

Luke 7:36-50

Forgiveness

Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven – v. 47

Since the fall of man the greatest and deepest need for sinful men has been the need for forgiveness. Apart from such a blessing men must live under the heavy burden of guilt. I dare say that in a society made up of fallen sinners it becomes nearly impossible for relationships to function without the blessing of forgiveness. Homes couldn't function without it. Marriages would not survive apart from it. Relationships between parents and children would become severely strained apart from it. I think it would be accurate to say that businesses would cease to function apart from it and churches would splinter into unnumbered factions apart from it.

And when I speak now of forgiveness especially in the realm of social relationships, I'm speaking of the need for forgiveness to be obtained and the ability for a man or woman, a husband or wife, a parent or child to be able to give forgiveness as well as receive it.

Forgiveness is something that unsaved sinners need, and it's also something that Christians continually need. The continuity of that need is readily seen by the fact that in the Lord's prayer, a prayer that acts as a guide to teach us to pray, one of the petitions is for forgiveness. *And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors – Mt. 6:12.* Think about that for a moment. This prayer is a guide to our praying and by including such a petition as the one I've just read it becomes very apparent that the need for forgiveness is continual enough that each time we pray we can and should utilize that petition – *forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

I found it rather interesting to note that in tracing the word *forgive* or *forgiveness* throughout the Old Testament the book where you find the word most often used is the book of Leviticus. You find it in that book in connection with the various animal sacrifices that are prescribed by Moses. Whether it be the sin offering, or the trespass offering or the peace offering, the common refrain for all the burnt offerings is in these words: *and it shall be forgiven him.*

That's really quite remarkable when you think about it. We generally think of the Old Testament as being the book of the law and indeed it is that but that doesn't take away from the truth that the gospel is also to found in the Old Testament and most notably the idea of forgiveness is found throughout the book.

Another place where you find a strong emphasis on forgiveness is in the dedication prayer of King Solomon upon the completion of the temple. In that prayer that is found in the 8th chapter of 1Kings you find Solomon reciting the various circumstances in which the Israelites would need forgiveness. And as he makes intercession to God in that dedication prayer he's asking God to hear and forgive his people when they seek him for forgiveness in all those diverse circumstances.

The cross reference to that prayer is found in 2Chron. 6 where no fewer than 5 times do you find King Solomon raising the issue of forgiveness to the Lord. And it's in that setting that the very familiar verse in the next chapter 2Chron. 7:14 comes as the Lord's answer to Solomon's prayer *If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.*

With such an emphasis, then, in the Old Testament and the New Testament on what we could call the doctrine of forgiveness and with what is beyond all doubt the sinners need for forgiveness and the Christian's need for forgiveness it becomes very necessary that Christians should be strong in their understanding of this doctrine.

I dare say that there are many Christians that bear guilt burdens that they should not bear because of a lack of understanding about forgiveness – especially a lack of understanding or a lack of appreciation for the basis upon which God gives forgiveness. And then there are other instances in which Christians find it hard to issue forgiveness. That's a very serious handicap, you know, with ramifications that bear on the real condition of a man's soul. A person's salvation is rightly called into question who does not have the ability to forgive. And such an inability ultimately springs from pride and self-righteousness which keeps that Christian from knowing how great and how constant his own need for forgiveness runs.

And so this doctrine is well worth studying for a number of reasons. When you consider your need for forgiveness as well as your need to be forgiving – when you consider the benefits gained by knowing you're forgiven and the burdens borne by your failure to know your forgiveness – these things all add up to the need to not only know but to master this doctrine of forgiveness. And not just master it – but internalize it. That's often times what's missing. It's not a difficult doctrine to understand but it is something that most definitely needs to be internalized so that you may begin and proceed throughout your day being governed by the impact of your own forgiveness in your own life.

And so that's what I want to set before you this morning. And I want to set it before you that you may internalize it. May the Holy Spirit Himself stamp on your hearts this morning:

The Doctrine of Forgiveness

And in exploring this doctrine I would like to present it to you from a number of differing aspects.

I. Forgiveness from the Aspect of Authority

In Luke 5 and in Mark 2 we have the account of a group of men that bring a sick man on his bed to Jesus to be healed. If you know the story then you may recall how they couldn't get to Jesus because the crowd was so dense and so they had to be a little creative and think outside the box, as it were. And so they hoist their sick friend to the roof of the house

where Jesus was speaking and then they proceed to undo the roof which enables them to lower their sick friend right into the presence of Christ. In that setting we read in Lk. 5:20,21 *And when he saw their faith, he said unto him, Man, thy sins are forgiven thee. And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, Who is this which speaketh blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?*

The question raised by the Pharisees was not a question that Christ would dispute with them. He would have been in complete agreement with them that no one can forgive sins but God alone. No one has that kind of authority. But then in order to demonstrate that Christ did have such authority because Christ himself is the Son of God he then supernaturally healed the man and the man was enabled to pick up his bed and walk away. That miracle was performed for a very specific purpose that Christ reveals in v. 24 *But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power upon earth to forgive sins, (he said unto the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy couch, and go into thine house.*

I've said this before but it bears repeating that in such narratives as these we see what amounts to and what should be taken to be the present day application of Christ's miracles. There are those that look at Christ's miracles and say to themselves *if Christ healed a man of sickness then, why not now? If Christ healed a man of blindness, or deafness, or demon-possession, or even death itself them, then Christ can do it today.* And that is true. Christ can perform miracles today. And on rare occasions we hear of such miraculous healings that dumbfound those in the medical industry.

That is not the point of Christ's miracles, however. The point to Christ's miracles was to demonstrate that Christ was God and by demonstrating that he was God he also demonstrated that he has authority to forgive sins. This is what should thrill your soul about this account of the healing of a sick man. Christ has authority to forgive sins.

And if we're going to come away with any sense of assurance that our sins truly are forgiven then we have to know and have the matter settled in our minds and hearts that the one who has authority to forgive sins has forgiven your sins and my sins. Forgiveness that comes from those who have no authority to give it comes with a rather hollow ring to it. And it's worth stating here that no ecclesiastical person or institution has the authority to forgive sins. No pope, or cardinal, or bishop, or priest, or minister has such authority. The Pharisees spoke correctly when they raised the question *Who can forgive sins, but God alone.*

Now a preacher, or a church does possess the authority to declare and teach the grounds upon which God will forgive sins. He can set forth the terms of forgiveness in accordance with God's word but he has no inherent authority to actually forgive sins. God alone has that authority.

And we should note in connection with God's authority that God will not exercise that authority without a just basis for it. In other words God will not simply arbitrarily forgive sins. I made reference in my introduction to the book of Leviticus. I pointed out to you that common refrain that is found a number of times especially in Lev. 4, 5. But I didn't give

you the entire refrain. What I quoted for you was the phrase *and it shall be forgiven him*. If I could fill in that refrain a little more it would include these words: *and the priest shall make an atonement for him, and it shall be forgiven him*. Every time you find that phrase *it shall be forgiven him* you also see the words *the priest shall make an atonement for him*.

And what this indicates to us quite clearly is that there is a very close connection between forgiveness and atonement. Indeed atonement provides the grounds for forgiveness. Those Old Testament sacrifices, of course, pointed to Christ who would make the actual atonement. This becomes the grounds, then, for Christ exercising his authority to forgive. He doesn't simply say forgive and forget. There's something bothersome, you know, about that phrase forgive and forget. I know the intention of the phrase. I know that when in the realm of our relationships we have occasion to forgive one another that we are supposed to forget instead of bringing a matter up again and again.

I think, however, that we would do better to replace the phrase *forgive and forget* with the phrase *forgive and remember*. Not that we're to remember the sin that's been forgiven but we're to remember Christ who provided the grounds upon which our sins could be forgiven. For it is in the remembrance of Christ that we can truly gain assurance that our sins are forgiven. He has the authority to forgive sins and he exercises that authority upon the grounds he has provided by his atoning death.

So we have this aspect of the doctrine of forgiveness – the aspect of authority. And by viewing forgiveness in connection with Christ's authority and the grounds upon which he exercises that authority we can gain in our hearts deep and lasting assurance that our sins truly are forgiven. So we have the aspect of authority. That's a very important aspect of our understanding of the doctrine of forgiveness. But would you think with me next on:

II. Forgiveness from the Aspect of Need

Let me ask you a question just now. How much forgiveness do you need? In the portion of Scripture that we read before the sermon from Luke 7, we have the account of a woman who comes into the house of Simon the Pharisee and proceeds to anoint the feet of Christ and to weep at his feet and wipe his feet with her hair.

Simon is repulsed by this action and it leads him to doubt the character of Christ. *This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner* he says in v. 39. This leads to Christ speaking a parable to Simon in which he describes two creditors one who owed 500 pence and the other 50 (v. 41). Both debtors are forgiven in the parable and then Christ wants to know from Simon which one would love the creditor most? The answer is obvious and Simon answers rightly that the one who is forgiven most will be the one who loves most.

Christ goes on to explain that the woman who came into Simon's house and anointed Christ's feet was very conscious of her need for forgiveness and had been forgiven much. Again I raise the question to each of you this morning – how much forgiveness do you need? Perhaps I should phrase the question a different way. How much do you love

Christ? What is it that leads you to love him and what is it that can lead you to love him more? Is it not your awareness of how much you've been forgiven? Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not now suggesting that the more you sin the more you'll love Christ because you'll understand that you've received a greater amount of forgiveness.

Not at all. I'm only suggesting now that if you will truly evaluate yourself by the very high standard of God's law then you will know in increasing measure how much you've been forgiven. The law of God, you see, weighs the actions but it weighs much more than just the actions. It weighs the thoughts and motives behind our actions. And whatever comes short of loving the Lord with all our heart and mind and soul and strength comes short of the standard of God's law and leaves you and me in need of much forgiveness.

Would you like an all encompassing confession for sin this morning? Let me give you a confession you can take to God that will take into account your thoughts and words and deeds and motives all in one comprehensive statement. Here it is – *God, forgive me for not loving you with all my heart and mind and soul and strength.* And if you want to add to it you can add to it by saying *forgive me, God, for the sins I've committed both of commission and omission. And forgive me, God, for the things I've tried to do for you but have not done with pure motives and have done only half-heartedly.*

And in all these matters you can be sure that God will forgive you. And if the reality of that forgiveness and the extent of that forgiveness will reach the depth of your soul, then it will impact you the way this woman in Lk. 7 was impacted and it will give rise to the statement being applied to you that you love much. You love much because you appreciate in some measure the extent of your own forgiveness.

This is why we need to understand as best we can the character of God. And this is why we need to understand as best we can the sinfulness of man. It's only by bringing God down and raising ourselves up that we'll deceive ourselves into thinking that our forgiveness is not really that big a deal. If I could put the matter to you plainly and simply it amounts to this: pride is what keeps us from loving God and humility is what enables us to love him more. Pride can and should be overcome by a right view of God's character and a right view of God's law and humility is cultivated by a right view of Christ's provision for our forgiveness.

So we have the aspect of authority when it comes to forgiveness and we have the aspect of need. Consider with me finally:

III. Forgiveness from the Aspect of Debt

In Mt. 18 we find Peter coming to Christ with a question about forgiveness. Peter asks the Lord in v. 21 *how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?* Christ answers by saying in effect that there is no limit to how often we forgive others in the realm of our relationships.

And then to emphasize his point and drive home the importance of the issue Christ tells a parable about a king who would take account of his servants. One particular servant comes

before this king who owes ten thousand talents and when he begs the king for patience and pledges to pay all the king forgives his servant of the entire debt. This servant, in turn, goes to those who owe him and when they seek mercy this servant fails to give it. When the word of this servant's treatment toward those that owed him reaches the king, the servant is summoned again before the king and the forgiveness that was previously given to the servant is nullified and the servant is delivered to the tormentors until he paid everything he owed.

This parable along with other statements made by Christ must be understood in the light of the gospel or else we'll be misled into thinking that we earn forgiveness by issuing forgiveness to others. On the surface some statements appear to indicate that. *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors* (Mt. 6:12). *For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses* (Mt. 6:14,15). Like I say, these statements must be understood in connection with the gospel.

And the truth that these statements bring to us very forcibly is the truth that where God issues forgiveness, God expects the recipients of forgiveness to be forgiving toward others. Forgiveness, you see, is never really received or believed in without having a transforming effect on the life of the one who claims to receive it. In other words – if I have truly seen my need for forgiveness and have seen in some measure the extent of that need and have petitioned Christ to provide that need then I can't help but to be forgiving of others.

I asked you earlier how much forgiveness do you need? Let me ask you another question now – how much forgiveness do you need to give? Are there others that you need to forgive? Parents – do you need to forgive your children? Children, do you need to forgive your parents? Husbands – do you need to forgive your wives, and wives your husbands?

I said in my introduction that society can't function in a world of depraved sinners without forgiveness being exercised. And families cannot function in families of depraved sinners apart from forgiveness being exercised. Some of you here in church will remember Harold Wynalda. Once in a great while I still hear from Harold. Those who remember Harold may also remember that Harold had a severe falling out with his family when his judgment was overruled and his mother was placed in a nursing home.

Harold thought that was an awful betrayal of his mother and for several months maybe even years Harold would not and could not forgive his siblings for that deed. He used to wrestle with the issue in his own heart and he would often times raise the issue to me by saying to me *I don't need to forgive them, do I? If they don't repent and seek me for forgiveness, then I don't have to forgive them do I?*

He even raised the issue with Dr. Cairns when Dr. Cairns visited us some while back. And when Harold would raise that issue with me I would say to him – *Harold, I'm not going to tell you what to do. I'm not going to say to you that you must forgive or you must not forgive your siblings. What I will say to you is that whatever you do, or don't do, make sure that you are governed by the forgiveness you've received from Christ. Let that*

determine your conduct. Happily, Harold was eventually reconciled to his siblings. I don't know that they ever sought him for forgiveness. I don't know that they ever regretted what they had done. In their judgment they probably did what they felt they had to do. I don't know either, whether or not Harold actually said to them that he forgave them. Such a gesture may have been very hollow if they didn't feel themselves to be in need of forgiveness. Indeed, such a statement could have provoked them to anger since underlying such forgiveness would have been the accusation that what they had done was wrong.

I think there are times when the matter of forgiving others amounts to gaining victory in our own hearts that we've forgiven someone whether or not we've actually made a statement to them. If they do seek it, then, yes, we are bound to give it. But in some instances our forgiveness may need to take on the form that is expressed by Christ himself when he says in Lk. 23:34 *Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*

How often a wife may have to pray that way for her husband. *Father, forgive him.* He means well but he doesn't know what he's doing and he doesn't know the effect of his actions or lack of actions upon me. Here again it could be a futile thing to tell him you forgive him. He may be so oblivious to what he's doing that he doesn't think he needs forgiveness. Take your case to God himself in that instance. He is, after all, your highest court of appeal.

The same application could be made regarding parents and their children or children and their parents. *God, forgive mom and dad. They mean well and I'm sure they're striving to do right but they don't know the negative impact of their dealings with me. They can't tell that they're suffocating and killing me.* And could I just say here that where this type of situation becomes most acute is where parents fall into the temptation of forcing external compliance and leave the matter of their children's heart condition untended to.

This is why I said in my introduction that the doctrine of forgiveness not only needs to be mastered but it needs to be internalized. I need the truth of it to reach my heart, in other words. If I know my need for forgiveness and I know the reality of that forgiveness based on the authority of God's word and Christ's atoning death then I gain the ability to forgive even when that forgiveness is not sought.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. That covers by far the largest category of our sins. And it teaches us to be very broad in the way we issue forgiveness. By being able to issue it even when it's not sought is to deliver our own souls from the bondage and bitterness that accompany the inability to forgive.

So we see forgiveness from the aspect of authority. Christ has the authority to forgive. And we see it from the aspect of need. Our need is deep and extensive and continual. And we see it from the aspect of debt. We owe God the debt of gratitude and that debt is paid by forgiving others. Have you been forgiven for your sins? And are you forgiving as a result? May the Lord stamp the truth of this wonderful blessing deeply upon our hearts that our lives may be transformed by the glorious truth of our forgiveness.