

Forgiveness and the Wounds of Conflict

Forgiveness is “the act of forgiving or the state of being forgiven”, willingness to forgive”.¹ To forgive means:

“to cease to blame or hold resentment against someone or something”,

“to free or pardon someone from penalty, debt or other obligation”.

Wounds are injuries and suffering received as a result of the violence of war, displacement, bereavement, scarred memories, etc. These hurts are real, and they are painful. They must not be denied. But neither must they be allowed to control our lives in the present or the future.

Calvary shows there can be a link between being wounded by others and yet moving on towards forgiving them, Luke 23:33-34. A forgotten wound of conflict happens when we allow an unforgiving spirit to harm our own walk with God.

Conflict is any “struggle or clash between opposing forces”, “a battle”, “a state of opposition between ideas and interests”.

Sadly the history of Sudan is dominated by conflicts. These may have tribal, economic, religious, or political reasons. Conflicts like these are the opposite of Jesus’ second commandment: “Love your neighbour as (you love) yourself”, Mark 12:29-31.

Supposing my family have been killed by militiamen. Or my land has been taken by pastoralists. Or I have been exploited by a hostile invader. Or I have been raised far from “home” because of the displacement of war. As a Christian, how should I react to these events and towards the people who have done them to me?

Think of the words of Jesus Christ on forgiveness:

¹ All definitions are from Collins English Dictionary (Glasgow: Harper Collins) 1995.

We will examine them one by one and try to apply them to our lives in the Sudan of 2009. If we say “Jesus is our Lord”, then we must do what He tells us to do on this (and every) subject.

(1) **Matthew 6:11-15: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”,**
verse 12.

This is taught specifically to Christian disciples, not to the general crowd, 5:2. It is instruction in how to pray, 6:9. God is to be put first in everything. Christians live for Father God’s “other-worldly” kingdom, verses. 9-10. Everyone ultimately depends on God for the necessities of life, verse 11.

Verse 12 “Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us”, Good News Bible (G.N.B.). Christians are not perfect. We still need forgiveness! The Greek word for “debt” *opheilema* is a metaphor for sin. We ask God to forgive everything we owe to Him. This is like asking to be set free of debt by someone to whom we owe a lot of money. Genuine forgiveness, given and received, strengthens a spiritually healthy life just as bread nourishes physical wellbeing.

God himself has paid a price to atone for our sin. He paid the price because He wants us to be at one with Him—and not to continue as His enemies. Our need for forgiveness is as regular as our need for food. Broken relationships must be restored.

Being forgiven depends upon our own willingness to forgive. We say to God: “We know we must forgive others so that You can forgive us”. Are we prepared to live by Jesus’ royal rule, or will we disobey and live our own way?

The evil one will trap us if he can, verse 13. He will try to make us act in an unchristian way. The evidence that we are forgiven is that we forgive others. We must never be tempted to “get our

own back”. Fellowship with God is the Christian’s number one priority. Do not fail to be Christian by refusing to forgive others. (Also see Luke 11:4).

Verses 14-15 develop this thought. It is the only sentence of “the Lord’s Prayer” that Jesus makes extra comment on.

Forgiving others who have wronged us does not earn our own forgiveness from God. But it is an undeniable evidence that God has done a deep work of grace in our own hearts and lives. Reconciliation with God demands we are reconciled to our fellow human beings.

The man or woman who knows how much his own sin has offended Holy God will be better able to keep the wrongs against himself in proper perspective. If we have too large a view of what people have done to us we are likely to have too small a view of what we have done to God. There are different things that Jesus says will follow, depending on if we forgive or if we do not, see also Matthew 5:7; 6:12; 18:35.

We must be careful. Our holding things against others will stop our prayer life from being effective. Jesus warns that it always will. Psalm 51 is a useful prayer for all Christians.

(2) **Luke 6:37 “forgive, and you will be forgiven”**. “forgive others and God will forgive you”,
(G.N.B.).

The context is Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, 6:17. He teaches how Christians should love their enemies, verses 27-36. We don’t live this way to gain entry into God’s kingdom. But if we are living in God’s kingdom it will show in ways like these—visible differences in our Christian way of life.

One way of showing Christian discipleship is by going beyond what people usually do when wronged:

- “Do not judge” verse 37. Do not be too quick to draw your distinctions and jump to conclusions.
- “Do not condemn”. Do not exercise your right to show the guilt of another.
- “Forgive”. Greek *apolo*. Release—do not imprison. Set free. In fact, give forgiveness generously, verse 38.

The humour in verses 41-42 shows there is a place for criticism offered in the right spirit. But our own sins should be our main concern—not the sins of others. Just as a mango tree is known by the mangoes it produces, so a Christian will be recognised by the forgiveness he offers to others, verses 43-45. A Christian life built on obedience to Jesus’ words, will stand strong in all the storms of life, verses 46-49.

(3) Mark 11:25 “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins”. “Forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against”, New Living Translation (N.L.T.).

Verses 22-25 teach about prayer. Jesus wants us to pray trusting in our Heavenly Father. But He warns us our prayers are hindered when we do not forgive others. Faith in God includes doing what God wants us to do. Regular self-examination before praying gives believers regular opportunities for making things right with other people.

Imagine a Christian saying he has great faith: he preaches, he teaches, he sees miracles. But in his heart he holds bitterness against another tribe for wrongs they did to his family. Jesus says this man’s faith is not as great as it appears! This Christian needs to exercise his faith by forgiving and reconciling with others. Faith enables seemingly impossible things, verses 22-23.

(4) Matthew 18:21-22 Peter asks “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?” Jesus answers him by telling the unmerciful servant parable, verses 23-35.

This teaching follows the passage on how to discipline a fellow church member who has broken fellowship, verses 15-20.

The word “brother”, Greek *adelphos*, can mean male family member from the same parents, persons united by a common interest, persons of the same nationality, or believers of either sex.²

The forgiven servant shows himself to be unforgiving of others. Consequently, he is judged severely by his master. He did not appreciate his own sinfulness, wrongly thinking he could pay back an enormous debt, verse 26.

Jesus consistently taught that those who have clearly received God’s forgiveness *are forgiving towards others*, Matthew 6:14-15; Luke 6:36. The early Christians taught this too, Ephesians 4:31-5:2; James 2:13; 1 John 4:10-11.

When we know we are forgiven by God *we are set free to forgive others*. We must never limit the forgiveness we offer. (We don’t want God to limit the forgiveness He offers to us!) Heartfelt forgiveness settles accounts once and for all. To be forgiven is to be empowered to forgive.

The Master’s question to the servant in Matthew 18:32-33 is an applied commentary on Matthew 7:12, “do to others what you would have them do to you”. The unmerciful servant failed this test. Ask God if there are people you should forgive. Ask Him to help you to do it.

Verse 35 “forgive your brother from your heart”. In the Kingdom of Jesus, verse 23, His rule is over Christian hearts.

(5) Luke 17:3-4 “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him”. This is similar to Matthew 18:6-7, 15, 21-22.

² W.E. Vine Complete Expository Dictionary of Old Testament and New Testament words. (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson) 1996, page 82.

Everyone who wants to be a disciple of Jesus must beware of things that cause even Christians to sin, verse 1. Greek *skandalon* —stumbling blocks, things that stop believers from following Jesus. Withholding forgiveness is one of these.

A repentant brother (see 4. above) must be forgiven, even many times over. Repentance is to be encouraged, but it is *not* to be made conditional for forgiveness. Previous Bible passages we have seen do not allow this. See Matthew 6:12,14-15; Luke 6:37-38; Mark 11:25; Matthew 18:21-22, 35.

Verses 5-6 show it takes faith—a gift from God—to act Christianly in this. Ask God to help you do it. Ask others to pray with you for it. The longest and the toughest journeys in life always begin by taking one or two small steps.

The next saying of Jesus on forgiveness shows how He recognised the ignorance in which His opponents acted.

(6) **Luke 23:34 “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”**. A footnote in the N.I.V. says this sentence is not included in some early manuscripts. Early church leaders including Irenaeus, Augustine and Clement all take the words as true. Either way the words do show Jesus practising what He preached, Matthew 5:44, “Love your enemies and *pray for those who persecute you*”. Luke records Peter using some of the same words in Acts 3:17-19, as he offers the forgiveness of the Christian gospel to his hearers.

From the cross, the very place and time Jesus sacrificed Himself for others, the forgiveness of those who wronged Him appears uppermost in His mind and heart. He embraced all of the painful injustice on to Himself. He accepted hurt rather than holding anything against anyone else. Jesus gives us the supreme example of the spirit of forgiveness. But even weak and sinful human beings can be enabled to copy Jesus, see Acts 7:59-60.

Our final three sayings of Jesus on forgiveness will be taken together:

(7) Matthew 26:28 “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”.

This is the start of the Lord's Supper, where bread and wine are used to focus on the body and blood sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus' blood made atonement for sin once and for all, Romans 3:25-26. It is the wider fulfilment of the Covenant God made with humankind in Exodus 24:8.

Jesus' sacrifice allows us to be forgiven. So when we are faced with someone we ought to forgive, we must learn to be good stewards of the blood of Jesus! Pass it on to all!

Luke 24:47 “repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his (Jesus') name to all nations”.

This is part of our commission as Christian disciples. All the Old Testament Scriptures foretold it, verses 44-45, see Joel 2:32, Acts 2:21, Romans 10:13; and Isaiah 49:6, Acts 13:47.

The gospel of the crucified and risen Christ is a message for everyone everywhere, verses 46-47. We must not only speak it. We must also show it! Lack of forgiveness towards others will hinder our Christian witness. Giving forgiveness will make our witness outstandingly bright.

John 20:23 “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven”. See also Matthew 16:19; 18:18.

The passive perfect tense of “forgiven” and “not forgiven” means it is God who is working. As we Christians witness to the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, those who receive our message are forgiven (saved), those who do not accept our message remain unforgiven (lost).

The context is this. The disciples were given the Holy Spirit by Jesus, John20:22. They were to speak out for Him, verse 21. Our Christian ministry today continues the ministry Jesus had on earth, verse 21. How well do we do it? Are we willing to forgive?

Jesus did all that was necessary to forgive others. He died on the cross. Then it was left for people to accept or reject.

We must do all we can towards forgiving others. Then we can leave the rest to God.

Here is a list of some other words of Jesus on forgiveness which are not immediately relevant to our discussion—

Mark 4:12 the parables of Jesus which judge those who are unresponsive to forgiveness.

Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26 where Jesus demonstrates He has authority to forgive sins.

Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:2-29; Luke 12:10 warning that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

Luke 7:36-50, our forgiveness by God should be demonstrated by our adoring worship of God, for all to see.

Perhaps this last one is relevant to our discussion after all?

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and the Scriptures quoted:

1. "Wounds must not be denied nor must they be allowed to control our lives."

List some of the dangers in both of these wrong attitudes.

2. Which of the seven words of Jesus (see the seven sections above) do you find the most relevant to forgiving someone? Why?
3. Explain in your own words why evidence is important.

"Forgiving others who have wronged us does not earn our own forgiveness from God.

But it is an undeniable *evidence* that God has done a deep work of grace in our own

hearts". Luke 11:4; Luke 6:27-36.

4. Why do you think there is a link between a person's appreciation of their own forgiveness by God and their willingness to offer forgiveness to another person?

Ephesians 4:31-5:2; Matthew 18:21-35.

5. Supposing a brother does not repent, Luke 17:3-4. Then do we forgive him?

What else do we do? Why?

6. List as many factors as you can think of which enabled the Lord Jesus to say from the cross: "Father, forgive them", Luke 23:34.

If you can, give Scriptural support for every one.