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The Disciple-Making Minister

Biblical Principles for Fruitfulness and Multiplication

By David Servant

Chapter Twenty-Four

Confrontation, Forgiveness and Reconciliation

When we studied Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in an earlier chapter, we learned how important it is that we forgive those who sin against us. If we don't forgive them, Jesus solemnly promised that God will not forgive us (see Matt. 6:14-15).

What does it mean to forgive someone? Let's consider what Scripture teaches.

Jesus compared forgiveness to erasing someone's debt (see Matt. 18:23-35). Imagine someone owing you money and then releasing that person from his obligation to repay you. You destroy the document that recorded his debt. You no longer expect payment, and you are no longer angry with your debtor. You now see him differently than you did when he owed you money.

We can also better understand what it means to forgive if we consider what it means to be forgiven by God. When He forgives us of a sin, He no longer holds us accountable for what we did that displeased Him. He is no longer angry with us because of that sin. He will not discipline or punish us for what we did. We are reconciled with Him.

Likewise, if I truly forgive someone, I release that person in my heart, overcoming the desire for justice or revenge by means of showing mercy. I am no longer angry with the person who sinned against me. We are reconciled. *If I am harboring anger or a grudge against someone, I haven't forgiven him.*

Christians often fool themselves in this regard. They say they have forgiven someone, knowing that is what they are supposed to do, but they still harbor a grudge against the offender deep inside. They avoid seeing the offender because it causes that suppressed anger to surface again. I know what I'm talking about, because I've done just that. Let us not fool ourselves. Remember that Jesus does not want us even to be angry with a fellow believer (see Matt. 5:22).

Now let me ask a question: Who is easier to forgive, an offender who asks for forgiveness or an offender who does not ask forgiveness? Of course, we all agree that is it much easier to forgive an offender who admits his wrong and asks for our forgiveness. In fact, it seems infinitely easier to forgive someone who asks for it than someone who doesn't. To forgive someone who doesn't request it seems practically impossible.

Let's consider this from another angle. If refusing to forgive an offender who repents and refusing to forgive an offender who *does not* repent are both wrong, which is the greater sin? I think we would all agree that if both are wrong, to refuse to forgive an offender who repents would be a greater evil.

A Surprise from Scripture

All of this leads me to another question: Does God expect us to forgive everyone who sins against us, even those who don't humble themselves, admit their sin, and request forgiveness?

As we study Scripture closely, we discover that the answer is "No." To the surprise of many Christians, Scripture clearly states that, although we are commanded to love everyone, including even our enemies, we are not required to forgive everyone.

For example, does Jesus simply expect us to forgive a fellow believer who sins against us? No, He doesn't. Otherwise, He would not have told us to follow the four steps to reconciliation outlined in Matthew 18:15-17, steps that end with excommunication if the offender does not repent:

And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.

Obviously, if the fourth step is reached (excommunication), forgiveness is not granted to the offender, as forgiveness and excommunication are incompatible actions. It would seem strange to hear someone say, "We forgave him and then we excommunicated him," because forgiveness results in reconciliation, not severance. (What would you think if God said, "I forgive you, but I will have nothing to do with you from now on"?) Jesus told us to treat the excommunicated person "as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer," two kinds of people that Jews had no relationships with and actually abhorred.

In the four steps that Jesus outlined, forgiveness is not granted after the first, second or third steps unless the offender repents. If he doesn't repent after any step, he is taken to the next step, still treated as an unrepentant offender. Only when the offender "listens to you" (that is, repents), can it be said that you "have won your brother" (that is, been reconciled).

The purpose for confrontation is so that forgiveness can be granted. Forgiveness is predicated, however, upon the repentance of the offender. So we (1) confront with the hope that the offender will (2) repent so we can (3) forgive him.

All this being so, we can say with certainty that God does not expect us simply to forgive fellow believers who have sinned against us and who are unrepentant after confrontation. This, of course, does not give us the right to hate an offending believer. On the contrary, we confront because we love the offender and want to forgive him and be reconciled.

Yet once every effort is made for reconciliation by means of the three steps Jesus outlined, the fourth step terminates the relationship in obedience to Christ.¹ Just as we are not to have any fellowship with so-called Christians who are adulterers, drunkards, homosexuals and so on (see 1 Cor. 5:11), we are not to have any fellowship with the so-called Christians who refuse to repent at the consensus of the entire body. Such people prove that they are not true followers of Christ, and they bring reproach on His church.

¹ It would stand to reason that if the excommunicated one later repented, Jesus would expect that forgiveness would be granted then.

God's Example

As we further consider our responsibility to forgive others, we might also wonder why God would expect us to do something that He Himself does not do. Certainly God loves guilty people and extends His merciful hands in an offer to pardon them. He withholds His wrath and gives them time to repent. But their actually being forgiven is contingent upon their repentance. *God does not forgive guilty people unless they repent.* So why should we think that He expects more of us?

All of this being so, is it not possible that the sin of unforgiveness that is so grievous in God's eyes is specifically the sin of not forgiving those who request our forgiveness? It is interesting that just after Jesus outlined the four steps of church discipline, Peter asked ,

“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:21-22).

Did Peter think that Jesus was expecting him to forgive an *unrepentant* brother hundreds of times for hundreds of sins when Jesus had just told him moments before to treat an *unrepentant* brother like a Gentile or tax collector because of *one* sin? That seems very unlikely. Again, you don't treat a person as being abhorrent if you've forgiven him.

Another question that should provoke our thinking is this: If Jesus expects us to forgive a believer hundreds of times for hundreds of sins of which he never repents, thus maintaining our relationship, why does He allow us to terminate a marriage relationship for only one sin committed against us, the sin of adultery, if our spouse does not repent (see Matt. 5:32)?² That would seem rather inconsistent.

An Elaboration

Directly after Jesus told Peter to forgive a brother four-hundred and ninety times, He told a parable to help Peter understand what He meant:

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. And when he had begun to settle them, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents [This would have been equivalent to over 5,000 years of wages for the average laborer in Jesus' day.] But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.” And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii [equivalent to one hundred day's wages]; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, “Pay back what you owe.” So his fellow slave fell down and began to entreat him, saying, “Have patience with me and I will repay you.” He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, “You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?” And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.

² If an adulterous spouse is a Christian, we should take that spouse through the three steps Jesus outlined for reconciliation before going through with a divorce. If that adulterous spouse repents, we are expected to forgive according to Jesus' commandment.

So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart (Matt. 18:23-35).

Notice that the first slave was forgiven because he asked his master for it. Then notice that the second slave also humbly asked the first slave for forgiveness. The first slave did not grant the second slave what he had been granted, and that is what so angered his master. This being so, would Peter have thought that Jesus was expecting him to forgive an unrepentant brother who never asked for forgiveness, something not illustrated at all by Jesus' parable? That seems unlikely, and even more so since Jesus had just told him to treat an unrepentant brother, after he had been properly confronted, like a Gentile and tax collector.

It seems even more unlikely that Peter would have thought that he was expected to forgive an unrepentant brother in light of the punishment that Jesus promised us if we don't forgive our brothers from our hearts. Jesus promised to reinstate all of our formerly-forgiven debt and hand us over to the torturers until we repay what we can never repay. Would that be a just punishment for a Christian who does not forgive a brother, *a brother whom God does not forgive either*? If a brother sins against me, he sins against God, and God does not forgive him unless he repents. Can God justly punish me for not forgiving someone whom He does not forgive?

A Synopsis

Jesus' expectations for our forgiving fellow believers is succinctly stated by His words recorded in Luke 17:3-4:

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 (emphasis added).

How much clearer could it be? Jesus expects us to forgive fellow believers when they repent. When we pray, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors," we're *asking* God to do for us what we have done for others. We would never expect Him to forgive us unless we *ask*. So why would we think He expects us to forgive those who *don't* ask?

Again, all of this does not give us the right to harbor a grudge against a brother or sister in Christ who has sinned against us. We are commanded to love one another. That is why we are commanded to confront a fellow believer who sins against us, so that there might be reconciliation with him, and that he might be reconciled to God against whom he has also sinned. *That is what love would do*. Yet too often, Christians say they forgive an offending fellow believer, but it is only an excuse to avoid confrontation. They actually don't forgive, and it is clear by their actions. They avoid the offender at all costs and often speak of their hurt. There is no reconciliation.

When we sin, God confronts us by His Holy Spirit within us because He loves us and wants to forgive us. We should imitate Him, lovingly confronting fellow believers who sin against us so that there will be repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

God has always expected His people to love one another with a genuine love, a love that allows for rebuke, but a love that does not allow for bearing a grudge. Contained within the Law of Moses is the commandment:

You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; *you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him*. You shall not take vengeance, *nor bear any grudge* against the sons of your people, but *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*; I am the Lord (Lev. 19:17-18, emphasis added).

An Objection

But what about Jesus' words in Mark 11:25-26? Do they not indicate that we must forgive everyone of everything regardless of whether or not they request forgiveness?

And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.

This one verse does not supersede all the other verses we've already considered on the subject. We already know that what is so grievous to God is our refusal to forgive someone who requests our forgiveness. So we can interpret this verse in light of that well-established fact. Jesus is only emphasizing here that we must forgive others if we want God's forgiveness. He is not telling us the more specific mechanics of forgiveness and what one must do to receive it from another.

Notice that Jesus also does not say here that we must ask God for forgiveness in order to receive it from Him. Shall we then ignore everything else that Scripture teaches about God's forgiveness being predicated upon our asking for it (see Matt. 6:12; 1 John 1:9)? Shall we assume that we don't need to ask for forgiveness from God when we sin because Jesus doesn't mention it here? That would be an unwise assumption in light of what Scripture tells us. It is equally unwise to ignore everything else Scripture teaches about our forgiving others being based on their asking for it.

Another Objection

Did not Jesus pray for the soldiers who were dividing His garments, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34)? Does this not indicate that God forgives people without their asking for it?

It does, but only to a certain degree. It indicates that God shows mercy to the ignorant, a measure of forgiveness. Because God is perfectly just, He holds people accountable only when they know they are sinning.

Jesus' prayer for the soldiers didn't guarantee their place in heaven—it only insured that they would not be held accountable for dividing the garments of God's Son, and only because of their ignorance of who He was. They considered Him to be just one more criminal to execute. So God extended mercy for a deed that would have deserved certain judgment had they known what they were actually doing.

But did Jesus pray that God would forgive everyone else who was responsible in some way for His sufferings? No, He did not. Regarding Judas, for example, Jesus said it would have been better if he had never been born (see Matt. 26:24). Jesus certainly didn't pray that His Father would forgive Judas. *Quite the opposite*—if we consider Psalms 69 and 109 to be prophetic prayers of Jesus, as Peter apparently did (see Acts 1:15-20). Jesus prayed that judgment would fall on Judas, a man who was not an ignorant transgressor.

As those who are striving to imitate Christ, we should show mercy to those who are ignorant of what they've done to us, such as in the case of unbelievers like the ignorant soldiers who divided Jesus' garments. Jesus expects us to show unbelievers extraordinary mercy, loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us and praying for those who mistreat us (see Luke 6:27-28). We should attempt to melt their hatred with our love, overcoming evil with good. This concept was prescribed even under the Mosaic Law:

If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him (Ex. 23:4-5)

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you (Prov. 25:21-22).

It is interesting that, although Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who mistreat us (see Luke 6:27-28), He never told us to forgive any of them. We can actually love people without forgiving them—just as God loves people without forgiving them. Not only *can* we love them, but we *should* love them, as we are commanded by God to do so. And our love for them should be manifested by our actions.

Just because Jesus prayed for His Father to forgive the soldiers who were dividing His garments does not prove that God expects us to ignore everything else we have studied from Scripture on this subject and forgive everyone who sins against us. It only teaches us that we should automatically forgive those who are ignorant of their sin against us and show extraordinary mercy towards unbelievers.

What About Joseph?

Joseph, who graciously forgave his brothers who had sold him into slavery, is sometimes used as an example of how we should forgive anyone and everyone who sins against us, regardless of whether or not forgiveness is requested. But is that what Joseph's story teaches us?

No, it does not.

Joseph put his brothers through at least a year of successive trials and tests in order to bring them to a place of repentance. He even had one of his brothers incarcerated for many months in Egypt (see Gen. 42:24). When his brothers were all finally able to acknowledge their guilt (see Gen. 42:21; 44:16), and when one of them offered himself as a ransom for their father's current favored son (see Gen. 44:33), Joseph knew they were not the same jealous and selfish men who had sold him into slavery. Then and only then did Joseph reveal his identity and speak gracious words to those who had sinned against him. Had Joseph immediately "forgiven" them, they would never have repented. And that is one of the flaws of the "instant forgiveness to everyone" message that is sometimes taught today. Forgiving our brothers who have sinned against us without confronting them results in two things: (1) A false forgiveness that brings no reconciliation, and (2) offenders who don't repent and thus grow spiritually.

The Practice of Matthew 18:15-17

Although the four steps of reconciliation listed by Jesus are quite simple to understand, they actually can be more complex to practice. When Jesus outlined the four steps, He did so from a perspective of when brother A is convinced, and rightly so, that brother B has sinned against him. In reality, however, brother A could be wrong. So let's imagine a situation in which every possible scenario is considered.

If brother A is convinced that brother B has sinned against him, he should first make sure that he is not being overly critical, finding a speck in brother B's eye. Many small offenses should just be overlooked and mercy extended (see Matt. 7:3-5). If, however, brother A finds himself feeling resentment towards brother B for a significant offense, he should confront him.

He should do it privately, obeying Jesus' command, demonstrating his love for brother B. His motive should be love and his goal reconciliation. He shouldn't tell anyone else about the offense. "Love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8). If we love someone, we won't expose his sins; we'll hide them..

His confrontation should be gentle, demonstrating his love. He should say something like, "Brother B, I really value our relationship. But something has happened that has created a wall in my heart against you. I don't want that wall to be there, and so I must tell you why I feel you have sinned against me so that we can work to be reconciled. And if I have done anything that has contributed to this problem, I want you to tell me." And then he should gently tell brother B what the offense is.

In most cases, brother B will not even have realized that he offended brother A, and as soon as he learns that he has, he will ask forgiveness. If that is what happens, brother A should immediately forgive brother B. Reconciliation has taken place.

Another possible scenario is that brother B will try to justify his sin against brother A by telling him that he was only reacting to an offense already committed by brother A against him. If that is the case, brother B should have already confronted brother A. But at least now there is finally some dialogue and a hope of reconciliation.

In such cases, the offended parties should discuss what happened, admit their blame to the degree of each one's guilt, and then offer and receive forgiveness from each other. Reconciliation has been accomplished.

A third scenario is that A and B are unable to reconcile. They thus need help, and it is time to go to step two.

Step Two

It would be best if brother A and brother B both agreed on who should now join them to assist in working towards reconciliation. Ideally, brothers C and D should know and love both A and B, thus insuring their impartiality. And only brothers C and D should be told of the dispute out of love and respect for A and B.

If brother B is not cooperative at this point, it will be up to brother A to find one or two others who can help.

If brothers C and D are wise, they will not render a judgment until they have heard the viewpoints of both A and B. Once C and D have rendered their judgment, A and B should submit to their decision and make the apologies and restitutions that are recommended to one or the other or both.

Brothers C and D should not try to appear more impartial and take less personal risk by recommending that both brothers A and B need to repent when in fact only one actually does. They should know that if either A or B reject their judgment, it will be appealed before the entire church and their cowardly judgment will become evident to everyone. This temptation faced by C and D to attempt to maintain their friendships with both A and B by compromising the truth is a good reason why two judges are better than one, as they can strengthen each other in the truth. Additionally, their decision is more likely to carry weight before A and B.

Step Three

If either A or B reject the judgment of C and D, the matter is to be taken up with the entire church. This third step is never done in institutional churches—and for good reason—it would inevitably result in church splits as people took sides. Jesus never intended that local churches would be larger than what could fit in a house. This smaller congregational family where everyone knows and cares about A and B is the intended scriptural setting for step three. In an institutional church, step three should be done in the context of a small group consisting of people who know and love both A and B. If A and B

are members of different local bodies, several of the best-suited members from both bodies could serve as the decision-making body.

Once the church renders its judgment, brothers A and B should both submit to it, knowing the consequences of defiance. Apologies should be made, forgiveness granted and reconciliation occur.

If either A or B refuses to make the recommended apologies, he should be put out of the church and none within the church should fellowship with him any longer. Often, by this time, an unrepentant person will have already voluntarily removed himself, and he may have done so long before if he didn't get his way at any step of the process. This reveals his lack of genuine commitment to love his spiritual family.

A Common Problem

In institutional churches, people normally solve their disputes by simply leaving one church and going to another, where the pastor, who wants to build his kingdom at any cost and who has no real relationship with other pastors, welcomes such people and sides with them as they relate their woeful tales. This pattern effectively neutralizes Christ's commanded steps of reconciliation. And normally, it is just a matter of months or years before the offended person, whom such pastors welcomed into their church, has left to find another church, offended once again.

Jesus expected that churches would be small enough to fit into homes, and that local pastors/elders/overseers would be working together in one body. Thus the excommunication of a member of one church would effectively be an excommunication from all the churches. It is the responsibility of each pastor/elder/overseer to ask incoming Christians about their former church background and then contact the leadership of their former church to determine if such people should be welcomed.

God's Intention for a Holy Church

Another common problem in institutional churches is that they often consist of many people who attend just for the show, having little if any accountability to anyone because their relationships are purely social in nature. Thus no one, and especially the pastors, have any idea how they live their lives, and unholy people continually bring a stain on the churches they attend. Outsiders then judge people whom they deem to be Christians as being no different than unbelievers.

This by itself should be proof enough to anyone that the structure of institutional churches is not God's intention for His holy church. Unholy and hypocritical people are always hiding in large institutional churches, bringing a reproach to Christ. Yet from what we've read in Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus clearly intended that His church would consist of holy people who were committed members of a self-cleansing body. The world would look at the church and see His pure bride. Today, however, they see today a great harlot, one that is unfaithful to her Husband.

This divinely-intended self-cleansing aspect of the church was evident when Paul addressed a critical situation in the Corinthian church. An accepted member of the body was actually living in an adulterous relationship with his stepmother:

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst. For I, on my part, though absent in body, but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, deliver such

a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus....I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves (1 Cor. 5:1-5, 9-13).

There was no need to take this particular man through the steps of reconciliation because he was clearly not a true believer. Paul referred to him as a “so-called brother” and a “wicked man.” Moreover, a few verses later, Paul wrote,

Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

Clearly, Paul rightly believed that those who are immoral, like the man in the Corinthian church, betray the falseness of their faith. Such people should not be treated as brothers and taken through the four steps to reconciliation. They should be excommunicated, “turned over to Satan,” so that the church does not strengthen their self-deception, and so they have hope of seeing their need of repentance in order to “be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5).

In large churches around the world today, there are sometimes hundreds of people posing as Christians, who by biblical standards are nonbelievers and who should be excommunicated. Scripture clearly shows us that the church has the responsibility to remove those within it who are unrepentant fornicators, adulterers, homosexuals, drunkards and so on. Yet such people, under the banner of “grace,” are today often placed into church support groups where they can be encouraged by other “believers” with similar problems. This is an affront to the life-transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Fallen Leaders

Finally, should a repentant leader be immediately restored to his position if he has fallen into serious sin (such as adultery)? Although the Lord will immediately forgive the repentant leader (and so should the church), the fallen leader will have lost the trust of the ones to whom he ministers. *Trust is something that must be earned.* Therefore, fallen leaders should voluntarily remove themselves from their leadership positions and submit to spiritual oversight until they can prove their trustworthiness. They must start over. Those who are unwilling to humbly serve in smaller ways in order to regain trust should not be submitted to as leaders by anyone within the body.

In Summary

As disciple-making ministers who are called to “reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all patience and instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2), let us not shy away from our calling. Let us teach our disciples to truly love one another by means of merciful forbearance always, gentle confrontation when necessary, additional confrontation with the help of others when needed, and forgiveness whenever it is requested. How much better this is than false

forgiveness that brings no true healing to broken relationships. And let us strive to obey the Lord in every aspect to keep His church pure and holy, a praise to His name!

For further study concerning confrontation and church discipline, see Rom. 16:17-18; 2 Cor. 13:1-3; Gal. 2:11-14; 2 Thes. 3:6, 14-15; 1 Tim. 1:19-20, 5:19-20; Tit. 3:10-11; Jas. 5:19-20; 2 John 10-11.