

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Sometimes we wonder why it is taking so long to bring peace to our earth? Why do conflicts drag on for so long? And why, when one conflict seems to be solved, does another one flare up? A large part of the reason is the lack of forgiveness. For any conflict to be finally resolved, as opposed to covering it over with sticking plaster, there has to be full and free forgiveness. How can you forgive the person who planted a bomb that killed your son, or massacred your entire family with a machete, or led a gang of crazed extremists to your door thinking he was doing his patriotic duty? It is difficult to see how. Yet some people do it. Gordon Wilson forgave those that planted the Remembrance Day bomb in Enniskillen and killed his daughter. But others cannot, It is not a simple matter, but it is a command of the Lord Jesus. And while people keep reminding themselves year by year of their grievances and their old disputes under the banner of "culture" or "religion", the cycle of violence will continue ad infinitum. So how can there be "forgiveness for past wrongs"?

1.FORGIVENESS FOR US

Seems introspective and selfish to start with ourselves, but the problem lies in the human soul, and as much in our souls as those of others. And, as Jesus said somewhere else, we ought to start by removing the log from our own eye before attempting to address the speck in someone else's.

But there is another reason for starting with ourselves. We cannot forgive others if we have not been ourselves forgiven, or if we have not forgiven ourselves.

Some people do not recognise any need of forgiveness themselves. They are perfectly respectable and clean-living. They have done nothing wrong and don't need forgiving. And they can't see why they should forgive others. But these people are living a lie! John says "if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us". All of us sin, all of us fall short of God's standards. But we minimise our own sin. What we do isn't serious. But what others do, that is serious. Actually, with God, all sin is serious. John says if we claim to have fellowship with God and yet walk in the darkness - in other words if we do not live according to God's teaching exactly as Jesus revealed it- we are lying and not living according to the truth. In other words, we are not facing up to reality. The reality is that if we sin, that is if we live our life in any way other than the way God teaches us to live, we can have no fellowship with him - no knowledge, no friendship, no share in the blessings he has to give us, nothing. We are completely cut off from God and everything good. To put it another way, our life is a hell on earth. And if we die this way it will be hell full stop. We have no grounds for self-congratulation or false confidence. We need forgiveness just as much as the thief, the murderer, the rapist, the organiser of genocide. God offers us forgiveness in Christ and stands ready to receive us. But we must first admit our sin and our need of forgiveness. Only then can Christ's forgiving love reach our hardened hearts

But for others, the reason they cannot forgive others is that they cannot forgive themselves. If I cannot forgive myself for the mistakes I make, and judge myself so harshly I can never get off the hook, I am not likely to treat anyone else more leniently. Indeed, some of the most censorious and unforgiving people in this world

are also those who feel most guilty. They are constantly hard on themselves, perhaps trying to live up to standards that are humanly impossible, and they apply the same standards to others, and mete out the same harsh punishment to others that they impose on themselves.

Not until they feel the love and forgiveness of God for themselves will they be able to forgive others. So what can be done? Jesus came to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. That means your sins, yours and mine, can be forgiven because Jesus offered the sacrifice of himself, the only perfect sacrifice on the Cross of Calvary. As we have seen, God doesn't trivialise or minimise our sin. It is a serious matter. It was so serious God's own Son had to die. But because he has died, God can and will forgive. If he had just turned a blind eye, he would have been less than faithful to his word of old, when he said he was a righteous God who would not tolerate sin. And he would not have been righteous, because he would have been condoning wrongdoing by letting the perpetrators get away with it. But because Jesus has died in our place, taking the punishment we deserved freely and voluntarily, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And we have Jesus, risen and ascended pleading our cause and his sacrifice before his Father's throne in glory! And that is not all! God sends us his Spirit to draw us into fellowship with him, God fills us with his love so we can love others the way he first loved us. God himself has forgiven us, surely therefore we can forgive ourselves!

The first step, then is to receive forgiveness for ourselves.

2. FORGIVENESS FOR *OTHERS*

But that is only the first step. Things must not end there. Once we are forgiven ourselves, Jesus calls us to forgive others. This is the message of the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. A master calls in his servants and forgives them their debts, which are considerable. One of these servants then goes out and demands payment from a fellow-servant who owed him a much smaller sum. When this man could not come up with the money, he applied the full force of the law and had the man thrown in prison. The unmerciful servant's colleagues learn of this and complain to their merciful master. He is livid that the servant he let off such a great debt should be so harsh with his fellow-servant, he goes back on his former promise and has the unmerciful servant thrown into prison. Don't try working out the legalities of all this. Nothing like any of this would have happened in real life: Jesus is telling a story to make a point. The debt owed by first servant was absolutely impossible to pay - something like a million pounds in our money today. The debt owed to him by his fellow servant was no more than a few pounds by comparison. Jesus is emphasising how small are debts owed to us by our fellows as compared to the huge debt we owe God, and how small the wrongs others have done us are compared to the huge wrong we did God by rejecting him and his Son. We should be prepared to forgive others their debts to us, the wrongs they have done us. as God forgives us the debts we owe him and the wrong we did Him.

None of us is in a position to be self-righteous. None of us can claim we have done nothing wrong. And all wrong is equal in God's sight. Anger is as bad as murder. Lust is as bad as adultery. We have been forgiven. We should also forgive. Indeed,

Jesus says if we do not, God will not forgive us. A truly repentant sinner will willingly forgive, because he knows how much he needed to be forgiven himself. Anyone who will not forgive cannot be truly repentant, and therefore cannot be forgiven. Jesus requires us to forgive: no matter what the offence, no matter what the rights and wrongs. It is not our place to bother ourselves about justice or vengeance. That is God's business and should be left in His hands. We must forgive. If we don't, we add to the culture of unforgiveness in our society and in the world, and do our bit to keep wars and conflicts going. If we want to do our bit for peace, we must forgive and forget - and not just once, but 70 x7times - in other words a number so big you'll lose count and go on forgiving for ever. This is a very tall order. We cannot do it on our own. But we don't have to do it on our own. We have Jesus living in us. Allow Him to fill us with His love, and then His love and forgiveness will flow out through us to others.