

BITTERNESS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP
TO ANGER AND FORGIVENESS
Matthew 18:21-35
Message 3

INTRO: Our subject is once again, bitterness and its relationship to anger and forgiveness. In the first message we talked about Simon the Magician as recorded in Acts 8. We considered Peter's statement in the KJV to Simon, "For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and *in* the bond of iniquity." I interpreted this verse as saying, "Simon, I perceive that you are existing in the state of the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of unrighteousness."

In the second message we looked at six important words as related to our subject: anger; justice; vengeance; forbearance; longsuffering and patience. This morning we want to look at the seventh; forgiveness.

Some time ago I did a series on "Wine in the Bible". I told you when I did that series that by far the majority of Evangelicals teachers would disagree with me on my conclusions. That will be true again in this message, because there is a common view in Evangelicalism that forgiveness must be extended unconditionally in all cases and that this is the only way to remain free from bitterness.

One of our folk here gave me a tract he had received recently in the mail from one of the local churches entitled, "Why We Must Forgive." It has some helpful information but it simply expresses the general teaching that we must forgive everyone the wrongs they have done to us or suffer the consequences of an 'unforgiving' spirit.

So, let us look at this important subject of forgiveness.

G. Forgiveness

One of the very closely related subjects to bitterness is forgiveness. As a matter of fact, it is the view of many that forgiveness is the only way to stay free of or come free from bitterness. That view has made common the idea of 'unconditional forgiveness'. The big question in forgiveness is do I forgive

unconditionally or must certain conditions be met first?

We will talk about that later. Let us first look at the word forgiveness as found in the NT. There are two words translated to forgive, but the key word for forgiveness is *apheimi*, which comes from *apo*, which means *from*, and *hiemi* which means *to send*, and thus means *to send*, or *to send away*. I believe that in forgiveness the thing that ruins the relationship, the sin is sent away, and the relationship is restored.

There is another word translated to forgive. It is the word *charizomai* which is a verb form of the word *charis* which means *grace*. I have puzzled over these two words for forgiveness. Vine says that *charizomai* speaks of unconditional forgiveness and *apheimi* speaks of conditional forgiveness. That is an interesting viewpoint. However, my own conclusion at this point is that *charizomai* stresses the price of forgiveness. It is graced, it is free. It is freely bestowed and freely received. If it is not free, it is not forgiveness with regard to the sin. The one who bestows forgiveness sends the offence away freely. For the recipient, the offense has been sent away without price. All he or she had to do was repent. The word *aphiemi*, however, stresses what happens in forgiveness; the wrong is 'sent away'.

Now I cannot think but that the two words for forgiveness in the NT are connected to an interesting practice in the OT. On the "Day of Atonement", the highest holy day in the OT, two goats were chosen and brought for sacrifice. This is described in Leviticus 16 (read 5-10; 15-17; 20-26).

Listen to the following from the notes on a study of the OT tabernacle. "There was a very interesting ceremony in the OT. Lev. 16:5-26 speaks of the scapegoat. The idea of the word translated scapegoat may have the idea of bearing away. There were two goats, the one on which the Lord's lot fell and the scapegoat. The one on which the Lord's lot fell was killed and its blood sprinkled for cleansing. Aaron laid his hands on the live goat, confessed the sins of Israel and then a chosen person led the goat into the

wilderness and released it signifying the removal of sin."

Why two goats, rather than two lambs? When it came to Passover time, an Israeli could bring either a goat or a lamb. What is the significance of the lamb? It pictured Jesus Christ. A lamb has the nature that pictures Christ. Why a goat as a sacrifice? I think the goat pictures the sinner. When Moses lifted the brass serpent in the OT it pictured Jesus Christ. How could a snake picture Jesus Christ? It pictured Christ in my place. He took my place as the snake. I was the snake but he took my place. I am the goat, but He took my place.

So on the day of atonement, I believe the two goats picture sinful man and picture Christ taking the place of sinful man. Now the one goat was sacrificed, it died. Then its blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat, picturing the price of death God would pay for my sins. My sins are forgiven at a price. God is just, and His justice is satisfied in the death of His Son who died on our behalf. And so, because He has paid for my sins, forgiveness is graced, charizomai.

But the second word, aphiemi means to send away. When Aaron finished sacrificing the first goat, he then went to the second, the scapegoat. And he laid both his hands on this goat and confessed all the sins of Israel while his hands were on the goats head (read 16:21-22). Here is the picture of aphiemi, the taking away, the bearing away of our sins and there is a complete picture of the forgiveness Jesus Christ accomplished for us on Calvary. Forgiveness is possible because Christ died for man's sin. The lamb pictures Christ in His purity. It pictures Christ as the Divine one. The goat pictures Christ as taking man's place. 2 Cor. 5 tells us that God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us.

So, let us continue our thoughts on forgiveness. There is a very common view held among evangelicals, and that is that forgiveness must be extended regardless of whether the one who did the wrong repents or not. It is the view of 'unconditional forgiveness.'" For example: Just recently a middle aged man brutally killed a young man on a bus in Manitoba, and then he

cut off his head. Now he has wronged a host of people, not the least of which are the parents. Now let us say the parents of this boy come to this man who is unrepentant and belligerent and they say, "We forgive you for so brutally killing our son." If they said they have forgiven him, is this man then forgiven, though he is unrepentant? If he died, would he now not be accountable for this sin because the parents forgave him? The answer of course is a resound, "No." The problem with unconditional forgiveness is it does not forgive!

Why is unconditional forgiveness wrong? There is a very important doctrine that enters here and it is the doctrine of 'justice.' Why could God not just simply unconditionally forgive Adam and Eve for their sin and receive them back into His fellowship in the Garden of Eden? The answer is that it would be unjust. It would fail of righteousness. In order for them to be restored, justice for their sin had to take place. Justice for sin, is death. So, in sacrificing an animal to clothe them God gave a picture which foreshadowed that Christ would take their place in death. Justice demands that sin must be paid for. If God could have unconditionally forgiven Adam and Eve, Jesus would not have had to die. But then God would have ceased to be just, and with that ceased to be God. That is an impossibility and so is unconditional forgiveness.

So, let me add something here, and that is the difference between punishment and discipline. Sin requires punishment, and the price is death. That is pictured in the goat that died that we considered earlier. Punishment and discipline are two different things. Punishment meets the requirements of justice and does not seek to be corrective. Punishment proceeds from justice. Discipline proceeds from love and is corrective in nature. God disciplines His children, but He does not punish them. Sin must be punished in order to achieve justice. But God does not punish believers because Christ has taken their punishment. But He does discipline them, in order to correct their way of life.

So, let me try to answer a few objections some of you may be thinking right now. Maybe you say, "I was

bitter. I forgave from the bottom of my heart though the other person did not repent and I feel much better. How can you say it does not work?" What happens in this thing we call 'unconditional forgiveness' is that the heart attitude of the offended person becomes right. He has dealt with this matter from his own perspective. What has happened is he or she has given up the grudge against the other person. This person has relinquished the rights to vengeance, and so they feel much better. They call it forgiveness, but it is something else that has taken place.

Turn again to Leviticus 19:18 (read). Man is here instructed to not take vengeance. Second, you shall not bear a grudge. The word 'to grudge' is to be a keeper of anything, and here means to keep my anger. I am not to avenge, nor keep my anger. A person who supposedly forgives without repentance taking place by the guilty party, actually only gives up his or her anger and ceases to carry a grudge. They think they have forgiven, but what they have done is given up the right to revenge and ceased to carry a grudge, and this sets them free, but not the other party.

You see, in real forgiveness there is the reconciliation of the two parties who have been separated by an injustice. So if the wronged party says they have forgiven, but the other party has not repented, then forgiveness has not truly happened, because reconciliation has not taken place. What has happened is that the person has relinquished all rights to vengeance. He or she has ceased to hold a grudge. What the person did helped, but what we call what he did is wrong. He did not forgive. He gave up his right to maintain his anger against the other person. He has become willing to forbear and give space to the offender without requiring immediate justice and relinquished all right to vengeance.

You see, if unconditional forgiveness truly worked then the conscience of the offender should be cleared when he is forgiven, while he or she still has not repented. But that does not happen because it has not truly been forgiven. But let us say that he should become repentant and confess and take care of his sin, now his conscience would also be cleared when he or

she is forgiven. When people forgive without repentance taking place, their attitude becomes right and peace is restored to them. Peace does not come because the wrong is forgiven but because they are now willing to relinquish all right to justice and vengeance. Unconditional forgiveness or forgiveness without repentance works to clear the offended from continuing to carry bitterness, but it does not work to clear the offender. Therefore it is not truly forgiveness. Forgiveness must do both. When God forgives, both happen. True forgiveness clears both parties. Unconditional forgiveness is a misnomer. It has the wrong name.

Let me answer one more objection. Someone will say, "We must forgive unconditionally like Jesus did on the cross when he prayed, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do'" (Luke 23:34). Now I want you to look at this verse carefully, and do not let me misread it. Here it is: "Father, I forgive them, for they know not what they do." Why did He not pray that way? Because God's forgiveness is conditioned on repentance. Jesus put this before God as a request and the ground on which He made that request was the ignorance of those who crucified Him.

I discussed this with my daughter one time and she said, "But Dad, did Jesus ever pray anything that was not in the will of God?" Well, I considered that for some time. Then I thought of when Jesus was in Gethsemane, for three hours He asked God to remove the cup from Him. Was it God's will to remove that cup? Of course not! Why did Jesus pray this? In Scripture, sometimes we see Him in His humanity, and sometimes in His deity. Mark 13:32 says Jesus did not know the hour of His return. But we know that Christ as God is omniscient. How could both be true? Well, sometimes the Scriptures speak of Him in His humanity and sometimes in His deity. When Jesus looked on those who crucified Him, it was in His humanity that He asked God to forgive them. When He said, "Father, let this cup be taken from Me" surely, He was not speaking in His deity. He was going through the human experiences of rejection and that which would ultimately lead to His physical, human death. When He said, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do" were they

forgiven? No! It was a request. Scripture itself says that forgiveness is conditioned on repentance.

Let me answer one more question. If I cannot forgive unconditionally, what then is an unforgiving spirit? The Bible answers this question in the parable that was read for us in the Scripture reading this morning in Matthew 18:21-35 (read?). In this parable we have a parable of an unforgiving spirit. In the context, Peter has asked how often we are to forgive, so the subject matter is forgiveness. And Jesus has said it is not only to be up until seven times but until seventy times seven. That is quite a few.

Then Jesus gives the parable of a man who was in debt to such an extent that he could not pay. So he begged his master to have patience with him. That master had compassion on him and forgave him his debt (aphiemi). Now he is free from his debt! Now he has a chance to make some money from his fellow servants who owe him money. And one of them said, "Be patient with me and I will pay you all." But, instead of forgiving the debt as had happened to him, he threw him in prison.

Well, when the master who had mercy on this man heard that, he said, "Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had on you?" So the master who had compassion delivered this servant to the torturers or tormentors as the AV says, until he should pay all that was due him. Now there is an unforgiving spirit, and it brings torment.

I view an unforgiving spirit, not as failing to forgive unconditionally, but failing to forgive when repentance has taken place. So let us say I have been wronged and the person has genuinely asked for forgiveness and I fail to extend that forgiveness, that is an unforgiving spirit. Now I have talked to people who have said, "I could not forgive so and so even if he or she repented." That is an unforgiving spirit.

One of our folk gave me a track he received in the mail from a local church that was titled, "Why We Must Forgive." It says of this parable, "In other words, if we refuse to forgive those who have wronged us, God will refuse to forgive us from the punishment that we

deserve for having wronged Him." This track does not take into account the context where the one asked for patience and received it and then he did not extend the same grace to his fellow debtor.

"But," someone will say, "this passage does not require repentance!" Turn now to Luke 17 (read 1-4).

Now you may ask this question: "I have been wronged. The person has never asked for forgiveness, has never repented to me about this. What must I do if I cannot forgive such a person?" If the person is a believer, Matthew 18 tells us what to do (15-17). Sometimes even these issues cannot be resolved or there is no church to take the matter to, what do I do? I then recommend Romans 12:19 (read). Pray to God and say, "I have tried to resolve this matter. It seems it cannot be resolved. I am going to commit this matter into Your hands. The issue has not been cleared up. It is still there. I can do no more. It is Yours. I leave it with you." Now you will know when you have truly given it to God. When you have, the matter no longer stands as an issue between you and you are not bitter. If you still harbor bad thoughts, you have not given it to God.

I must deal with one more matter briefly. I have heard on numerous occasions of the subject of forgiving oneself. I do not find that concept anywhere in the Bible. I would gladly entertain your responses later to this because I may not have the whole picture. But as I see it, this relates to two major issues. Let us take for instance the accident that happened not too far from here, not too long ago. A father and son went hunting together and the father accidentally shot his son. What is this father to do? Is he to forgive himself? Has he done wrong? I can only see that one must accept that it was an accident and say, "Lord God, all things work together for good to those who love You. I do not know how this can be something You can use for my good, but I believe Your Word, and I believe this is one of those things that You will use for my good. I love You and I trust You even in this and I will not live with regrets all my life, I will live by faith and trust You."

But let us say the father was angry, and did something that caused the gun to go off and kill his son. What now? Is he to forgive himself? If he was angry, the regrets will certainly be a lot larger than if it was a pure accident. But now there is some wrong to take care of. Without question in my mind, he must repent before God and accept forgiveness from Him. It is my thinking that in order to find victory, he may well need to repent to his wife, children, maybe larger family, and possibly his church and say, "Folks, my son is dead because I became angry. I did not mean to kill him, but through my anger I accidentally killed my son. I am sorry for this. I have wronged you through my anger. Would you forgive me."

Now let me address one more issue from my perspective. In my life I wrestle with numerous foolish mistakes I have made. There is no one to ask forgiveness for, but I keep kicking myself. Do I need to forgive myself, or can I? I think in such cases I need to say, "Thank You Lord that all things work together for good to those who love God. So I will rather take pleasure in my weaknesses. Thank You Lord for keeping me humble. I love You and trust You even in these things."

Let me address yet one more matter. Someone has wronged me, and they come to me and say, "If I have done anything wrong, would you forgive me." Now let me just simply say that that is not repentance and you cannot forgive on that basis. If they say, "Last Friday, I said thus and such to you. That was uncalled for. Would you forgive me for saying (then say it) this?" That is the ground on which you forgive. Now sometimes things need to be acknowledged that are very hard to spell out. It needs to be addressed in such a way that it is clear exactly what the forgiveness is being asked for.

Yet one more matter. When I have wronged someone in front of others, if at all possible, I need to apologize before those whom I have done this. In the same way, sometimes we ask someone to come before the church to take care of matters. That is when it affects the church.

Now let me just slip in one more thing here regarding a view that I think is wrong with regard to

forgiveness. Some erroneously conclude that to require repentance for salvation is to require works. In other words repentance is works. Let me simply say this, that repentance does not 'earn' forgiveness. We do not merit forgiveness because we repent. It is graced. If repentance is a work, it is not graced.

Just this morning I added two more points. Question: If I have had bad thoughts about others and they do not know it, should I tell them and ask forgiveness? My advice: No. Confess it to the Lord and ask His forgiveness and receive it by faith. Telling the person can end up making it worse, and your offense is not that wide. Confess as wide as the offense is.

Also, if I am very unsure about whether I should talk to somebody about something. It bothers me, but I am very unsure. What should I do? My advice normally: Wait until you are sure. The devil is a wild enemy. He uses real guilt, false guilt and anything else he can. Maybe talk to a pastor or an older person about it and get some outside input.

CONCL: So, let us conclude. What is forgiveness? As to its price, it is charizomai. It is graced. It is extended freely. As to its action, it sends away the sin. It removes or covers the sin and restores the relationship.

Is unconditional forgiveness biblical? The answer is no. God never forgives unconditionally, and if He did He would fail in one of His divine attributes, the attribute of justice. And if He failed in that, He would cease to be good, and cease to be Jehovah God! Why does unconditional forgiveness work for the offended person? Because it is not truly forgiveness but the willingness to give up the right to revenge, and the willingness to give up the grudge, that is keeping the anger. In real forgiveness, both parties are set free; in so called 'unconditional forgiveness' only the offended party is freed.

When forgiveness is unconditional, it is unjust as well. If forgiveness could be unconditional, God wasted the blood and life of His only Son! Justice demands payment. Forgiveness has a price! What is an unforgiving spirit? It is when someone has repented of their wrong to me, and I continue to carry my anger toward that person.

How can I deal with issues where I have done all I could but the other party will not repent? Take it to God and say, "I place this matter in Your hands. You take care of it." What about an accident for which I feel responsible? If it was purely accidental, entrust it to God and believe He will use this for your good. But what if I did this when I was angry and the anger was the cause? Ask the forgiveness of all those whom you have hurt by this.

Last, never say to someone, "If I have wronged you, would you please forgive me." Be specific and have others be specific when they repent.