

# The Gospel Of Forgiveness

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Spiritual "equipment" for the contest of life.

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# Introduction

“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

While we did not conspire to have Jesus crucified, all of us share responsibility for His having gone to the cross. Every person who has sinned—including you and me—has made His death necessary in order for God to extend forgiveness to us. The problem is: while we may easily welcome God’s forgiveness, we may at the same time find it difficult to extend this same gift to others. Thus, I propose that many of us *still* do not know what we are doing—especially in the realm of *forgiveness*.

Why is that? This simple question has bothered me for years. Like many people, I have engaged in a great deal of reading, study, and soul-searching to make sense of this simple yet profound problem. This book is the product of such reading and introspection. While what is contained within may not address the question in the way *you* would do so (or as others have already done), it will likely provide an excellent springboard into further studies on a subject with which nearly every one of us has grappled at one time or another.

The subject of forgiveness is important and timeless. It will always be needed and relevant, since it is one with which every person and every generation must come to terms. As long as there are people in the world, there will be hurts, crimes, and injustices inflicted by one person against another. Some will be perpetrators, others will be victims; in due time, all will have taken on both roles. Yet both the inflictor and the one so inflicted—if they choose to stand righteous before God—must deal with *what happened* in a biblical and responsible manner.

Despite the broad scope of opportunity to practice forgiveness, there remains a great deal of misunderstanding and misinformation on it. Many have waded into the arena offering their personal feelings, philosophical views, anecdotal testimonies, and even religious interpretations on the matter. Scholars, theologians, psychologists, therapists, moralists, philosophers, victims, survivors, and even atheists have all had something to say on forgiveness. Some of these views have merit; others are merely subjective theories and opinions. Most of the books I read in preparation for my own project are filled with stories—stories about how someone was hurt, suffered gut-wrenching loss, or was inflicted with horrible injustice. Most of these stories ended with (some form of) forgiveness;

a few did not. Regardless, it seems that we do not need more heart-wrenching stories, but a straightforward, candid, and biblical explanation. My personal views or others' stories may be helpful at times, but you cannot have a right relationship with God based upon someone's personal story or ordeal.

For this reason, this book is not my personal "take" on forgiveness. I am not trying to impose my religious views *upon* you; I am not trying to justify my personal convictions *to* you. (In fact, my own views have changed *because* of having immersed myself in this study.) This book is an exposition on what God has said on the matter, as expressed in His revealed Word, the Bible. As important as this subject is for living in fellowship with God, He has not left us without sufficient instruction on the matter. One of the predominant messages of Christ's own teaching dealt with forgiveness and reconciliation. Not surprisingly, then, the gospel of Christ is essentially a gospel—really, *the* gospel—of forgiveness. After hearing all that others have said and taught on this subject, no one can speak with the authority with which Christ speaks. Furthermore, no one can know the reality of the human condition than One who has not only been human Himself, but who never ceased to be God *while* He was human.

This does not mean that everyone is familiar with what He has said, however. It also does not mean that everyone understands what He has said in its proper context. Forgiveness is also an enormous subject, which makes the study of it daunting and involved. This discourages many people from studying it, especially if they are looking for only superficial answers. From Genesis to Revelation, the *need* for, *process* of, and *granting* of forgiveness are dominant themes of God's Word. It is an absolutely essential component of God's covenantal relationship with His people. The reason for the Levitical sacrificial system, and its fulfillment in Christ, was to provide forgiveness for human sin *in order to* provide human fellowship with God. Just as the cross of Christ is central to God's plan of redemption, so forgiveness is central to God's reaching out in mercy and grace to those in need of that redemption.

What interferes with this, however, is our personal and religious baggage—i.e., our inaccurate perspectives and misunderstandings. No one comes to the table, so to speak, without already having some predetermined view of (or complaint about) forgiveness. To some, forgiveness is beautiful and virtually miraculous; to others, it is a weak and dishonest way of responding to human crimes. Without a fixed point of reference—which is exactly what

God provides—we are left to define forgiveness according to our personal experiences or preferences. This is no longer a study of God’s Word but descends into personal opinions and group therapy. These latter practices cannot forgive achieve forgiveness from *or* fellowship with God.

For these reasons, forgiveness is a highly emotional subject. When I gave a series of lessons on this subject in 2007, a number of people in the audience were in tears. Some were crying out of frustration, not wanting to put aside their anger toward someone else’s offense. Some were crying out of the pain and guilt of their own injustices toward God or others. And some were crying due to their indescribable relief of finally being able to *release* their pain and discover *joy* instead. (It is not necessary to remain unemotional when confronted with moral responsibilities; it is only necessary that we not define moral beliefs by our emotions.) If you have been badly hurt by someone else—or if *you* have been the cause of someone else’s pain—do not be surprised if during the reading of this book you also find tears streaming down your cheeks. If for no other reason, your own crimes against God are reason enough for tears of godly sorrow. But remember also what Jesus said: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4).

Because it is a matter of theology and not opinion, forgiveness is a study of objective truth. Objective truth and critical thinking are neither popular nor easily attained. It is much easier to regurgitate someone else’s philosophy (or theology), or to circumvent the necessary means of discovering what *is* true or not. God’s Word dictates human morality, not the other way around. It is true that you have passionate convictions and that God knows your heart. It is not true that just because you *have* convictions means that they are legitimate, or that God is obligated to validate everything that is *in* your heart. Your responsibility is to discover and defend the *truth* as God has revealed it, not to justify your personal convictions.

For all the reasons stated above, forgiveness is a subject that is often abused or avoided altogether. It is a fact of human nature that the more time and energy that are required to learn something, the fewer number of people will objectively pursue that learning. This presents, then, a sad irony: while nearly everyone longs to be forgiven by God, relatively few are willing to invest the time and effort to learn how to be *forgiving people*. We want what God has to offer, but we do not necessarily want to become what God wants us to be. In other cases,



we believe God is “right” to offer forgiveness to ourselves, but we impose our own standards and limitations upon offering forgiveness to others. And some simply cruise through life with little regard for what God has taught on the matter, forgiving when it benefits them and withholding forgiveness when it does not. Given such perspectives, it is easy to see how a biblical study of this subject is not a popular one.

This book was not intended to be read exclusively by Christians. However, it must be understood that in order to be prepared the life to come, you first need to *be* forgiven. No one is forgiven who has not become a Christian, and no one is a Christian who has not yet obeyed the gospel of Christ. I say this only out of necessity, not to discourage non-Christians from reading this book. My hope is that *anyone* reading this will either obey Christ’s gospel or be drawn even closer to Christ Himself. Once we are truly forgiven by God, then we are expected to show to others what God has shown to us.

Regardless of your present standing with God, you have made an excellent choice toward improving that standing. Your increased knowledge of God’s teaching on forgiveness will give you spiritual enlightenment and will make you morally wise. When you direct that knowledge and wisdom toward your relationship with God, you will most certainly seek His forgiveness *and* become a more forgiving person.

My strong recommendation is that you read this book all the way through without stopping to make notes or read the citations. Do not merely read chapters of interest, or you will miss some of the important background or biblical perspective that led up to them. (Some of the information is purposely but usefully repetitive, as you will discover by the end of the reading.) After this, read through this book a second time, and make notes and look up the citations. This will maximize what you are able to get out of this book and your exploration of this subject.

Remember, this book is not meant to replace God’s Word, but simply expedites the process of discovering what is *in* His Word. It is a tool, not a source of authority. Nonetheless, it has been my endeavor to provide you with a very *useful* tool in coming to a better understanding of the gospel of forgiveness.



PART ONE:  
Defining The Situation

# Chapter One: Why Should You Forgive?

*Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, "I repent," forgive him.*

Luke 17:3-4

**Y**ou already know this, but I will say it anyway: this world can be a malicious and unjust place to live. It is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid the effects of human imperfection, self-promotion, and outright greed. People will do you wrong, take advantage of you, be mean to you, and sometimes stab you in the back. Ultimately, in one way or another, you will become a victim of someone else's irresponsible behavior. Some will have a pang of conscience toward what they have done, while others could not care less how much—or how deeply—they have hurt you.

Given that situation, how are you supposed to respond to someone else's thoughtlessness—or worse, his (or her) criminal activity? Are you supposed to just accept what has happened and get on with your life? Or, should you plot your own form of vengeance and make sure that person gets what is coming to him? Or, should you confront him with his crime and learn to forgive him? If you are a Christian, you know the Bible teaches that you are supposed to forgive. But *why* should you do this? And *how* can you do this, especially when it seems that you are the one doing all the work because of someone else's crime?

Such crimes—the “what happened” incidents that leave you reeling with hurt and anger—vary in degrees, suffering, and consequences. Consider any one of the following scenarios:

- Someone you know stole money from you—and you caught him red-handed.
- You were the target of a wicked character assassination—by your own sibling.
- You have been disowned by your own mother or father—or both.
- Your husband (or wife) cheated on you with your best friend.
- Your own son or daughter was killed by a drunk driver.
- You were raped by a friend of the family.

Why should you forgive such people—or *can* you forgive them?

Or, let's examine it from the other side: maybe you were the one who did any one of these things to someone else. Why should anyone forgive *you*—or are you even *deserving* of forgiveness?

These are good questions. Often, however, our emotions get in the way of answering them directly, objectively, and in light of what the Bible actually teaches. Talking about the mechanics and process of forgiveness will not mean as much to you or me if we do not first understand the *why* of forgiveness. So then, our study will begin with this very thing: *why* should you forgive?<sup>1</sup>

### **Ideal Human Behavior**

Obviously, forgiveness must have a legitimate purpose. God does not forgive a single person without an excellent purpose, and neither should Christians. Without a specific and attainable goal, forgiveness is reduced to an exercise in mindless protocol: it may sound good, but nothing worthwhile is actually accomplished. Yet we (people) need Someone who is *greater* than us (yet who can *identify* with us) to reveal what is ideal human behavior. It is not within our ability to determine what is best for us, simply because we cannot see ourselves entirely, perfectly, or without bias. We need someone with supreme ability and authority to disclose to us goals that are practical, timeless, and universal. God does not forgive you or me for any inferior or less-than-ideal reasons; what He does is always in our best interest. If you imitate God's behavior—and if you are a Christian, this is expected (Ephesians 5:1)—then you will always act in another's best interest as well.

You cannot forgive *properly* without specific authority to do so. "Authority" is an often-ignored and highly underrated subject. We do not always realize how central it is to everything we do, especially as followers of Christ. We know that the visible universe cannot exist or function without fixed laws and physical properties, yet ideal human behavior is also determined by fixed laws and spiritual principles. We cannot just "reason" our way through that which involves an authority greater than our own; we have no right to do so. (This does not mean that people will *not* do this; it only means that we have no *business* doing it.) The standard for ideal, transcendent human behavior has been revealed to us by way of the written Word of God (the Bible). Our study on forgiveness is entirely predicated on this premise—i.e., that God provides the authority for and defines the practice of forgiveness in His Word. In the absence of a higher authority than humankind, there would be no such thing as ideal behavior, and therefore no

purpose for our existence. In that case, the past is irrelevant; we have no future; we just “are.” In that case, all talk about forgiveness is a waste of time.

But this really is *not* the case. Jesus has revealed to us the Father’s flawless and benevolent nature (John 1:18, 14:7-9) and has disclosed to us exactly what is ideal human behavior. Without this definite, universal, and authoritative standard, we lose all perspective and points of reference. Forgiveness would become no more or less important than trying to contemplate life in another solar system or the spiritual awareness of dolphins. Our imagination, emotions, subjective worldviews, and other private perspectives would take over, allowing us to rationalize virtually any behavior. Yet, God’s world is not governed by the speculations of men but divine truth and absolute reality. When Jesus taught that “the truth will make you free” (John 8:32), He was not talking about *your* truth or *my* truth, but THE Truth—that which He revealed about God *and* men. When Jesus claimed to be “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), He was not recommending one path that is equally comparable to many other paths that also lead to eternal life, but a singular, exclusive, and non-negotiable “way” to the Father. Just because many will not accept the truth does not make it go away. Rejecting the truth is not the same as erasing it.

In forgiving others *as* we have been forgiven by Him, we conform to Christ’s reality and adopt His selfless attitude (Philippians 2:5). Those whom we forgive within the brotherhood of believers are reconciled to us (and us to them) so that our spiritual fellowship can be restored and continue. Those who are unbelievers also benefit from this heavenly influence and, hopefully, will choose to obey Christ as we have. Our performance is measured by an objective standard—the gospel of Christ—rather than any personal or self-serving one. We can evaluate exactly where we are in relation to this standard, and we can therefore know what else is required to obtain it. Like Paul, we have not yet reached spiritual maturity—even in our forgiveness—but “forgetting what lies behind” we reach forward “to what lies ahead” (Philippians 3:13). We are reaching forward, in essence, to Christ Himself.

### **A Heavenly Objective**

Even in the absence of direct biblical references, people seem to know intuitively that forgiveness is superior to stewing in bitterness or acting out of vengeance. For example, Dr. Edward Hallowell (in *Dare To Forgive*) writes, “A chief motive to forgive ... is the realization that you and the world will be better

off if you can forgive.”<sup>2</sup> This is true—not simply because it sounds good, but because it conforms to an otherworldly or heavenly *objective*.

Such statements confess that “the world” has an inferior approach to dealing with human faults, imperfections, and crimes against one another. Yet, when people use words like “better,” “progressive,” “more enlightened,” “more advanced,” or “less primitive,” they necessarily imply an absolute, transcendent standard. We cannot move *toward* or *away from* something without a definite, immutable, and universal point of reference. We can *want* to be a more civilized society, for example, but this comparative language means nothing if we do not know what an *absolutely* and *perfectly* civilized society looks like in *every* context and not just our own. Furthermore, this requires a definable measurement or objective evaluation of either our success or failure in nearing this ideal.

The world *would* be a better place if everyone would first learn to practice godly virtues. Yet, we need a fixed, independent, and universal standard in order to do this. We cannot all come up with customized *versions* of forgiveness and hope to achieve a “better world.” Contradictions, division, and chaos can never lead to uniformity, unity, and stability. We need a standard that means the same thing to every person, regardless of his or her circumstances. One’s private imagination cannot establish universal, transcendent, and meaningful purpose—regardless of that person’s higher education, philosophic views, or personal experiences.

Furthermore, forgiveness is not merely a human transaction with results that are limited to this life. It has a direct and profound effect upon one’s *spiritual future*. This makes it not only an important subject, but a compelling and essential one. If God’s forgiveness of your sins—and your forgiveness of the sins of others—determines your soul’s destiny in the hereafter, it is in your best interest to listen to what He says on the matter rather than listening to those who have never *seen* the hereafter (or do not believe it even exists). No matter who you are or what you believe, you will indeed participate in the world to come. *How* you participate in that world depends on what you do in this world. Whether or not you will be *prepared* for that existence depends on the kind of person you choose to be in this life. For this reason, “Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise ... [and] do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (Ephesians 5:15, 17).

Since God is our Creator, and since ideal human behavior is based upon His own divine nature, forgiveness is no longer a mere exercise of human will. Instead, it is an endeavor to draw near to God in a meaningful, practical, and goal-oriented manner. Christ is our Ideal; He is our definitive point of reference. In extending forgiveness to another person, we put Christ's gospel into action. We no longer speak of it as a concept or theory but actually *live* it in a real and demonstrable way. We admit that God's way is better than our own; His values are more important than our own; and His truth is supreme to any of our personal "truths." Instead of simply talking about Christ, we actually allow Christ to live through us (Galatians 2:20).

Suppose a person who is *not* a Christian nonetheless chooses to demonstrate forgiveness? He will certainly not be harmed by practicing a godly behavior. By exercising Christian virtues, he will be benefited and so will those whom he forgives—but only to a limited extent. We cannot equate being "forgiving" with being a "Christian." It is true that God expects Christians to be forgiving people; it is not true that forgiving people are automatically regarded as Christians.<sup>3</sup> Even serial killers, pedophiles, and other deviants can express Christ-like love and God-like charity when they so choose, but they still remain what they are.<sup>4</sup> No one will be saved simply by imitating certain behaviors of saved people. On the other hand, one who embraces godly virtues is "not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). That person only needs to obey Christ as Lord rather than selectively choosing to embrace one Christian behavior or another.

Forgiveness is a moral issue, not merely a noble one. Morality deals with *divine influence on human behavior*, which necessarily demands that there be divine expectations leading us toward a divine standard.<sup>5</sup> Those who reduce forgiveness to a mere gesture of human decency ("Wouldn't the world be a better place if...?") overlook the essential *source* of our forgiveness, and fail to define its ultimate purpose. In the absence of God, life boils down to survival of the fittest: if forgiveness does not make you more "fit" to survive, then it is useless and expendable. Let natural selection take its course; do what you have to do to survive for as long as you can. Accordingly, Jeffrie Murphy, professor of law and philosophy at Arizona State University, argues that "small" or "moderate" acts of vengeance are actually healthy and necessary. "[Forgiveness can] sometimes be an act of weakness and insecurity—a hasty suppression of anger and resentment when that anger and resentment are neither evil nor unhealthy but rather valuable



testimony to our self-respect.”<sup>6</sup> As stated earlier, upon deleting God from our world-view, anything can and will be justified.

Thankfully, this is not the case. There is a God, an afterlife, and a divine standard. There is a source of our forgiveness and a reason for practicing it. We did not originate from random chance only to rush headlong into hopeless oblivion. “That which is known about God is evident within [us]” (Romans 1:19), and our longing to forgive or be forgiven is part of that evidence. Every *act* of forgiveness ultimately finds its source in the *God* of forgiveness. We learn how to draw near to this God through the *gospel* of forgiveness.

### **More Like The Master**

Alexander Pope once wrote, “To err is human; to forgive, divine.” While this is not a biblical phrase, it is consistent with biblical truth. First, “erring” is something we humans do with (unfortunately) great proficiency. We make mistakes, stumble over stumbling blocks, exercise poor judgment, use faulty reasoning, and sin against God. This is who we are, and we cannot entirely escape such imperfections as long as we remain human. This is not offered as an excuse for irresponsible behavior, nor is it intended to dodge moral accountability for our actions. We are not supposed to be *comfortable* with this situation; we are simply admitting the *reality* of it. Even the most God-fearing person on earth cannot rise above his human, earth-bound limitations. As long as we are in this sinful world, we will be tempted to conform to it, and sometimes we will succumb to this temptation.

But it is also true that to forgive is divine. We did not invent virtues like “forgiveness” and “forbearance.” Like our genetic blueprint that necessarily implies divine authorship, so these qualities are the inescapable imprint of God’s divine influence upon the human soul. Unfortunately, just because we are divinely-created and divinely-influenced does not mean that we always choose to walk by God’s divine Spirit. Godly forgiveness is not something that comes natural to us; it is instead a learned behavior. Forgiveness contradicts the self-serving, greedy, and vengeful world in which we are immersed; it stands opposed to human pride and defies our natural tendency toward self-preservation. People can teach each other that forgiveness is important, virtuous, or necessary for attaining inner peace, but Christ is the true Teacher of what forgiveness is and how it is to be practiced. Just as He has taught us how to love (John 13:34-35), so He has taught us how to forgive.

This teaching culminated in Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross. As Paul wrote, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Christ died for us not so that we could give a token nod of thanks to God and then resume our self-centered lives. He died for us in order to forgive us, and in reciprocation of His kindness He expects us to be a forgiving kind of people. In forgiving us, Christ has given us a mission to accomplish.

To illustrate this point, consider the account in Luke 5:17-26. Jesus was in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee, speaking the Word of God to those who had gathered together in someone's home. Learned men from Jerusalem, as well as people from many villages of Galilee and Judea, had come to hear Him speak and watch Him perform miraculous healing. In particular, four men came to the house carrying a paralytic on a stretcher, yet were prevented from entering because of the crowd. So they went up to the rooftop, removed the tiles and other parts of the roof to make a sizable hole, and lowered this man's bed down into the room where Jesus was. We can only imagine the startled reaction of the people as this happened, and as they anticipated Jesus' own response.

Instead of immediately healing the man, however, Jesus did something entirely unexpected. He said, "Friend, your sins have been forgiven you." This shocked the people—and offended some of the Jewish teachers. "Who is this man who speaks blasphemies?" they murmured indignantly. "Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" To this, Jesus responded magnificently: "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins have been forgiven you,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?'" Both actions require the authority of God Himself. If Jesus possessed divine authority to do the one, it was logical to believe He could do the other. If by this God-given power He could instantly heal a paralytic, then He could also forgive sins. So He told the paralytic, "Get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home." And the man did so.

The result was electric. Some were astonished and glorified God; others were filled with fear toward the unimaginably powerful Man that stood in their midst. Some remarked, "We have never seen anything like this" (Mark 2:12). Indeed! Nonetheless, the essential point of Jesus' critics was not incorrect: no one *can* forgive sins but God alone. The Jews had a long history of prophets and miracle-workers, but never had someone forgiven sins by his own god-like authority. With the power to forgive comes the power to heal, since divine forgiveness is the ultimate form of spiritual healing. As the instantaneous healing

was miraculous, so was the forgiveness. Thus, the two miracles either stand or fall together: if one was possible, then so was the other. Yet, if Jesus had not been able to heal the paralytic, then His critics would have had every right to call Him a liar and a fraud. As it was, He silenced their criticism and demanded their respect—and loyalty—instead.

Jesus did not forgive people simply to prove a point, however. He forgave people—and continues to forgive people—because He has something for them to do. This “something” may be a single act of faith or a lifelong ministry. In the present account, Jesus instructed the paralytic, “Get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home.” The healing of his physical body corresponded directly with the healing of his corrupted soul. Forgiveness of this man’s sins also provided him with the means to glorify God through his obedience to the Master’s command. Thus, the man who had awkwardly come in through the roof left naturally through the front door. The man who had been lowered into the room on his sickbed carried this same bed out of the house by his own strength. When he was paralyzed, the man could do almost nothing; now that he had been healed, he could do whatever the Master needed him to do.

This fact bears upon us today. It is not necessary that Christ heal us physically in order to prove what He is capable of doing in the spiritual realm. The proof has already been offered; we either believe in how He has performed (John 20:31) or we disbelieve for no good reason (John 15:24-25). Yet, Jesus did not perform miracles just to convince us that He is powerful. He has done these things because God wants us in living fellowship with Him, and the means to this objective is the forgiveness of our sins. Being in fellowship with God is not a static, inactive, or unproductive state of being. Instead, it necessarily demands dynamic, growing, and productive *service*. Thus, we are forgiven in order that we might serve the One who has forgiven us. In a sense, we call upon Him while we are paralyzed and useless; we leave His presence ready and able to do His will and serve in His kingdom. The same power that forgave us of our sins also enables us to live like forgiven people.

### **A Win-Win-Win Situation**

We glorify God in heaven through the good works we do in His honor here on earth (Matthew 5:16, Ephesians 2:10). We cannot claim to love God without demonstrating godly love to others, and especially to fellow believers (1 John 4:20). Thus, those who are forgiven by God are expected to love like He

has loved us (1 John 4:7) and serve others just as Christ has served us. Christ Himself said, “Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave” (Matthew 20:26-27). Being a “slave” does not sound very appealing up front, but it is a relative term: as a slave, *you* serve in contrast to *being* served. The route to greatness in God’s eyes is paradoxically through servitude: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). You and I are unable to “ransom” anyone through our service, but we can manifest the Light of God to the lost through our Christ-inspired actions. Certainly, one of these actions is forgiveness. Another purpose of our forgiveness, then, is to inspire others to seek the same salvation that we ourselves have joyfully discovered (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

God does not want to destroy men, but to forgive them. “Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,” He says, “rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?” (Ezekiel 18:23). His delay in bringing about the end of the world is directly due to His desire to have people repent so that He can heal their souls (2 Peter 3:9). When we share God’s passion for healing and restoration, then we will actively do *our* part in achieving this same thing. Because of each person’s free will, however, this is not always successful. “Sometimes the person who you forgive is transformed; sometimes there is no change.”<sup>7</sup> In either case, our *intention* is that they change for the better. Yet if we will not become servants of men, then we cannot be servants of God; if we refuse to serve believers, then we are unprepared to serve those who are still unbelievers. There is no shortage of opportunity in our lifetime to practice such servitude. “According to the ‘Law of the Instrument,’ if you have a hammer in your hand, you are likely to see nails all around you.”<sup>8</sup> If forgiveness is in your heart, your eyes will be opened to the need for it everywhere.

There is a personal benefit in this as well. In offering forgiveness to others, you conform to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). You learn to appreciate the pain of self-sacrifice while being refined and perfected in the process (“Even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed”—1 Peter 3:14). The transformation of your character, increase of godly virtue, and depth of spiritual fellowship with Christ will far outweigh whatever losses you may incur through your acts of mercy. Furthermore, as you show mercy and forgiveness to others, God will continue to show these same things

to you. The proof of your faith, as demonstrated through your obedience even under trial, will contribute to the salvation of your own soul (1 Peter 1:7-9).

The point is this: forgiveness is a win-win-win situation. First, when you forgive in a Christ-like manner, you honor God through your servitude and obedience. You profess, in essence, that God's will and commandments are more important than your self-determined will and personal preferences. You put God's interests ahead of your own, rather than standing opposed to Him as an adversary (as in Matthew 16:23). Second, you bring "light" and "salt"—i.e., godly illumination and influence—to those who are in need of these. To the lost, you serve as a beacon of hope, offering purpose and direction to their lives. To fellow believers, you offer encouragement and edification, demonstrating a faith in God that rises above all the anger, vengeance, disillusionment, and confusion of this world (Colossians 3:1-3, James 3:13-18). Third, you yourself become the recipient of God's providential blessings—including forgiveness of your own sins—and are led heavenward by His Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:16). The more you practice your faith, the greater in scope and strength it becomes. If faith that is as small as a mustard seed can move mountains, then great faith can do considerably more (Matthew 17:20). With such faith, "you will never stumble" (2 Peter 1:10)—not because of your faith alone, but because of the One in whom you have placed your faith.

### **The Proportion Of Love And Forgiveness**

God's forgiveness ought to have a profound and life-transforming effect upon the one who is forgiven. His act of undeserved charity compels us (in a good way) to extend acts of undeserved charity to others. His having released us from our prison of guilt gives us the keys to release others from their prisons as well.<sup>9</sup> Sadly, not every Christian has necessarily learned to appreciate this. Some have gone through the motions of conversion, yet their hearts have remained largely unchanged. One common reason for this may be that they do not realize how desperately in *need* of God's forgiveness they really are. If a person has led a relatively good and "clean" life, then he may regard his debt to God as being small and insignificant. This may bear upon the depth of his love: if his *need* for God is presumed to be, then his *love* for God will likely be stunted and under-developed. His love for God—which affects his service toward others—is often directly proportional to his perceived need for His forgiveness.

Jesus referred to such people in the course of His ministry. In one particular occasion while He reclined at the table of Simon the Pharisee, a woman of ill-repute came into the house (Luke 7:37-50). This woman bowed before the Lord and cried, then wiped His feet with her tears. This woman's sins were many—she knew it, Simon knew it, and so did Jesus. Yet, she deeply adored the One who could remove these sins and demonstrated her humility and faith in a most genuine manner. Simon, however, regarded himself as a relatively good man whose sins were few—especially in comparison to this woman's. From his point-of-view, forgiveness was something he naturally expected due to his pious behavior. God would have had to expend little energy to impart righteousness to him, but this woman represented a nearly hopeless case.

Jesus was well aware of Simon's heart and his low regard for this woman. So He posed a scenario to Simon concerning two debtors—one who owed much and one who owed comparatively little—and how they were both forgiven of their debts. "So which of them will love him [i.e., the creditor] more?" Jesus asked, and Simon replied, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." Upon this self-incriminating answer, Jesus made the necessary application: Simon's love was small and immature because he perceived his debt as small and easily forgivable. His self-righteousness had blinded him to the righteousness of God (see John 9:39-41). But Jesus also addressed the woman whose tears covered His feet: "Her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

Think of the implication. Simon assumed that God would naturally forgive him because he was, after all, a *good Jew*. Yet, this "sinner" who displayed her love for Christ was the one who actually received His forgiveness. Likewise, some people today assume that God will naturally forgive them because, after all, they are *good people*. Even some Christians believe that Christ will naturally forgive them because, after all, they are *good Christians*. This salvation-by-works theology contradicts the gospel of forgiveness. Unless these people demonstrate genuine love for the Lord—unless they realize how desperate they are for His grace—they will not be forgiven.<sup>10</sup> Instead of experiencing great relief and joy for having an unbearable burden lifted from their souls, they have wrongly assumed that their burden was considerably lighter than others and therefore of little concern to God. This ungrateful attitude will be reflected in their love for (and service to) the Lord.

The quantity of sins, however, does not change what needs to be done. Whatever God had to do to remove one sin, He had to do to remove all sins. Whatever Christ had to endure for one sinner, He had to endure for all sinners (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). Whether it is a few sins or a billion sins, the same sacrifice was required to restore the soul who had committed them. Thus Jesus went to the cross for *every* sinner, not just the really “bad” ones. His blood had to be shed to forgive *every* sin, not just the really “bad” sins. Nonetheless, there are still “Simons” today—those who love little because they have put such a small price on *their* redemption, while regarding other “sinners” with contempt. You or I cannot afford to be one of those people. We ought to have the attitude of the “sinner” woman instead. We should come weeping and filled with contrition as we beg God for forgiveness. God looks with great favor upon those who come to Him with such humility (James 4:7-10).

### **Summary Thoughts**

Forgiveness is not a reflexive, kneejerk, unconscious action. As with anything that has a direct effect on our spiritual relationship with God, it is purpose-driven and goal-oriented. People cannot define what is “good” for others without ultimately appealing to what God has already defined as “good” in His revealed Word. If forgiveness is necessary, then it is necessary because God said so, not because of what anyone else says or for any other reason. Likewise, if God requires His people to forgive, then it does not matter what others say, whether they agree or protest. You must forgive because it is the *right thing to do*.

In conjunction with this, you should forgive because it corresponds to and is consistent with God’s own divine nature. God is the author of morality, and forgiveness is most certainly a moral issue. Not only do you want to be forgiven *by* God, you are expected to become an imitator *of* God. He forgives you because He has something for you to do—a ministry or calling which you are expected to fulfill. God never forgives you “just because,” and you must never forgive others without purpose, either. You forgive in order to be more like the Master *and* so that you may inspire others to seek Him as well. In having been forgiven by God, you are taught to appreciate the sacrifice required to make such kindness possible. Even if you are a relatively good person (in comparison to others), you are still a sinner before God. Thus, you are still in need of the atoning blood of Christ. In practicing forgiveness, you contribute toward your own salvation and act in your own best interest.

Forgiveness is not merely an exercise in religious piety. We can learn all of its facts and details and still not practice it (or practice it properly). Those who *do* practice godly virtues out of love and loyalty to Christ profoundly appreciate His saving grace. Yet the ultimate question is not, “Why should I forgive?” but “Why does *God* forgive?” We have much to say on this in due time. Meanwhile, we will next explore exactly what this forgiveness *is*—and also what it is *not*.