

The Blessings Of Forgiveness

Introduction. Alexander Pope said, "To err is human; to forgive, divine." We live in a culture that views forgiveness not as a virtue, but as a sign of weakness. Our heroes are the vengeful who challenge their enemies to give them an opportunity to strike; those who proudly see themselves as their enemies' "worst nightmare." Some even argue that forgiveness is unhealthy. Self-help books boldly assert that people should cultivate self-esteem and blame others for causing their problems.

From the passage in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, seven motives emerge that enrich the New Testament teaching on forgiveness. The price of refusing to forgive is high, so we need to examine these motives and do our best to learn from them.

I. *It Deflects Pride*

- A. Paul would have been speaking of the incestuous man, first mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. Paul deals with the situation very delicately by not mentioning the man by name. The man had not offended Paul in particular, but he was merely one of a great number who had felt the deepest concern on account of his conduct.
- B. One of the chief causes of an unforgiving heart is pride (Proverbs 16:18). Pride can certainly ruin the hearts of those who have not committed an offense (Luke 18:9-14; 1 Corinthians 10:12).
- C. Thankfully there was no place in the Corinthian's heart for pride or bitter resentment. Paul did not want to exaggerate the incident or blow it out of proportion. The man had repented, the incident was closed, and it was time to move on. Joseph demonstrated a good attitude in his situation (Genesis 45:1-15; 50:15-21).
- D. Forgiveness breaks the bitter chains of pride, self-pity and vengeance that lead to despair, alienation, broken relationships and the loss of joy.

II. *It Shows Mercy*

- A. The man had suffered enough and it was time to show him mercy. The word for "sufficient" occurs 41 times in the New Testament and is variously translated as "large," "worthy," "great," "much," and "enough."
- B. The word for "punishment" appears only here in the New Testament. Both its use in extrabiblical Greek writings and the context of this passage suggest that it refers to an official disciplinary act by the majority (Matthew 18:15-18; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15).
- C. Christians are never more like God than when they show forgiving mercy to a repentant sinner (Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). An unknown proverb states, "Doing an injury puts you

below your enemy; revenging one makes you even with him; forgiving it sets you above him.”

III. ***It Restores Joy***

- A. Mournfully confessing his tragic sin with Bathsheba, David acknowledged the sad reality that sin steals joy (Psalm 51:12, 14). Confession and repentance restores the joy that God desires of all Christians (John 15:11; 16:24; 17:13; 2 John 12; cf. Galatians 5:22).
- B. A congregation cannot set arbitrary limits on grace and mercy; it cannot reject a truly penitent individual, no matter how serious the sin. For the Corinthians not to forgive the repentant person would be sinful and would steal their joy. It would, in fact, bring God’s chastening on them (Matthew 6:14-15; 18:35). Unforgiveness would also render them unfit for worship (Matthew 5:23-24).
- C. Positively, the Corinthians need to comfort him. “Comfort” means “to come alongside,” “to strengthen” or “to encourage.” God does not want Christians to be totally consumed by the grief caused by their sin (2 Corinthians 7:10). After sorrow has done its convicting work, it is to be replaced by joy.

IV. ***It Affirms Love***

- A. In its only other New Testament appearance, the word for “affirm” speaks of formally ratifying a covenant (Galatians 3:15). The Corinthians had officially and publicly disciplined the offender, and now they needed to conclude the matter by publicly and lovingly restoring him to their fellowship.
- B. At its core, unforgiveness manifests a lack of love and is antithetical to the spirit of Christ (John 13:34-35; Ephesians 5:1-2). Forgiveness fulfills the royal law of love (cf. James 2:8). Without it, churches are torn, split and fragmented.
- C. Congregations that faithfully practice discipline must also forgive penitent sinners. The greatest demonstration of love, both by individual Christians and the church collectively, is forgiving others.

V. ***It Proves Obedience***

- A. Even if forgiveness did not reflect some of the noblest Christian virtues, including humility, mercy, joy and love, it would still be right to do because God commands forgiveness.
- B. Whether they were willing to forgive would be a real test of whether the Corinthians’ hearts were right before God.
 - 1. A cursory glance at human history reveals that fallen man does not readily forgive. Repeated wars, longtime feuds, centuries of deadly

- retaliation between racial and religious groups and personal vengeance have marred human history.
2. Confucius said, "He who cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass."
- C. The Corinthians had proven themselves obedient by disciplining the offender. Forgiving him would also be proof of their obedience (Luke 17:3).
 - D. God has always tested His people to reveal what is in their hearts (Exodus 16:4; Deuteronomy 8:2, 16; 13:3). The Corinthians had passed the test. Out of the chaos and confusion of their turbulent past had come an obedient congregation.

VI. ***It Restores Fellowship***

- A. It is certainly implied here that the Corinthians were disposed to forgive the offending brother; and Paul assures them that they had his assent to this, and that if they did forgive him, he was ready to join them in the act and forgive the man also. His primary goal was for fellowship to be restored and for there to be unity in the Corinthian church.
- B. Paul lived his whole life in the presence of Christ, aware that the Lord knew his every thought, word and deed (2 Corinthians 2:17; 4:2; 12:19). Paul eagerly forgave because Christ, in whose presence he constantly lived, had fully forgiven him.
- C. Forgiveness is crucial to maintaining unity within a congregation. Without it, discord, disharmony, bitterness and vengeance can destroy unity.

VII. ***It Thwarts Satan***

- A. Satan's goal for the church is the opposite of God's. Satan wants a congregation where sin reigns supreme. If sin is confronted, Satan wants it done so in a harsh, graceless and merciless manner. Both failing to deal with sin and failing to forgive repentant sinners can destroy a congregation.
- B. An unforgiving spirit would play right into the devil's hands and gives him the leverage he needs to split a church apart. Christians must not be ignorant of his devices (Ephesians 4:27; 6:11). "Devices" means "that which is thought out; hence, a purpose, device."

Conclusion. It was Gandhi who said, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator; if our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist; if our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist; if our greatest need

had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer; but our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.

Forgiveness affects the one who forgives (2 Corinthians 2:5), the one forgiven (2 Corinthians 2:6-8) and the entire congregation (2 Corinthians 2:9-11) The hard work of disciplining sinners and restoring those who repent is a true test of a congregation's love for the Lord.

Compared to Christ's suffering you have not been seriously wronged at all. We receive many benefits from the Lord, but the greatest of them all is the redemption found through His blood. This can be yours today if you will obey the gospel while we sing our invitation song.