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“The Entrance of THY WORDS Giveth Light”

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THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

One of the greatest subjects in the world! It concerns the whole of mankind since the Garden of Eden. It also concerns GOD in every aspect of His relationship with man. It is, therefore, not merely worth studying, but demands our study. Every Bible Study scheme must contain this subject, however limited the scheme.

The scope of the subject may not be so wide as that of divine Salvation, but it is an essential part. Salvation is vaster because it includes the past, present and future. But Forgiveness stands at the entrance of Salvation; no one can know experimentally the blessings of Salvation until he knows the experience of the forgiveness of sins. Nor do we finish with Forgiveness once we have entered into the joy of Salvation. Not till the believer is safe in glory can he cease to feel and know the healing ministry of Divine Forgiveness in his personality. The reason is obvious: We are ever in contact with sin, though not in sin. So that in a world of sin even the sinning saint must continually have the experience of God's forgiveness of confessed sin if he is to live victoriously. Moreover, it is this very fact that makes forgiveness a wonderful manifestation of the infinite love of a holy and gracious Saviour God. Not, of course, that we should "continue in sin that grace may abound"! But when we do fall into sin and turn to the Father in repentance we taste afresh the depth of His un-failing love in receiving forgiveness. What heart has ever drunk so deeply of Love as the forgiven heart? Who can in truth say, "I love", except as Divine LOVE has first stooped lowest to whisper, "I Forgive!" Thus did the Man of Calvary stoop that we might live and love!

The following is merely a brief summary of the more important aspects of the subject. The references are an important part of the study and should be turned up and read. Personal study will reveal many more references, and help to expand the subject to its limits.

I. WHY FORGIVENESS? It is essential to begin here—where God begins. The answer is, because of SIN.

Where there is no sin, there would be no need of forgiveness,

for there would be nothing to forgive. It is the presence and continual activity of sin which alone calls forth forgiveness.

But we must answer a prior question before we can rightly appreciate the full meaning of forgiveness: *What is Sin?* Sin is, firstly, the repudiation of the character and will of God. And, secondly, it is the refusal on the part of man to acknowledge the claims of God in his life. This is the radical character of sin, in whatever form it may manifest itself in lesser or larger degree.

The consequences of sin to man may be gathered up into three terms: First, it resulted in putting man at a *distance* from God; as Paul expresses it: "alienation from the life of God" (Eph. 4:18; Col. 1:21). There follows necessarily *degeneration*, spiritual and moral (Eph. 4:19); and this in turn leads to *death*; "dead in trespasses and sin" (Eph. 2:1-3; Rom. 6:23; Rev. 20:11-20). So that if man is ever to become reconciled to God and restored in his nature, divine forgiveness must function. Moreover, God's own character and sovereignty must be upheld, sin and Satan cannot be permitted to frustrate His purposes and will.

All this reveals the necessity of salvation from sin, in which forgiveness is so essential a part.

2. HOW IS FORGIVENESS PROVIDED? It is obvious that if sin's effects are to be done away with, and the sinner saved from eternal damnation, restoration must be effected in some very radical manner. Such restoration must vindicate the righteous character of God, and at the same time "blot out" completely the guilt of the sinner. The teaching of the epistle to the Romans, specially in its earlier chapters, makes this clear (e.g. ch. 3:23-26, etc.). The only possible basis of forgiveness of sin, therefore, is in the atoning work of Christ, for in that Divine Scheme alone do we find all the requirements met completely.

We may note three particular aspects of that atoning sacrifice as being specially relevant here: The Death, the Blood, and the Cross of Christ, are terms which express these aspects. Not that they are in any sense separable from one another, but in their unity they are distinctive expressions of the truth as a whole.

(a) In the *Death* of Christ we have the *judicial* basis for a

righteous forgiveness: By that Death the holy Law of God was vindicated which declares, "the soul that sinneth it shall die" (Ezek. 18:4). Because Christ died for sin, the forgiven sinner is reckoned to have died *in Him* unto sin (Rom. 5:6, 8, 10, 11; 2 Cor. 5:14).

(b) The *Blood* of Christ is that which *cleanses* from the pollution and guilt of sin (Rom. 4:25; 1 Pet. 1:19; Col. 1:20; Heb. 9:12-14, 22; 1 John 1:7; Rev. 5:9; 7:14).

(c) The *Cross* of Christ stresses the fact of the utter rejection by God of all human glorying and wisdom and works as a means of *earning* forgiveness on our individual merits. Human achievement has never yet devised a way of acquiring such merit as would satisfy the requirements of the Holiness of God. Upon all such self-justification the curse of God rests. On the other hand, the Cross of Christ is the source of power by which the forgiven sinner "puts to death" the old life and all its manifestations (see 1 Cor. 1:18, 19; Gal. 3:13; 6:13, 14), and shares with Christ, in His humiliation and exaltation, the life that overcomes (Heb. 12:1-2; Gal. 5:24).

The atoning work of Christ in all its comprehensiveness provides God with the eternally righteous basis upon which He can forgive sin and restore the sinner to a place of fellowship with Himself in Christ Jesus: "That He might be just and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). In other words, according to Paul's usage of terms specially, to justify is to forgive. In popular thought forgiveness is not so comprehensive as justification, but in the theology of the Bible it means no less than this. When God forgives, He reinstates the sinner into His favour as a justified or righteous person.

WHO CAN FORGIVE SIN? This point must be taken in two parts:—

(a) *Divine Forgiveness*: The Pharisees were right for once when they reasoned, "Who can forgive sin, but *God alone*?" But they did not get far enough because they refused the Christ of God. The Lord had to add, therefore, "The Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sin" (Luke 5:22, 24). Both statements express the one truth but from different standpoints, and both must stand together.

Scripture seems to indicate that forgiveness of sin is in general the act of God the Father, but always in direct consequence of the application of the work of Christ the Son: "God was *in* Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19); "As God also *in* Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32; with which cf. Col. 3:13 and 1:14). The one is impossible without the other. In fact, the whole Trinity are undoubtedly concerned in the work, for part of the Holy Spirit's wide ministry is to *convict* of sin in order to lead to repentance (Gen. 6:3; Jn. 16:8-11; Rom. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9. See also 1 Cor. 6:11). The purpose of conviction of sin is to drive the sinner to Calvary, the place of forgiveness. And this brings peace, joy, and blessing (Rom. 14:17; 15:13).

This is Divine Forgiveness, the only forgiveness which causes the angels to sing, because it is ratified in the presence of the hosts above (Luke 15:7, 10). No earthly potentate, prelate or priest, has the "power of absolution" except God first pronounces His own word of forgiveness. Apart from this all-essential prerequisite any other forgiveness on the part of man is but an empty show devoid truth. But when God has thus pronounced the word of pardon no demon, or angel, or man, can annul the eternal word.

(b) *Human Forgiveness*: We must *forgive one another*; more emphatically so if God has already forgiven us. When one wrongs another, specially in the inner circle of the Christian fellowship, not only is fellowship broken, but the Spirit thwarted, and the great Head of the Church grieved. It cannot be otherwise. The estrangement resulting can only be met in the same manner and spirit as existed when God in Christ pardoned our sin. In fact, there is a very close analogy between human and Divine forgiveness, as may be seen by reference to the following passages: Matt. 5:23, 24; 6:12; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:36; 37; Eph. 4:30, 31; Col. 3:12-14; James 5:16—all of which deserve careful study.

Not only is the analogy clear but the divine injunctions to *confession and forgiveness* are equally obligatory if the evil effects of the wrong are to be obliterated. Unforgiven sin rests upon the conscience of any Christian who has failed in this obligation to his fellow Christian. The Father's pardon is only to be obtained by confession of wrong done to His children, *and* forgiveness freely given by the injured party also. This is an aspect of

the subject which is too often overlooked, and is one of the causes of powerless testimony and fruitless ministry. Time and prayer spent in studying Matt. 18: 15-17 will be abundantly repaid.

4. WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS OF FORGIVENESS? Two parties are in view always when we speak of forgiveness: the wronged and the wrong-doer—in the present discussion, God and the sinner. Forgiveness is part of a mutual relationship between the two parties. On the one side God forgives, and on the other the offender must *repent*: God does not forgive unless and until there is repentance. And repentance is manifested by confession; so that the primary essential on the part of the wrong-doer is confession of sin: “*If we confess our sins He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). Sincere, deep-felt sorrow for the wrong done, and confession of that wrong, is the condition of mind which insures acceptance of the forgiveness God offers (2 Cor. 7:10; cf. Luke 17:3, 4). It was this state of mind which led the father joyfully to welcome the Prodigal before he even gave utterance to his newly formed purpose (Luke 15:17).

What is true in divine forgiveness is true also in human forgiveness, as already pointed out above. James has a key text on this aspect: “*Confess your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed*” (ch. 5:16). Yet we must not suppose that failure to confess and repent on the part of the wrong-doer releases the injured party from all obligation to forgive. If a repentant state of mind is essential in the one, equally is it essential in the other to have a forgiving spirit, even though his enemy has not repented. The offended is to go even farther and is to seek to bring the offender to repentance (see Matt. 18:15-17). He is to “*carry his pursuit to the point of making every reasonable effort to win the wrong-doer, and only when he has exhausted every effort may he abandon it. The object is the gaining of his brother.*”

5. THE RESULTS OF FORGIVENESS. Remember that oneness and harmony of heart and will with Himself is God's original purpose for man. Such is the ideal picture of Adam and Eve in

Eden ere sin entered; they had the friendship of God Himself. Such also is the assumption in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. God would share the enjoyment of man's fellowship in bringing to pass all His gracious designs for earth's blessings.

Forgiveness, therefore, implies the complete *reconciliation* between God and man: The healing of the breach made by sin. It is not God who has to be reconciled to man, but man to God. Read carefully such passages as Rom. 5:10, 11; 2 Cor. 5:18, 19; Eph. 2:16—all in R.V. Man is restored to God and the enjoyment of the things of God.

This, in turn, results in true *fellowship* between God and man. The apostle John writes in his first epistle: "ye also may have fellowship with us; yea, and our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ; these things we write unto you that your joy may be fulfilled" (1 Jn. 1:3, 4).

It is the same when between Christians forgiveness is exercised by the wronged to the wrong-doer, as exemplified in the epistle to the Corinthians. The point of Paul's appeal to the Church is that forgiveness of the sinning member must be so complete that he is again received into the *full fellowship* of the assembly—"lest he should be swallowed up with excessive grief" (2 Cor. 2:6-11. R.V.). This opens the way for all the "fruits of the Spirit", which had been hindered because HE had been grieved (Eph. 4:30-31), to flourish again: Love, Joy, Peace, Longsuffering, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Meekness, Temperance (Gal. 6:22-23). These fruits are the fruits of forgiveness.—A.McD.R.

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