaspheming the Holy Spirit and apostasy. But Jesus said there is only one! In Mark 3:28, 29 He said, “I say unto you, all sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme, but he that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation.” Blaspheming the Holy Spirit and apostasy must then be the same sin of slandering the Holy Spirit.

THE WILFUL SIN IN HEBREWS

In order to identify the wilful sin in Hebrews as being that of apostasy, I wish to tie together these texts in Hebrews which I believe refer to the same thing. They are Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-29; 10:38, 39.

First, Hebrews 6:4-6: “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.”

Secondly, Hebrews 10:26-29: “For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy
under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?”

Thirdly, Hebrews 10:38, 39: “Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.”

It is not my approach to this topic to make the attempt to interact with the various interpretations of these sections of Scripture. I am familiar with them, but for various reasons, I reject them for the position which I hold. It would be both too lengthy and too distracting from our purpose to do so. My position is that of a Calvinist. I believe they were Jewish individuals, who at one time possessed a knowledge of Gospel truth, had a certain kind and degree of enjoyment from that knowledge, who were enlightened with the common influence of the Holy Spirit, who believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and had their minds exposed to the teachings of the new Gospel age, but yet, after all this, they made shipwreck of the faith, and openly and totally abandoned the profession of Christianity, and reverted back to the things which comprised Judaism. I do not believe they were regenerated by the Spirit, not justified by grace through faith alone. I believe there is an enlightening ministry of the Spirit which stops short of regeneration from which a person may fall away. I do not believe a regenerated, justified person will fall away, but will persevere in the things of God to the end. While I believe in the preservation and perseverance of the saints, I do not believe that every “professing believer” is a true saint. It is this latter category which may fall away and commit the unforgivable or wilful sin of apostasy.

The book of Hebrews has a two-fold theme; One primary and one secondary.

The primary theme is the Superiority of Christ. He is said to be:

I. Superior To The Prophets - 1:1-3
II. Superior To The Angels - 1:4 - 2:18
III. Superior To Moses - 3:1 - 4:13
IV. Superior To Aaron - 4:14 - 10:18
V. Superior In Access To God - 10:19 - 12:29

The secondary theme consists of six warnings against apostasy. They are:

I. The danger of neglecting such a great salvation - 2:1-4
II. The danger of following the example of the Israelites in the wilderness - 3:6 - 4:2

III. The danger of apostasy - 5:11 - 6:8

IV. The danger of despising the gospel - 10:26-31

V. The danger of following the example of Esau - 12:15-17

VI. The danger of refusing to listen to Him who speaks from heaven - 12:25-29

It is now proper that we secure a description of just what is the wilful sin of apostasy. First, apostasy is defined by Paul, assuming he was the writer of Hebrews, as being that of “falling away” from the doctrine of Christ (6:1,4), “wilful sin” against knowledge (10:26), and “drawing back unto perdition” (10:39).

Secondly, what exactly did the apostates say or do in committing this sin? Several things:

One: They slandered Jesus by agreeing that the Jewish leaders had been right about Jesus. He was an imposter and deserved to be crucified. Hebrews 6:6 “seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame.”

Two: They slander the gospel by turning away from the sacrificial death of Christ which can take away sins. Hebrews 10:26 “If we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin.”

Three: They slander the person of Jesus by mocking His deity. Hebrews 10:29 “who hath trodden under foot the Son of God.”

Four: They slander His sacrificial blood by saying He died a death worthy of that of a common criminal. Hebrews 10:29 “hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified an ‘unholy thing’” The NKJV says, “a common thing” - nothing was special about it.

Five: They slander the Holy Spirit of grace. Hebrews 10:29 “and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace.” The word “despite” means to insult or enrage.

Six: They slander the gospel by rejecting the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Hebrews 10:38 “the just shall live by faith, but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.”
The apostates, who have fallen away, sinned wilfully, and turned back into perdition, have concluded their leaders were right in what they did to Jesus. They also now confess they had made a grave mistake in thinking He was their Messiah. They crucify Christ afresh by confirming that the actual crucifiers were right, and declaring openly they had retried Jesus and concluded that He truly was not the Messiah, but a deceiver and therefore worthy of death.

They now agree with the ones who shouted “Crucify Him, crucify Him!” They agree with those who placed a crown of thorns on His head and said, “Behold, the King!” They now agree with those who mocked His Person by saying, “If you are who you say you are, come down from the cross!” They now agree with those who spit upon Him in disgust. They now agree that God was on their side when He said in His law, that cursed is everyone who hangs upon a tree. And as they rage and deny the Christ they once embraced, the Holy Spirit Himself becomes enraged at the insult they are heaping upon Him. After showing them the things of Christ, they now stomp upon Him with both their feet. And then He says, “That is enough, it is finished. I will show them nothing more!” He then turns them over to a reprobate mind and the gospel light goes out, and darkness covers the realm of their souls. They have slandered the Holy Spirit.

Because they have now repudiated the doctrine which they formerly embraced means that any further preaching of the gospel to them will be useless and in vain. “Ephraim has joined himself to idols. Let him alone.” (Hosea 4:17). Because they see nothing to repent of, there will never be any forgiveness. They have committed the unpardonable sin.

THE SIN UNTO DEATH IN I JOHN

In I John 5:16 we read, “If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and He shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.”

Here we are given the third title for the one sin which is unforgivable. The three are (1) Blaspheming the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:22-30; Luke 12:9, 10); (2) The Wilful Sin (Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-29, 38, 39); (3) The Sin Unto Death (I John 5:14-18).

What is the sin unto death? Much discussion has arisen as to its nature and who commits it. Again, time will not permit me to interact with the various viewpoints. I can only say that I do not believe John is referring to the physical death of a believer, but is instead addressing spiritual death, which is
eternal separation from the favor of God. Also, I do not believe that the use of the term, “brother” requires him to be a regenerate believer.

The immediate context of verses 14-18 deals with the believer’s confidence in prayer that he is praying in the will of God (vs. 14, 15). This prayer should include intercessory prayer for our brethren, those inside the Christian community. John says this involves praying for the brother who has fallen into sin. In praying for such a person, we are asking God to grant the grace of repentance so there can be forgiveness and restoration to His favor within the family of God. He then distinguishes between two types of sin. One type of sin can be forgiven. The other cannot be forgiven. The one who is praying can have confidence that his prayer can be effectual and lead to forgiveness for the erring brother, if the sin is one which is not unto death. On the other hand, he can have no confidence of the brother being forgiven if he has committed the sin unto death. Whatever the sin unto death is, it is a visible sin which can be identified by the brethren who are praying.

The sin unto death cannot be identified apart from the larger context of John’s letter. In his letter, John is acting like a shepherd watching over his flock to protect them from the wolves. Only this time the wolves had originated within the Christian community. A crisis had arisen within the community of believers due to the rise of false teachers who were promoting a view of Christianity which was different from that held by John and other apostles. The point had been reached where they could no longer abide in apostolic doctrine and had separated themselves from the church. They had set up a rival church claiming to represent an improved and advanced form of Christianity. John considered it necessary to write a careful statement of apostolic Christianity so that his flock might be able to see where the apostates were distorting the message, while at the same time reassuring his flock that were the true people of God. In I John 5:13 he says, “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may believe on the name of the Son of God.”

The teachings which the false teachers were spreading became known as Gnosticism, which was a blend of oriental mysticism and Grecian philosophy. They blended in just enough of the Christian message to produce an effective counterfeit Christianity. Here are some of the characteristics of their teachings and practices.

(1) They claimed to have fellowship with God and to be sinless - 1:6,8
(2) They said they knew God - 2:4
(3) They believed God was light and they lived in that light - 2:9
(4) They held unorthodox views about Jesus:
(a) They did not believe that Jesus was the Christ or the Son of God - 2:22; 5:1
(b) They denied that Jesus had come in the flesh - 4:2, 3; II John 7
(c) They denied that His death had any atoning value. They claimed they had no sin, thus they did not need an atonement - 2:1,2
(d) They did not submit to the authority of Christ’s commands - 2:4
(5) They were unloving toward apostolic believers - 2:9-11
(6) They were unholy and worldly in their lifestyles - 2:15-17
(7) They claimed to possess a deeper knowledge of God than ordinary Christians - 2:20, 27. This knowledge came from special prophetic revelations which they claimed to receive directly from God - 4:1

John referred to them as “antichrists.” In chapter 2:18-19 he says, “Little Children, it is the last time: and as you have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would not doubt have continued with us, but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.” In chapter 4:1-3 he states, “Beloved believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know you the Spirit of God. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof you have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.” (cf. also verses 4-6).

Who then are the ones who are committing the sin unto death? Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones answers in this manner:

“There were people in the early church who claimed to be Christian members of the church, but they had gone out. They had left the church; they had denied the doctrine concerning Jesus as the Son of God and Jesus as the Christ. And that is why, in a sense, John writes his letter to safeguard against that. It is a terrible thing that a man should deny that Jesus is the Son of God. In other words, it seems perfectly clear to me that John here is simply repeating the teaching of the Lord concerning blasphemy against the Holy Ghost of which we read at the beginning of Matthew 12 and in the sixth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews. It is a wilful rejection of the teaching of the Holy Spirit as to the true nature and Messiahship of Jesus, the denying of Christ as to His true nature. That is what is meant by the sin against the Holy Ghost, and that is what John means by “a sin unto death.” (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Life In Christ Studies In I John, p. 677, Crossway Books, Wheaton, Ill.).
It is this visible, identifiable sin for which prayer will no longer avail. How will a person know if he or she has personally committed this sin? When their conscience no longer convicts them of sin and their need of Jesus to forgive them of their sin! No conviction, no repentance. No repentance, no forgiveness! It is a sin which is not covered by the blood of Christ, and God cannot and will not forgive sin without the shedding of blood. William Barclay notes that the Greek expression “sin unto death” means “the sin which is going towards death, the sin whose end is death, and the sin which if continued in, must finish in death.” (Barclay, Letters of John and Jude, p. 142). Most modern translations translate the expression, “There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.” (ESV).

Some think it is unloving and un-Christian to not pray for someone. They need more Biblical knowledge. In John 17:9, Jesus is praying for the people whom the Father had given Him (cf. 17:2). He says “I pray for them; I pray not for the world, but for them who Thou has given me.” Also, we need to understand that the God of the Bible may well turn away from a people who have turned their backs on Him. Just before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 B.C., the Prophet Jeremiah was told by God, “Pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to Me: for I will not hear thee.” (Jeremiah 7:16) In 14:11, he was later told by God, “Pray not for this people for their good.” There are many things about God in the Bible which nominal Christians do not know. And when they later discover these things, they are offended and fall away into perdition. Does this teaching on the unpardonable sin offend or trouble you? Or does it give you assurance that you are still grieved over your sinful imperfections and still love the Savior who shed His blood for you? Let no one think they have committed this sin if your can still sorrow over your sinning and still rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Remember this is a premeditated, calculated, wilful sin against the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. It is not a sin of ignorance. Remember that even the Apostle Paul could be forgiven of his blasphemous rage against the Christ and His church. Listen as he gives his testimony in I Timothy 1:12-15, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has enabled me, for that He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; what was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.”

Paul was a great sinner, even guilty of blasphemy, but he never blasphemed the Holy Spirit in a wilful manner. Anyone who desires to be forgiven by God’s way, may call upon the name of the Lord and
be saved. Reader, do you have a saving interest in Christ Jesus? God is merciful, but don't presume upon His mercy.