

Forgiveness
Matthew 18:21—35

When we forgive someone we think in terms of allowing an offender to be pardoned of his or her offence. Forgiveness can be offered whether or not the offender has asked for forgiveness. On the other hand, an offender may say they are sorry and ask for forgiveness but it may not be given.

On a spiritual level mankind has offended God by sinning. Since man has a wicked heart that is far from God, we would never willingly ask or plead for forgiveness, but out of God's love and mercy he supplied forgiveness for all mankind. This is akin to offering someone forgiveness before they would even want to ask us to forgive them. God planned from the beginning to forgive man of his sin. Forgiveness is the first step to being reconciled to God. Without it we are lost and without hope.

How many times should we forgive our brother? (verses 21—22)

Jesus had just finished teaching the Disciples about the judicial system that will be set up in the Millennial Kingdom. There will be a perfect government with a perfect King and perfect judgments being handed down because it will all be God-directed. The 12 Disciples will have places of authority (sitting on the 12 thrones of Matthew 19:28) while the priests may be the ones handing down actual verdicts to the toughest cases (Ezekiel 44:24). It's interesting that David set up 24 orders of priests from out of the Levites, and it's possible that we see these represented around the throne in Revelation 11:16. It's also possible that the 24 orders of priest were set up to be a shadow of how things are set up in the throne room which would make these 24 elders angelic beings.

Since the topic of a brother sinning against another brother was fresh on Peter's mind a natural question would be how often should a brother be forgiven. His idea of forgiving someone seven times was a very generous number since I'm sure forgiving someone even twice would go beyond what most people would do. Jesus, however, comes up with a crazy-large number; 70 times 7 or 490 times. What an odd number to pull out of the air. Seems almost obvious that there is some deeper meaning to what Jesus is telling Peter.

The usual explanation is that we are to continue to forgive others their trespasses against us without limit. Not a bad idea but I don't believe the context of the passage supports this view. This isn't a command written for the Body of Christ to obey but has special implications to Israel.

490-year Cycles

It's interesting to see how God seems to have divided Israel's history into four 490-year cycles. By taking the actual number of years between each major event in Israel's history and subtracting the number of years that they turned away from God (the times when God would call them Loammi or not my people. See Hosea 1:9) or were in captivity. According to E.W. Bullinger the four periods of 490 years are:

1. From the birth of Abraham to the Exodus (505 years chronologically subtract 15 years of Ishmael).
2. From the Exodus to the dedication of the temple (583 years subtract 93 years under captivity).
3. From the temple dedication to Nehemiah's return (560 years subtract 70-year Babylonian captivity).
4. From Nehemiah's return to the end of the Tribulation (the 70 weeks of Daniel's prophecy).

It's beyond the scope of this lesson to go into detail on these years but it's interesting to see that in Daniel's prophecy that God continually forgave Israel but the end of this period includes a time of reckoning (the Tribulation) followed by restoration (the Kingdom). During this 490-year span God's forgiveness is evident. Every time Israel humbled herself as a nation they experience God's forgiveness, and out of that came His blessing (2 Chronicles 7:14). This is exactly what Daniel did as he prayed for his sins and the sins of his people, Israel (Daniel 9:20). God spelled out specifically how He would deal with her. Leviticus 26 gives specific blessings if they walked with God obeying His statutes but also gives specific curses if they don't.

Parable of Forgiveness (verses 23—35)

Jesus tells a parable to illustrate the forgiveness principles of the Kingdom. There was a king who was taking account of one of his servants. This servant owed way more than he could ever repay, 10,000 talents. It would

take a common worker 50 million days to earn enough to pay it back. Having pleaded his case to the king, the king was compassionate and exonerated the servant.

The forgiven servant then went out and demanded immediate payment for a loan that he made to a brother (equivalent to 100 day's pay). When the debtor was unable to pay, the man had him cast into prison. This got back to the king who then had the wicked servant come before him. The once forgiven servant was no longer forgiven and was turned over to the tormentors until he pays off loan.

In the parable the king is Jesus Christ, the wicked servant is unbelieving Israel while the brother in debt is believing Israel. Verse 35 clearly states that this same thing will be done to individuals in Israel who do not forgive others their debt. This principle fits in perfectly with Matthew 6:14 where Jesus tells the crowd, during the so-called Sermon on the Mount, that if they forgive others then their heavenly Father will also forgive them.

National vs. Individual forgiveness

Israel has a unique position. They were the nation that was called out from all other nations through whom God would reveal Himself (Deuteronomy 7:6—8; Romans 9:4). They were given a special place of honor. No other nation has ever had a special covenant relationship with God. There are many who wrongly take the blessings promised to Israel and try to impose them on the United States but the blessings and cursings given to Israel were meant only for Israel and cannot be transferred to any other nation. To properly interpret Scripture I believe it is important not only to see how God distinguishes between Israel under prophecy and the Church under Mystery but it also helps to see how God deals with the nation of Israel and with individuals within that nation.

For instance, 2 Chronicles 7:14 mentioned above is how God deals with the nation. When the nation turns against God even the righteous within Israel will suffer. On the other hand, when David says blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered in Psalm 32:1 he is speaking about individuals whose heart is right with God. When Peter preaches in Acts 2:36 saying that “you” crucified Jesus he was pointing to the individuals in the nation of Israel. The remedy for each individual was to repent, be baptized and then they would individually receive the Holy Spirit.

Peter's second sermon is addressed to the nation and the remedy given in Acts 3:19 for crucifying their Messiah is to repent (of the sin of crucifying Jesus) and return to God. Israel is able to return to God but many individuals could not since they had never walked with God. If the nation were to do this then the times of refreshing would come—the setting up of the Kingdom.

Israel vs. the Church

I believe God had put up a wall between Israel and the Gentile nations. This wall is spoken of in Ephesians 2:14. Israel was given a very special place in God's plans. When Israel failed to do what God had tasked her with, then God temporarily set the nation of Israel aside and began dealing with individuals by introducing the Mystery program through the Apostle Paul. In this Dispensation of Grace, the wall separating the Gentiles from the blessings of God has been torn down. Before this, Gentiles were not able to come directly to God without going through Israel. This wall will once again be built after the Rapture, when God will turn back to Israel. Gentiles who desire to come to God will then need to do so through Israel, who will be acting as a nation of priests (go-betweens between the nations and God) (Zechariah 8:23; Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9).

There is another wall that needs to be dealt with correctly, the permanent wall dividing Israel's Kingdom program from the Church's Grace program. God was dealing with Israel much differently than He is currently dealing with the Church in this Age of grace. Those who see no difference between dispensations are, in effect, tearing down the wall between these programs, and the result is confusion. For instance, when Israel's concept of forgiveness is applied to the Church, then we get doctrine that leads people to believe that they had better forgive or they will not be forgiven (Matthew 6:14; Luke 6:37). Instead, Paul clearly tells us in this age that since we are forgiven we need to forgive others (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). Our own forgiveness is not contingent on making sure we have forgiven others. If it were, as soon as we don't forgive, we will be condemning ourselves to eternal damnation.

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