

# Forgiveness & Repentance

*One Another Duties*

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**Bible Text:** Psalm 86:5; Luke 15:21; 17:1-4  
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Brethren, I begin tonight with a selection from a volume I've never seen, the selection was given to me from a volume entitled "Perfect Illustrations for Every Topic and Occasion." Well, I don't know if they're perfect but I sure like this one. It's entitled "Bathing in God's Forgiveness," and the Scripture reference connected is Matthew 18:21-35 and the selection goes this way.

"There's a story about a traveler making his way with a guide through the jungles of Burma. They came to a shallow but wide river and waded through it to the other side. When the traveler came out of the river, numerous leeches had attached to his torso and legs. His first instinct was to grab them and pull them off.

The guide stopped him, warning that pulling the leeches off would only leave tiny pieces of them under the skin. Eventually, infection would set in.

The best way to rid the body of the leeches, the guide advised, was to bathe in a warm balsam bath for several minutes. This would soak the leeches, and soon they would release their hold on the man's body."

Now the writer says,

"When I've been significantly injured by another person, I cannot simply yank the injury from myself and expect that all bitterness, malice, and emotion will be gone. Resentment still hides under the surface. The only way to become truly free of the offense and to forgive others is to bathe in the soothing bath of God's forgiveness of me. When I finally fathom the extent of God's love in Jesus Christ, forgiveness of others is a natural outflow."

That's what the Bible teaches and, brethren, we return tonight now to our second heading considered in part last Lord's day evening. We're coming back to the fundamentals of forgiveness and by way of review, an underlying fundamental of forgiveness is patience.

Again, Colossians 3:13, forgiving each other grammatically is an expression or an application of the Christ-like grace of patience, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on patience, that's the foundational virtue or grace connected to forbearance and forgiveness, patience being that quality of a long endurance of provocations without losing one's temper, a long holding out in the presence of provocation, not blazing up in anger, retorting with angry words. This patience or longsuffering is an attribute of God. We read in Romans 2 of the riches of his patience. It is an attribute of God the Son. Paul writes that, "in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate his perfect patience." It is a fruit of the Spirit but the fruit of the Spirit is patience. The relation of patience to forgiveness is evidenced in Matthew 18:26, the slave asked, "Have patience with me and I will repay you everything." The response of his lord, the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. Patience is a sure and certain Christ-like grace of the Christian and its sure outworking is forgiveness. Patience, longsuffering, is a fundamental of forgiveness.

Well, secondly we noted that forgiveness received, the actual experience, not the theoretical experience but the actual experience of the gracious pardon of your sins is fundamental to forgiveness. In the language of another, the knowledge of God's mercy can only produce in us a forgiving disposition. There is no experiential knowledge of forgiveness in a heart devoid of a forgiving spirit. Real confession of sin, genuine repentance and saving faith in Christ produce and cannot but produce a sincere desire to forgive others just as we have been forgiven. The experience of the grace of God is a motivating force of graciousness toward others. A forgiving spirit is an essential mark of kingdom life, of a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Those who are forgiven much want to follow their Savior in forgiving the lesser debts they are owed by others. True forgiveness is the fruit of being forgiven in Christ by our Father God and all experienced through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now concerning this fundamental of forgiveness received, it was said last Lord's day that Christians are to forgive because God in Christ has forgiven them. Cause and effect. This is the summary lesson of the parable of the unmerciful slave. A forgiven man will of a certainty reflect the patience, the compassion and forgiveness shown to him. He bathes in it as the introductory account depicts it, and thus can let go.

Concerning the fundamental of forgiveness received, Christians forgive not only because they have been forgiven by God in Christ but Christians forgive after the pattern, after the model, after the manner of God in Christ forgiving them. They forgive freely with a gracious, generous, large-hearted spirit to their offenders. They forgive fully and entirely and completely, "I forgave you all the debt." And they forgive forever and permanently the great new covenant blessing, "and their sins and lawless deeds I will remember no more."

As was indicated in our account this morning of the prodigal, a fourth characteristic in terms of forgiving after the model or manner of God in Christ forgiving us, a fourth characteristic can be added and that is that element of a heart full of joy. When a penitent offender comes as the prodigal did to his father, there is a kind of holy jubilation, a holy

exuberant rejoicing. In forgiveness conferred, we forgive as God in Christ has forgiven us.

Two fundamentals, patience, forgiveness received, now here's a third intentionally omitted last week, a third fundamental is the repentance of the offender. The kind of thing that is set before us in the parable of the prodigal son. The penitent confession of the offender. John writes in the well-known verse of 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." And if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he himself is the propitiation for our sins. If there is conditionality related to the conferral of God's forgiveness, that conditionality is twofold. There is the satisfaction of divine justice made by Christ's vicarious death. He suffered the penalty that accrued to our offenses. There is the satisfaction of divine justice by the propitious death of Christ, and there is also the sinner's repentance, and we understand theologically that the sinner's repentance is related to the priority of regeneration. We can be reminded of that by what Peter said in his report of what happened in Cornelius' house, Acts 11:18, "God granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life." And again what Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:25, "if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth." Yet on the side of human responsibility, if we confess our sins.

I want to set before you some additional biblical warrant supportive of this third fundamental, the repentance of the offender. I read of David's own testimony in Psalm 32, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit! When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to Thee, And my iniquity I did not hide; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD'; And Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin." This fundamental of the offender's repentance was David's experience.

In Proverbs 28:13, "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion."

We read of the message, the summary message of John the Baptist in Mark 1:4, "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

And in Luke 24:47, thus it is written at verse 46, "that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

In Acts 2:38, "Peter said to them," those who ask, "Brethren, what shall we do?" "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."

And in Acts 3:19, the preaching of Peter, "Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away."

In Peter's words to Simon Magus, Acts 8:22, "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you."

And then there is the case of the scandalous sinner, 1 Corinthians 5, commented upon in the passage read this morning in 2 Corinthians 2:7 and following, he is to be forgiven and comforted lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow, an excessive sorrow that may well have been connected to the repentance that gave liberty to restore this man and reaffirm your love for him.

Then there is the case of the prodigal considered this morning. Luke 15:21, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." You join that to the previous parables of the lost sheep and what is said in Luke 15:7, "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." And then the lost coin at verse 10, "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Who repents and is forgiven and restored, who is found again as the son in the prodigal account was.

But brethren, then there is this text and we're going to slow down now and give more detailed attention. There is Luke 17:1-4,

1 He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks should come, but woe to him through whom they come! 2 It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he would cause one of these little ones to stumble. 3 Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. 4 And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." 5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

Now plainly that account is similar to the account of the unmerciful slave, Matthew 18. There's the issue of stumbling blocks in each context, that's a similarity. There is the similarity of numbers, 7 times, 70 times 7 in Matthew 18:22, here in 17:4 of Luke, and if he sins against you seven times a day. A similarity in that we have these numbers, but there are some obvious differences between these somewhat similar accounts.

Now the easiest one to explain is this, having to do with the numbers. Yes, there's some similarity, there are numbers involved, but the number of times Jesus tells us to forgive, Matthew 18:22, 7 times 7; Luke 17:4, just read, 7 times. Brethren, despite the difference, the meaning is the same, we are to forgive as often as we're sinned against. That's the meaning. Our Lord by either number is removing the response of forgiveness from the

realm of calculating and counting. As William Hendrickson has written, "One might as well ask how often must I love my wife, how often must I love my husband, how often must I love my children as to ask how often I shall forgive." Whether we're reading in Matthew 18:22 or here in Luke 17:4, either number removes boundaries and limits. The difference is really no difference at all in terms of meaning. It is coined to a heart of a readiness to forgive.

Well, that obvious difference is rather easily explained but here's the second difference and I'll use Calvin's words as I've used Calvin's words here in the past. The second difference expressed by Calvin that the words of Luke give rise to another question for Christ does not order us to grant forgiveness until the offender turn to us and give evidence of repentance. If he repents, forgive him. Now in the Matthew 18 account, the Lord Jesus includes no such condition. The repentance of the offender is not mentioned. Now perhaps it could be said, it can be inferred from what the overwhelmingly indebted slave said, "Have patience with me," maybe that can be deduced, but it is a fact that the expressed repentance of the offender is simply not mentioned, and it is a fact that in Luke 17 it's mentioned twice. So how are we to reconcile the difference? In Matthew 18, it seems that forgiveness is unconditional, at least in some respects, and in Luke 17, conditional.

Now the answer to how do we deal with this admittedly is controverted. Again I use the words of Calvin that I will rephrase in a different way. Calvin says, "I reply there are two ways in which offenses are forgiven. If a man shall do me an injury and I, laying aside the desire of revenge do not cease to love him but even repay kindness in place of injury, though I entertain an unfavorable opinion of him as he deserves, still I am said," and I'm going to inject, "in some ways I am said to forgive him, for when God commands us to wish well to our enemies, he does not therefore demand that we approve in them what he condemns but only desires that our minds shall be purified from all hatred. In this kind of pardon, so far are we from having any right to wait until he who has offended us shall return of his own accord to be reconciled to us that we ought to love these who deliberately provoke us, who spurn reconciliation and add to the load of former offenses." Calvin goes on, "A second kind of forgiving is when we receive a brother into favor so as to think favorably respecting him."

Now to try to rephrase somewhat at this point and then pick up with Calvin again, Calvin is saying interpretively there are two dimensions of forgiveness, and some of these dimensions have to do with resentment and bitterness and anger and retaliatory desires, have to do with this get-even mentality and this spitefulness, and Calvin is saying and I think correctly, this is unconditional. We cannot have that in our soul as we await the repentance of the offender. And then there is this other dimension having to do with the whole-hearted acceptance and restoration of the offender. That's conditional.

Calvin goes on and I quote, "Though he does not repent, you must not therefore bear malice to him nor meditate revenge, but if he does not at least say that he repents, you are not bound to be so free and familiar with him as you have been," and correct myself, that was not Calvin, that was Matthew Henry that last statement. To rephrase again,

impenitence, the refusal of the offender that penitently confesses sin is no barrier to removing revenge, to mortifying anger, to mortifying grudges, no barrier to dealing kindly and courteously for to do that even to an enemy. But impenitence is a barrier to free and open fellowship. It is. It's a barrier to returning to business as usual.

In other words, one might say that forgiveness in the sense of putting away all retaliation, warring against and putting to death resentment and that corrosive of the soul that the Bible calls bitterness and showing one's self gracious and kind to an offender, forgiveness of that sort is to be exercised unconditionally and indiscriminately. There is no occasion whereupon the Christian is justified in retaining malicious thoughts, malicious designs, no occasion whereupon the Christian is justified in being rude and unkind even to an offender. No occasion. Yet forgiveness in the sense of restoring one fully to a place of confidence, to a place of trust, to familiarity, that's contingent upon repentance. Forgiveness in the full sense of restoring to confidence and affection, in the language of John Broad, is wrest from the supposition that we believe the man sincerely repents.

Now again I want to say this in another way that perhaps for me is plainer and by way of attribution, this further way of expressing these matters of what's conditional and what's not is really the fruit of some time on the phone this past week talking this over with my mentor who was very helpful.

1. We must always unconditionally have a forgiving heart. Always. Always part like the compassionate father, a disposition to forgive. Always a heart like God's, so marvelously expressed again in the 86<sup>th</sup> Psalm,

5 For Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in  
lovingkindness to all who call upon Thee.

Always, unconditionally, indiscriminately. That's the Christian's heart. And if the Christian has that heart, those relational poisons like bitterness and anger and grudge-bearing and revenge will be mortified. But this believer yearns to have things right.

We must always have a forgiving heart but then, secondly, the actual conferral awaits repentance. The actual bestowal such that the ruptured relation is restored necessitates repentance. There is a difference between a heart full of forgiveness, an eagerness and readiness to forgive whereby toxic attitudes are put to death, are warred against and put away, and then the actual granting of forgiveness whereby there is resolution and a restoration to fellowship.

I believe those perspectives relate in the first case to unconditionality, and in the second to conditionality, and my question to this church follows. Are there situations where there is a disconnect, a disconnect due to no credible repentance? A disconnect in your homes? A disconnect among the "one anothers" of our membership? Are there hearts of forgiveness about to burst so as to confer forgiveness like the compassionate father on his penitent son? Are there hearts of forgiveness about to burst on the part of the offended awaiting even the first expressions of prodigal-like repentance? Are there relations

wounded, broken, dysfunctional, where there has been no humble penitent seeking of forgiveness in your homes or from the "one anothers" of this church? No humble penitent seeking of forgiveness from those you have offended whose hearts are ready to confer forgiveness, and yet that forgiveness is neither sought nor asked?

Going back to Luke 17, a couple of more things to point out. The first is in verses 3 and 4, the repetition of "if." If your brother sins, if he repents, if he sins against you seven times a day and returns to you seven times saying, "I repent," forgive him. Praise the God of all wisdom for being so exact. This "if" is in the original, a particular condition expressing what is not now a reality as the writer writes, but he's saying you can count on it, it's coming. It's coming. The condition of future probability. It's coming. You may not be dealing with it now but buckle your seatbelts, it's coming.

The "if" expresses that which is not really taking place now but which will probably take place in the future. It is probable that your brother will sin against you. There's every evidence arising from our fallen humanity and from history to tell you that's probable. Your brother will sin against you. But what's so marvelous here, it's the same condition if he repents. We're talking about brothers.

So what does Luke express? He's saying that just as probably there will be an offense, so there will be repentance. Could he write that about us? Or if he was writing about the Ballston Lake Church, would he have to change his construction and make the repentance part highly doubtful?

Verse 4 likewise contains conditions that you can confidently anticipate, they're going to happen. If he sins against you seven times a day. How many times has your spouse sinned against you? If you've been married over a week, surely more than once. Mark it down, there's going to be a continuum of offenses in the church. Only way to escape it is to become a hermit and to insulate yourself and back off and have nothing to do with the people of God. You might as well renounce the Christian faith and commit all-out apostasy now as go that direction. The Christian life is a life of risk and vulnerability. You can't live it any other way. I know the temptation to want to back off and have nothing to do with certain others because of the fear of what may happen next, but you cannot go that direction. That is not an alternative to the Christian. You've got to bear your soul to the prospect, the inevitability you are going to be hurt again. That's the Christian life and if you're not willing to live that way, renounce the faith now and go on.

"If he sins against you seven times a day." It's gonna happen. There's going to be a continuum, but also a continuum of repentance, "and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent.'" What's your response? "Forgive him." To this one particular to note all these "ifs," verses 3 and 4, probable future condition anticipated, mark it down, it's coming. We're not in heaven yet and until we're in heaven, verses 3 and 4 and these gifts are telling us what the course ahead is like. Offenses. Repentance. Forgiveness.

The second particular and I express it again in the words of Calvin, and it has to do with the matter of the credibility of his repentance. As soon as a man by words makes

profession of repentance, are we bound to believe him? But on the one hand there is to be the heart of the prodigal father's son or the prodigal son's father, a readiness, an eagerness to forgive such as we saw this morning, the prodigal didn't even finish his statement before forgiveness was conferred. That ought to be us, giving every benefit of the doubt, latching onto the slightest evidence of repentance and believing the best. And on the other side, the offender should not make a mockery of his repentance carelessly, thoughtlessly, repeating offenses again and again and again. There's a big difference between that and an offender who is honestly struggling and warring against his own remaining sin so as not to offend, a difference between that and the offender who mocks repentance by his thoughtless, careless repetition again and again. As Calvin writes, Christ does not deprive believers of the exercise of judgment so as to yield a foolish readiness of belief, a foolish readiness of belief, I add, when the track record mocks what has come out of his mouth in the past. This third fundamental is the fundamental of the penitent confession of the offender. On the one hand we must have a heart of forgiveness come what may, on the other hand the conferral of that heart awaits the penance.

Now finally tonight we take up the focus of forgiveness, the point on which forgiveness is aimed, that to which it is applied, to which we are to respond with forgiveness. Now the focus of forgiveness is plainly identified in Colossians 3:13, "bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone." The term "complaint," there is the focus. The term "complaint" comes from a root meaning "to blame someone," that is, for what they've done, "to find fault with them; to be dissatisfied with them." The King James renders "complaint, quarrel." The NIV reads, "whatever grievances you may have against one another." The Amplified, "if one has a difference," and then in parenthesis, "(a grievance or complaint) against another." Now there's the focus of forgiveness. There's an unresolved issue between two because of an offense.

Now what's interesting here, again in verse 13, is Paul's telling you count on this to happen, "whoever has a complaint against anyone," same conditional construction as found in Luke 17, signifying a probable future condition. It's probable that amongst the "one anothers" of our assembly there will be a complaint against another. You can expect that among members of the church there will be offenses from time to time. Concerning the Colossians when the apostle wrote, he was not assuming the reality of such at the time of the writing, had he been doing that, he would have constructed this differently, but he knew human nature and he knew church life and expresses thus an expectation of probability that in the future these are gonna be your realities.

Offenses will arise in the church just as surely as they will in a marriage. Anytime you have imperfectly renewed sinners endeavoring to cultivate and sustain a substantial real relationship, well, that kind of friction as you rub shoulders with one another, you know that from time to time offenses will arise. It's inevitable. And again, your marriages testify to that and so does the life of this church testify to that. Offense of the tongue, offenses of the temper, offenses of omission, offenses of commission, offenses arising from pride and selfishness and pettiness and laziness and rudeness and neglect. Grievances against one another will come to pass, that's what Paul is saying, and our

church simply says by experience, "Amen. Yes, Paul, you're right. You phrased that exactly right."

It'll happen in the best of marriages. It'll happen in the best of churches. And as I counsel premaritally, I believe I can affirm that every time I try to emphasize this to potential newlyweds. Sometimes they may not believe it but soon they are. You're gonna offend one another. And I tell them that that is not so much the concern as the response to the offenses. In my own judgment, that is much more ruinous. Vindictive, angry, mean-hearted responses may gravely wound a marriage even beyond the problem which the initial offense created. Same thing in the church. It is critically important to possess and exercise the humility to confess one's sins in the home, in the church, and to sincerely without excuses seek forgiveness, and it's critically important to graciously, fully forgive the offender, letting the offense go, putting it away, and receiving the offender back.

Brethren, if not willing to do that, we're not qualified to either be spouses or church members. We must do that or our marriages and this church, your church, will be cauldrons of bitterness. That's the alternative. And the questions I leave you with tonight are such as these. Are there unresolved complaints against one another? Are there present offenses, grievances, differences? Are there relationships fractured, wounded, no longer functioning? Tension, apprehension, coldness? Is there the need to be prodigal son-like in no holds barred repentance? And the need to be the compassionate father, whole-hearted, generously, joyfully exploding from the heart and conferring what's in the heart? We need both.

We're coming upon a period of time on the calendar when maybe for some of you there's more discretionary time, maybe not but for some maybe, time that may need to be spent in meeting with brethren and clearing the soul of unresolved offenses. It would be a marvelous gift to one another and to Christ's church, be a marvelous thing to start the next calendar year, if God preserves us, with complaints resolved, relations restored and this church breathing the fresh and rarefied air of sound, solid, unified, communicative "one another" relationships. Do we have the grace to do that?

Let's pray.

*Father, may we spend sufficient time bathing in the forgiveness received from Thee in Christ that we might have hearts bursting with a forgiving disposition, yearning to confer what's in those hearts upon penitent offenders with whom we have complaint. May we prove to be a church that in experience knows the sufficiency of the grace of Christ to both penitently confess and to forgive as God in Christ has forgiven us. Amen.*