

A Forgiving Spirit

Matt. 6: 14, 15.

W. Kelly.

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The Lord was not content with this impressive call for practical grace in the prayer prescribed to His disciples: "Forgive us our debts, as we also forgave our debtors." He immediately after follows it up with emphasis.

"For if ye forgive men their offences, your heavenly Father will also forgive you [yours]; but if ye forgive not men their offences, neither will your Father forgive your offences."

There is such confusion in Christendom as to the forgiveness of sins that the true force of the Lord's solemn words is lost for the most part. The vast majority have so hazy a view of eternal redemption that they fear to believe in the full and abiding efficacy of Christ's work. The glad news, or the gospel, of God is thus for them shorn of its power. They are no better off than a Jew who brought his offering, confessed his sin, and went away with the comfort that it was forgiven. As he had to offer often, so the ill-taught Christian talks of his need to be resprinkled again and again with that blood, though expressly said to be shed once for all.

What blindness, if we adduce nothing else, to the testimony of Heb. 10! The perfect sacrifice has caused the imperfect to cease. The worshippers once purged have no more conscience of sins; in plain contrast with the Levitical sacrifices, wherein is made year by year *remembrance*, as the Christian is entitled to *remission* of sins. Christ came to take away the temporary, and to establish the everlasting. Therefore, when He offered one sacrifice for sins, He for ever [in continuity] sat down on God's right hand. He had done all perfectly to blot out the guilt of His friends (once His foes); and took His seat as its triumphant proof, from henceforth waiting till His enemies who reject Him and His work be set as footstool of His feet. Then He will come forth and tread them down in their open rebellion at the consummation of the age. But to the Christian the Holy Spirit testifies that their sins and their lawlessnesses God remembers no more. Now where remission of these is, there is no longer an offering for sin: every thing of the kind is superseded and more than fulfilled in that of Christ.

But here faith fails, because God's word is not received in its own divine and conclusive authority; and thus are souls defrauded of peace and joy in believing; and entire devotedness to God is curtailed, bought as we are with a price so incalculable. This unbelief is helped on by confounding things that differ, like our text with that complete redemption which rests solely on Christ's cross. Still more when such blessed institutions of Christianity as baptism and the Lord's supper were made saving ordinances, not figuratively but intrinsically; and a clerical class was made necessary and of divine right to apply them with due effect to the laity: a figment which outdid the highest claims of Jewish priesthood, and in principle denies the gospel.

But while the Lord does not, here or in any part of His teaching on the Mount, refer to that redemption which He was to accomplish, He has a weighty lesson to enforce on His disciples in cultivating a spirit of grace. It the Jew in general could not rise above the law in its distance from God, the fear which made the very mediator full of trembling, and the readiness to denounce and curse which it engendered, grace is the atmosphere in which the Christian lives and flourishes. No doubt it is through righteousness but withal it is grace reigning.

What was it that drew to the Lord Jesus even from John the Baptist? What was it that in spite of a legal environment at length blossomed and bore fruit so sweet in Peter and John and James and a noble army of martyrs and confessors? What was it that melted Paul's heart of steel and made him the most ardent and suffering witness to the world of Jesus Christ and Him crucified? What else could begin with the proudest, most self-satisfied, stiff-necked, and rebellious race, and transform them into the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, the hungering and thirsting after righteousness, yea the merciful, the pure in heart, the peace-makers, persecuted for righteousness' sake, and even for His sake, for whom the nation and its high priest judged crucifixion only His due, and so fulfilled the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets?

As it was the grace and truth which gave the disciples life, and would give it abundantly in the power of Christ's resurrection, so would follow that full and abiding remission which only His blood secures, and this uninterruptedly. But sin indulged does interrupt communion with our God and Father, and needs the advocacy of Christ to cleanse the feet thus defiled, by the washing of water by word. His blood retains intact its atoning virtue; but the word is applied by the Spirit in answer to Christ. on high, and he that sinned repents in dust and ashes. For this is He that came through water and blood. We need and have both, and cannot do without the water from first to last, as we have had the blood once for all. Whoever ignores, or (still worse) denies, the twofold provision of grace, undermines redemption and muddles the truth of God.

Now the Lord specifies an unforgiving spirit as intolerable to our Father in His daily government of His sons. And no wonder. It is to go back from grace to law, from Christ to wretched self. Hence, as in the prayer, He urges grace toward those who may offend us ever so painfully, and love which He commends to our loyal and tender warning of its lack practically as hateful in His eyes. "For if ye forgive men their offences, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your offences."

O you who keep up your resentment, and brood over the offences (often exaggerated if not imaginary) of others, beware. You, a Christian, if so, are in utter default of this characteristic duty, as unlike Christ as you can be. Need one say that you are as unhappy as you are hard? Is it nothing to your high spirit, degrading as this is to a Christian, that "your heavenly Father will not forgive you your offences"? Trifle not with so bad and proud a state, and no longer grieve the Holy Spirit of God who sealed you. Let not the sun set upon your wrath, nor give room for the devil.