

## Forgiving and asking for forgiveness

*«Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.»  
(Col. 3:13)*

Forgiveness is at the very heart of the Gospel. The entire Christian message revolves around the forgiveness of God through the cross of Christ and urges us, as his disciples, to give or ask for forgiveness whenever it is needed. To obey in this point, or to fail to do so, comes to be a basic test to evaluate our Christian maturity.

What does the Word of God teach about forgiveness? We need to know first what to forgive is and then we will consider its practical consequences.

**Forgiveness goes beyond peace.** Peace is not always possible. Despite all the steps and efforts and in spite of the best of disposition we can show, there are situations when it is not possible to restore a broken relationship. The apostle Paul urged us to live in peace: «If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all» (Rom. 12:18). Nevertheless Paul, a man pretty well acquainted with conflict, starts his statement with two previous remarks: «If possible» and «so far as it depends on you». These two small clauses give an indispensable touch of realism that frees us of wrong expectations. Peace is not always possible simply because it implies two parties, not just one. Our responsibility -what is expected from us- is to try to live in peace, to take the initiative, to do every effort in order to «live peaceably with all». Once we have done this, the results are in other hands, not ours.

**«Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do»** (Luke 23:34). The example of the Lord Jesus is quite eloquent. He never spared efforts whatever the occasion to be at peace with his fellowmen, whom he loved until the very moment of his death. However, despite the holiness of his character and his flawlessness, he lived surrounded by enemies who finally put him on a cross. How can such a paradox be explained? We live in a world where the devil tries by all means to divide, to separate and to build walls between people. This is one of his specialties. For that reason, in spite of all our efforts to be at peace, there are occasions when they will be in vain. We cannot fully grasp the subject of reconciliation neglecting the reality of sin.

Nevertheless, forgiveness does not depend on reconciliation, it goes further than the restoration of the relation. Again, the example of our Lord sets the standard. Nailed on the cross, ridiculed, tortured by his enemies, on the verge of his painful death, he utters unforgettable words which come to be a profound summary of the Gospel: «Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do». (Luke 23:34)

Even though reconciliation is not possible, there is always something a Christian can and must do: *forgiving*.

## **The practice of forgiving**

**Transforming wounds into scars.** To forgive means to eliminate every negative attitude, thought or feeling towards someone. All bitterness, hatred, desire for revenge and resentment must disappear as a natural outcome of genuine forgiveness. In that sense, forgiving entails a process similar to the healing of a hurt: at first it is an open wound, it bleeds easily and it hurts. But, once turned into a scar, it stops hurting or bleeding. To forgive is similar to transform open wounds into scars. From this illustration we can draw several important conclusions:

**A long and costly process.** The willingness to forgive can and should be immediate; this is the will of God. Nevertheless completing the emotional and moral process of forgiveness usually takes time. From the moment one decides to forgive until the completion of that process the journey can last long. Let's remember the experience of Joseph in the Old Testament. He managed to forgive his brothers (cf. the moving passages in Genesis 45 and Genesis 50), but not without a long span (months for sure) in which he struggled against his own reactions. Yet, it is important to affirm right from the very beginning: "I'm decided to forgive, even though the healing of my wounds can last longer".

**You can do it alone.** Forgiving can be a one-sided process: I can and must forgive even though the other person is reluctant to forgive or receive forgiveness. I can forgive in secret, in my heart without the other person to know it. That was the case of Stephen who, about to die said: «Lord, do not hold this sin against them» (Acts 7:60). We must be willing to forgive even if we are not asked to do so, even when we are still sinned against.

**Friends again?** The primary goal of forgiveness is not the restoration of the friendship once shared, but the elimination of the poison in the heart. Sometimes the relationship can never be the same as before, like in the aftermath of a severe offense. God does not demand from us a masochist performance to restore impossible relationships. The reconciliation is a desirable result but, as we considered earlier, it is in no way guaranteed. Nonetheless, *God does demand from us to love our offender* with a supernatural love which is the fruit of the Spirit, the agape of Christ. Someone said that to forgive is the best way to free oneself from ones enemies. It is precisely what Paul says in Romans 12:20-21.

**Does forgiveness require forgetting?** Our human mind is like a collection of memories that cannot be eliminated so easily. We cannot expect forgiveness to erase our memories. This would be an unattainable goal. *Forgiving is not removing our memories, but removing the poison of our memories.* When we forgive,

the memory of the painful experience is still there, but it doesn't convey bitter feelings or hatred any more. The scar concept helps us to grasp it: the scar is a memory of a past trauma; it remains there forever, although it doesn't hurt, nor bleed, nor get infected. We cannot erase the memories of our mind, but we can indeed remove the poison from these memories. In fact, to remember can be a positive thing because it allows us to avoid go over the same mistakes or sins. Referring to the Jewish holocaust, someone said that to remember is the best vaccine not to repeat.

The problem with the statement, "I forgive, but I do not forget", commonly on the lips of some people, is that they continue harboring revenge feelings and bitterness in their heart. They not simply recall the event, the memories are still loaded with a good dose of poison. This attitude is sinful.

God is the only one who can forgive and forget at the same time because he is outside time, «I, I am he who blots out your transgressions... and I will not remember your sins» (Isa. 43:25)

## **Learning to forgive**

An old proverb says: "To err is human, to forgive is divine". If forgiveness has a divine origin, how can we promote such a paramount practice in human relationships? The apprenticeship of forgiveness is based on two realities:

### ***Be conscious of our sins***

To be aware of our own faults is a prerequisite to forgive. If we are not able to see first «the log» which is in our own eye, we'll have a hard time to forgive our neighbor. Jesus worked out this principle at Simon the Pharisee's house (Luke 7:36-50). Simon could see accurately the past sins of that woman, but he was blind to his own faults. For that reason, Jesus uncovers them, «you gave me no water for my feet... you gave me no kiss... you did not anoint my head with oil» (Luke 7:44-46). It is remarkable that these were sins of *omission*; Jesus does not reproach something wrong that Simon had done, but something good that he had not done. In God's eyes, our sins of omission are as serious as our sins of commission. Jesus' rebuke to Simon hints at a key idea: the essence of sin lies not primarily in the evil we do against our neighbor, but in the good that we do not perform to God: neglect to give him the honor and glory he deserves becomes the first step to all other sins (as it is clearly described in Romans 1:21).

Therefore, to forgive requires first to be aware, through God's light, of the dark hidden corners in our own heart. We need to discover the subtlety of the sin that «dwells within me» (in Paul's words): selfishness in our motivations, arrogance, pride, the maze of our passions, our potential for violence, vanity and a long list of the «works of the flesh». All these are exposed when we look in the mirror of

God's Word. We are prone to see the speck that is in our brother's eye, but we suffer from **myopia** when it deals with the uncovering of our own faults.

The inability to acknowledge our sins is a great obstacle to forgive because it leads to **arrogance and pride**. A proud person tends to make severe judgments on others while he is self-indulgent toward himself. That was Simon's problem in particular and that of the Pharisees in general. On the contrary, to acknowledge our own faults places us in a position of **humility**, makes us feel «poor» before God and leads us to cry to God the last sentence of the Lord's prayer: «forgive us our debts (offences), as we also have forgiven our debtors (offenders)» (Matt. 6:12).

### ***Experiencing Christ's forgiveness***

Simon had a hard time to accept and love the sinful woman not just because of his pride, but also because he had not experienced himself real forgiveness. Jesus said to him «he who is forgiven little, loves little» (Luke 7:47). As far as I feel debtor to God -self-conscious of my sin- and forgiven by him, I will be able to forgive my neighbor.

Every human being can -and should- forgive, but a Christian is in the best condition to do so because he has already been forgiven. Christ's forgiveness motivates and compels us morally to forgive. As Christians we wish to forgive not only because it is our moral obligation, but also because we want to follow the example of Christ: «forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you» (Col. 3:13). What a great privilege and challenge! Grace helps us in our weakness and we certainly lean on the sufficiency of God's grace to forgive whenever it is necessary.

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The web **Christian Thought** gives information about the literary work of Dr. Pablo Martínez and his father Rev. José M. Martínez. Through this work the Christian thought of the authors flows covering a wide range of subjects; theological, psychological and ethical issues are considered from a biblical perspective with a relevant and practical application to current problems.

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