



CHRISTIAN



FORGIVENESS.



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ON

CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS.

ALTHOUGH it be with sorrow that I ask the attention of my fellow-Christians to a painful fact; yet every child of God will doubtless agree with me, that there is a daily increasing call, amid God's family upon earth, for the exercise of the divine grace of "*Forgiveness.*" The many divisions and heartburnings sadly prevalent in the professing Church, in all its varied sections, cannot but oppress the heart, and lead to prayerful supplication on its behalf.

In the great mercy of our God, and by the working of His overruling hand, in relation to the circumstances of our lives, He causes His *own* to be found, through the preaching of the blessed Gospel of His grace, "*who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son*" (Col. i. 13.) His family on earth is thereby continually enlarged; but, as a necessary consequence, the amount of flesh and nature is enlarged proportionately. It is upon this, our fallen human nature, that the great adversary of Christ and His Church is unceasingly endeavouring to act: "*Your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour*" (1 Peter v. 8).

Although the consideration of "*Christian Forgiveness*" be fraught with difficulty, yet we will trust our God to help us in it, and, by His Spirit, through *His Word*, to "*guide*" us "*into all truth*" (John xvi. 13) concerning it.

Among the ten thousand ways by which the adversary succeeds in "*devouring*" God's children, there is perhaps none more conducive to his ends, than his acting upon the irritability of our natural dispositions. With what readiness do we, in some way or another, grieve and wound the feelings of a fellow-Christian; or, with what ease do we ourselves allow an angry spirit to be aroused within us: and, in either case, how little room is given for sorrow, or for prayerful consideration as to the best way to remove the trouble that has arisen.

What is the consequence? The wound rancours, the devil is busy in plying the ear with his hisses from the pit beneath, the breach widens, friends of the respective parties are made acquainted with the matter, coloured according to that particular coloured glass with which each may be looking at it; they are told "in confidence," and they hear "in confidence" of course,

and they give their judgment "in confidence"! At all events, they participate in the feud; party spirit supervenes, and hard thoughts and words are freely scattered: "*Where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work*" (James iii. 16). It is very humiliating to have to acknowledge all this, but, let the reader say if it be not but too true an outline of what is constantly taking place.

Let us be "*persuaded better things*" (Heb. vi. 9) of God's children, "*and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak;*" and let us endeavour to tread the "*more excellent way*" (1 Cor. xii. 31), the way wherein God shall be glorified, and Satan be foiled, that way of "charity," wherein each may "*esteem other better than himself*" (Phil. ii. 3); "*and this will we do if God permit*" (Heb. vi. 3). Our blessed Lord has left us an example that we should "*follow His steps*" (1 Peter ii. 21). May we, then, endeavour to be

"followers of God as dear children, and walk in love as Christ also hath loved us" (Eph. v. 1, 2).

As the subject of "Christian Forgiveness" naturally divides itself into parts, having reference to the *offender* and to the *offended*, I will arrange my consideration of it under four different headings:

(I.) Supposing that a fellow-Christian is offended with me (be it rightly or wrongly), what course does it become me to pursue towards such an one?

(II.) If I am offended with a fellow-Christian, and consider that he has "trespassed" against me, again the question is—What course does it become me to pursue towards such an one?

(III.) If regret be expressed towards one who has been "trespassed" against, *when*, and in *what manner*, is the *acceptance* of that expressed contrition to be manifested?

(IV.) In the supposition of there being

constant "trespass" and, as constantly expressed, contrition ; how frequently is forgiveness of the "trespass" to be accorded ?

But, of these headings presently—for any matter between man and man must of necessity be secondary, when there may be something to settle, first, between the Lord and the soul. Of this latter I will therefore speak first.

Marvellous though it be, the holy Lord Jesus — the Christ of God — has been pleased to place Himself in family relationship with His own, as the head of God's family, and to tell us that He is "*the firstborn among many brethren*" (Rom. viii. 29), and is "*not ashamed to call us brethren*" (Heb. ii. 11). What wondrous grace ! a grace so weighty, that one would have thought no room could have been found for the flesh in God's children even to *think* of the Lord Jesus Christ with familiarity. But, alas ! I fear that it is so sometimes, for such expressions as "our

dear elder brother" and similar ones do not, I submit, savour of the holy aspirations of God the Holy Ghost, however much they may be *meant* to express the fervency of love. When we meet with such, let us seek in words of grace and truth to point out the unsuitableness of these sounds of familiarity to those who use them.

I need hardly remind my reader how often, when we have "trespassed" against the Lord Jesus, the heart has been softened to repentance, and has been "gained" by the sound of His gentle voice speaking "between Him and me alone." On the other hand, there is the other side to be owned; and a sorrowful side it is: even that of turning a "deaf" ear to His loving voice. Have you, my reader, ever been so ensnared by the adversary as to have refused, practically, to listen to the voice of the loving, blessed Lord? and thus become like "*the deaf adder that stoppeth her ear, which will not hearken to the voice*

of the charmer charming never so wisely" (Ps. lviii. 4, 5). I hope not ; but, alas, I know that it is possible : therefore let us exhort one another "*daily, while it is called to-day ; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin*" (Heb. iii. 13).

This, I grieve to say, sometimes occurs ; but repentance comes, and with it deep contrition of soul : God the Holy Ghost reminds the soul of Christ, as the "*trespass offering*" (Leviticus v.) His eternal preciousness to God is pleaded, pardon is obtained, and the "*joy of salvation*" (Ps. li. 12) is restored.

Sometimes an advantage over us is gained by the adversary, through our lack of vigilance and watchful communion with God ; and not unfrequently he gains still further advantage by presenting to us certain good reasons (?) some real cause (?) for our having been disturbed in spirit ; and, like Jonah, we may perhaps say : "*I do well to be angry*" (Jonah iv. 9). But,

can *any* reason, *any* cause, *justify sin*? No; sin *is* sin, and *must* be confessed before God, as such, let the immediate acting *cause* of it have been what it may. If I have spoken "*unadvisedly with my lips*" (Ps. cvi. 33), *I* have sinned, *I* have wounded my Lord, and *I* must have dealings with Him as to it, and obtain His pardon, ere my soul can proceed on its way again with happiness. I must not slur over *sin*; I must not say "*Peace*" when there is none; or *build a wall, and let it be daubed with untempered mortar* (Ezek. xiii. 10). No indeed; there *must* be a "*godly sorrow*" working "*repentance unto salvation*" (2 Cor. vii. 10) "*having a readiness to revenge all disobedience*" (2 Cor. x. 6). There may have been *external* cause which issued in my sinning, but this should not have affected me; and it would not, had there not been some *internal* cause for it. In some way or another, I must have strayed away from the "*Good*

Shepherd ;" either, as I have said, by a lack of watchful communion, or, it may have been, by some form of spiritual pride—than which nothing more easily throws the soul off its guard. Be that as it may, the truth that I am pressing upon my readers' attention is—that *no external cause whatever can possibly be allowed as an excuse for the committal of sin.* Let him lay it to heart, and prayerfully meditate upon it in the presence of God.

A practical illustration of this, came under my notice a short time since. A Christian labourer had misapprehended his Christian master about some order he had received; and became so rude that his master lost his temper at last, and "*spake unadvisedly with his lips*" (Psa. cvi. 33). For this he was grieved—went to his Lord about it—obtained His pardon—and then took "revenge" upon himself. The labourer had walked off the premises in his anger; but, ere he went to his work

in the morning, the master was at the labourer's door, with extended hand, saying: " . . . I have come to you, in the presence of Him who died for us, to offer you my hand ; and hope that my coming may also win my brother." The master's hand was accepted, it is true ; but the labourer's words and tone bespoke but little self-judgment on his part : but with that the master had nothing to do, save to grieve. The master had sought to repair the breach, by following his Lord's instructions ; but with what success, he had to leave with God, as the labourer carefully avoided his presence ever after.

I will now look, one by one, at the several questions which I have propounded in reference to "trespass" between Christian and Christian.

(I.) Supposing that a fellow Christian is offended with me, (be it rightly or wrongly) what course does it become me to pursue, toward such an one ?

The answer is at hand. Let me forthwith enter into the sanctuary; and, there ask my Lord whether my brother hath indeed "ought against me;" there let me examine myself; and, should I find that my brother has *just cause* of complaint against me, let me, instantly, endeavour to make reparation, whether my offence has been either great or small.

The sound of Jesus' words are like Himself, eternal; they never, like other sounds, die away upon the wind; no, they are continuous; and, consequently, they have as much power with them to-day, as they had when He uttered them. Listen, then: "*If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there, rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift*" (Matt. v. 23, 24). These words, in their primary signification, undoubtedly applied to Israel; but they

are, as undoubtedly, fraught with spiritual import to the "*Israel of God*" (Gal. vi. 16) in the present time; and should be accepted by them, being "spiritually discerned;" for "*he that is spiritual, judgeth (or discerneth) all things,*" while to the natural man "*they are foolishness*" (1 Cor. ii. 14, 15). The scriptural instructions for this case are very simple; and if I endeavour, humbly and faithfully, to carry them out; not only will God be glorified, but, it will be more than probable that I shall become "reconciled to my brother." It is possible, of course, that my efforts for reconciliation may fail; and my proffered expression of regret be unaccepted. This I must leave, should it be so. I have sought to walk with, and before, the Lord Jesus, as to the matter; and I am therefore free, and happy, to "go and offer my gift."

If, on the other hand, as it will occasionally occur, I find that my brother has *not* just cause of complaint against me—

has *not* "ought against me;" but that he has taken umbrage at some *supposed* wrong done to him; a phantom of his imagination, a grievance without a foundation. What am I to do, then? Am I to thrust my brother and his grievance ruthlessly aside, and bid him be quit of such folly? or shall I not, rather, see whether, through any inadvertent act or word, or look even, on my part, I may not, perhaps, have given my brother some occasion to be troubled? and, if so, let me, with all speed, humbly endeavour to "gain" him, remembering that, to my brother, the adversary has made the supposed offence to assume the garb of a stern reality, and has taken occasion, thereby, to irritate him: "*My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth*" (1 John iii. 18); "*Love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous*" (1 Peter iii. 8).

(II.) If I am offended with a fellow-Christian, and consider that he has "tres-

passed" against me, what course does it become me to pursue towards such an one?

Since the Lord Jesus did "*always those things that pleased His Father*" (John viii. 29) we should follow Him as our "example," try to walk in "*His steps*" (1 Peter ii. 21), and so "*please*" Him (2 Tim. ii. 4)—Jesus our blessed Lord and Master. If I have been wounded by the conduct of another, it is not improbable that feelings of anger, more or less strong, will lurk within me against the offender, and my communion with God will consequently be impaired: nevertheless, I may be lulled to sleep, continue my usual routine of daily service, and hardly perceive that all is not right within. God, in His grace, will not allow this state of soul to continue, for He is my *Father*; He *loves* me, and leads me to feel that there is a something wrong, that God the Holy Ghost has been grieved, and, therefore, hindered in His blessed work of *taking of the things of Jesus and*

showing them unto me (John xvi. 15); and I am led to ask the *reason* of this. "*All things that are reprov'd (or discovered) are made manifest by the light: for whatsoever doth make manifest is light*" (Eph. v. 13). The Saviour's words fall upon the heart: "*When ye stand praying, forgive if ye have aught against any; that your Father which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses*" (Mark xi. 25). The matter that has caused the grievance is gone over before and with the Lord; victory over every wounded feeling is obtained; sorrow is felt for having been so slow in treading in the Lord's steps; and the offender is *there*, in the divine *light* of God's presence, thoroughly forgiven and again loved "*with a pure heart fervently*" (1 Peter i. 22). Communion with God is fully restored—for the hindering cloud is removed—and the soul is happy. Opportunity will now soon be sought to *express* the *forgiveness* to the offending brother.

The chastened joy that supervenes on these dealings with God is beyond expression; and the foot now hastens to carry out the Lord's behest: "*Go and tell him his fault between him and thee alone; if he shall hear thee thou hast gained thy brother*" (Matt. xviii. 15). It is impossible to measure the boundless grace of God in forgiving *us our sins*, as, in confession, we present before Him the eternal value and preciousness of His own beloved Son in His death upon the cross for us; but the vastness of the love calls upon us with loud voice to be "*kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven us*" (Eph. iv. 32). If we refuse to do this, no wonder that our communion with God is hindered. It is useless for us to think of maintaining it. He is pitiful towards us, no doubt, and "*doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men*" (Lam. iii. 33); but what grief it is to lose communion

with Him ! He must be obeyed ; His word is plain ; He says still : “ *When thou standest praying, forgive.*”

The devil will supply us with his good reasons why we should shirk this practical question of “*Christian Forgiveness* ;” he will tell us that Christ intercedes for us, that we are forgiven for His sake, if we have failed in any way ; so that we need not trouble so much about *forgiving* ! What frightful *hisses* from the *pit* ! What an endeavour to harden the conscience, and to obliterate the effect of the truth of God. May our God preserve us from yielding a willing ear to these evil suggestions.

The doctrinal truths of the eternal efficacy of the death of Christ, and of the advocacy of the Lord Jesus, as our living High Priest, are, blessed be God, divine and glorious realities—realities with which nothing can ever interfere. We know Jesus *has* offered Himself “*one sacrifice for sins for ever*” (Heb. x. 12) ; that

"He is the propitiation for our sins" (1 John ii. 2); and that *"He ever liveth to make intercession for us"* (Heb. vii. 25): but woe be to the soul that dares to use these most holy truths in an unholy and ungodly manner; smoothing his breast, and saying to himself that he, personally, need make no confession. *"If we confess our sins"* is the word of our God. Let every child of God, therefore, see to it that he deals with Him unceasingly as to constant defilement. To palliate *sin* is frightful; and, if I do not *forgive*, I *sin* in that particular, even as in any other way. An unforgiving spirit is *sin*, and must not be allowed: I must *forgive*, to the end that my *"heavenly Father may forgive me my trespasses;"* *"To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My word"* (Isaiah lxvi. 2); *"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up"* (James iv. 8-10).

Before closing this section of my subject, I must not forget that there *is* the possibility of being *angry* without committing sin. For instance, would it not be a right thing to be *angry* if we heard our God grossly dishonoured by a fellow-Christian? Righteous *anger* under such circumstances would certainly be consistent with a true allegiance to God ; but the frailty of nature must not be forgotten ; hence the admonition, "*Be ye angry, and sin not ; let not the sun go down upon your wrath*" (Eph. iv. 26). We must not allow our anger to extend beyond the limit of the setting sun, lest *righteous anger* should give place to *fleshy anger*, and so our God become *dishonoured* by us, instead of honoured.

(III.) If regret be expressed toward one who has been *trespassed* against, *when*, and in *what manner*, is the acceptance of that expressed contrition to be *manifested*?

These two questions blend with each other, and necessarily stand in close connection with the subject we are considering. Properly speaking, *forgiveness* cannot be *granted* otherwise than when *confession is made* to the one who has been offended. Of God's dealing with His erring people Israel, who had so seriously *trespassed* against Him, it is written: "*I will go and return to My place till they acknowledge their offence, and seek My face*" (Hosea v. 15). Also in 1 John i. 9 we read: "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.*"

To the one who has been offended, but who has subjected himself to the searching light of God's presence as to what has transpired, it will be no very difficult matter to discern that his brother is contrite: he is on the look out for it. Love dreams not of requiring a lengthy, *audible* confession—a word is enough—the joy of the Father, in Luke xv., is in measure appre-

hended — the offended one is but too grateful to God at being allowed the happy privilege of *manifesting* forgiveness, and he rejoices to join his brethren in giving praise and thanksgiving to God for His boundless restoring grace.

The adversary being thus foiled, the communion between the two brethren, which had been interrupted, becomes renewed, and, in all probability, will be of a deeper and truer character than before the severance took place.

The *when* of our question is thus answered: When the offender arises and says, "*I have sinned;*" and the *in what manner* has its answer in Luke xv. : "*When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck and kissed him.*" The profound depth of this joy over the prodigal we can never reach; but we may ask that we may both know and feel more of its exceeding blessedness and delight.

IV. The last division of our subject is now reached, viz: In the supposition of there being constant "trespass" and as constantly expressed contrition, *how frequently is forgiveness* of the "trespass" to be accorded?

The emotions of the hearts of the Apostles were not so intense as their blessed Master's, and this they had to learn. Let us hearken to Peter, as the spokesman for the rest, limiting the measure of *forgiveness* to "*seven times*" (although probably he thought he had named a *good measure*). Hearken again to the blessed One's reply: "*Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee until seven times, but until seventy times seven*" (Matt. xviii. 22).

The memory of the demand that the child of God daily makes upon his Father's love, when thought of in the light of those words, which are so often upon the lip: "*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our*

debtors" (Matt. vi. 12), must fall with solemn sound upon the heart that can be weary of *forgiving*. Our perpetual demands for *forgiveness* should only prove the stronger reason why we ought to forgive our brethren; and these demands should be a very clear and distinct indication to us of *how often* we should do so. Although the Apostles had been taught this petition by their Master's own lips, it would appear that it had not made any deep impression upon them, for they were evidently not prepared for such a reply to their question as "*until seventy times seven*;" and were staggered at the amount. An overwhelming sense of inability, on their part, to carry out the admonition surged over their souls, and found expression in the words, "*Lord, increase our faith*" (Luke xvii. 5)—faith in Himself for the needed power to do so. Should the child of God ever find his power to *forgive* thus taxed, the adversary will ply him with

many and cogent reasons why *there can be no necessity to forgive to this extent*; will tell him that he is not *guided* by the Word, as he thinks he is—that he is overstraining its meaning, etc., etc. But *to obey* is that which pleases God (see Ex. xix. 5, Deut. xi. 27, 1 Sam. xv. 22, Job xxxvi. 11, Jer. vii. 23, etc., etc.) As oft as the offender, “*turn again to thee saying ‘I repent,’ thou shalt forgive him.*” It is God’s command, and is simply to be obeyed, without any questioning or reasoning: faith in Him for the power will enable us to do so, and He shall be thereby glorified.

The parable in Luke xvii. which immediately follows our Lord’s exhortation: “Take heed to yourselves” (2, 3) may perhaps have been intended to exemplify passive obedience under trying circumstances. The Lord had exhorted the Apostles to forgive; and had encouraged them to this by showing how great things faith could accomplish; but He then pro-

ceeded to give them a picture of "passive obedience." The master, returning from the field, desires his servant to prepare his supper, and to serve him until he has eaten and drunk. The servant, though weary, does so obediently, it being his duty; he receives no thanks from his master (for he has merely "done the things which were commanded him"), and takes no honour to himself for doing his duty. It may be, at times, extremely irksome to nature to "deny self and take up the cross," in the many trying circumstances of social life. Nevertheless, to "glorify God in the fire" (Isaiah xxiv. 15) is the soul's desire; and to hear the Lord Jesus say: "My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. xii. 9), gives strength for it, though one has, again and again, to cry, "Lord, increase my faith."

But, as in *obedience*, so also does our God delight in *tender mercy*. "*The Lord*

is very pitiful, and of tender mercy" (Jas. v. 11); and He says, "*Be ye kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another*" (Rom. xii. 10); "*And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you*" (Eph. iv. 32).

God would have us to keep a well-exercised conscience as to all His admonitions, referring to the maintenance of our relationship with fellow-saints. God would have love to be *manifested*, whereas the devil would have it to be *obliterated*.

I have in this paper merely treated of "personal trespass," it not being my purpose to proceed farther than that. Nevertheless, there *are* scriptures which bear even upon the more extended circle of that which is *trespass in and against the Church of God*, and which scriptures it is well that every child of the "living God" should prayerfully consider.

I would direct attention to such passages as Rom. xvi. 17, 18, where we are told to "*avoid*" certain persons. In 2 Thess. iii. 16, we are commanded to "*withdraw from,*" and in the 14th verse of the same chapter, "*to have no company with*" certain brethren. In 1 Tim. vi. 3, 4, 5, God bids again that we "*withdraw;*" and in 2 Tim. iii. 1-5, that we "*turn away from*" the characters there named; while 1 Cor. v., the subject of "trespass" against the Church seems to culminate in the dire sentence: "*Deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*" (2 Cor. v. 5). To be obliged to act according to such commands may be, as it is, very painful, and, to carry out in a right spirit the last extreme of discipline, may well nigh break the heart of any who, in some little measure, realise the awfulness of the sentence. But God's commands are imperative,

and *must* be attended to, be the cost what it may.

The object of all discipline is "*for our profit*" (Heb. xii. 10), and it is only God alone who can cause the soul to be "humbled in me" (Lam. iii. 20), and to return to Him. He is "LOVE," and does this work in His own people now, even as He will also so work in His ancient people at some future day; for He, Jehovah God, "waits to be gracious" (Isa. xxx. 18), that His own great heart of LOVE may be eventually satisfied (Isa. liii. 11) by the full salvation of all His own (see also Luke xv. 20-24; Zeph. iii. 17; Hosea ii. 14, &c).

But I forbear enlarging upon the subject of "relative trespass," as it is not now my province.

All that our blessed God has ever spoken, whether it has been by Him as God the Father, by Him as God the Son, or by Him as God the Holy Ghost, falls

upon the ear with the utmost holy solemnity, as well as with reverential sweetness. The obduracy of the heart melts under the sound of God's Word, and gives way under its divine influence and power. The devil knows this well, and, therefore, does his best to prevent the children of God from committing themselves unreservedly to Him, to obey His behests, as contained in the sacred volume of Truth. May we be more watchful, and "less ignorant of Satan's devices;" and not forget his ability to transform himself "into an angel of light" (2 Cor. xi. 14); but "Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. iii. 18), endeavouring to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. iv. 3); and thus, more practically, make manifest that "brotherly love" which God desires should continue (Heb. xiii. 1).

"Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that

great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do His will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Heb. xiii. 20, 21).

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