

**THE**

**Spirit of Forgiveness**

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**By A.E.M.**

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## The Spirit of Forgiveness

(EPH. IV. 30-32 ; MATT. XVIII. 20-23, 33-5 ; JAMES V. 14-20.)

It is before me to speak about forgiveness—the spirit of forgiveness—as it is to be operative amongst the people of God.

When we are enjoined to forgive one another (Eph. iv. 32) a list of things that grieves the Holy Spirit is referred to, and we are exhorted to have them removed from us, “*Let all bitterness, and heat of passion, and wrath, and clamour, and injurious language, be removed from you.*”

We were speaking this afternoon about the gain of the presence of the Spirit amongst us. It would be granted freely by every person in this room that the Spirit of God is always active in regard to the things of Christ, but we have to remember that in this activity the Spirit is ever true to the ground on which He has been given, that is, He works according to fixed laws. Alas ! there are many things on our side which are contrary to the ground

on which the Spirit is given, and consequently these gracious activities are often hindered.

God in His great goodness and love to us is often pleased to call attention by His word to something in our lives which may be a hindrance to the activities of the Holy Spirit, and it is an obligation on our part not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God. The passage before us gives, as I have said, a list of things which, if allowed amongst the saints, will grieve the Spirit, but it gives also in contrast a list of what is according to God, included in which we get forgiving one another.

It may be remarked that I am taking up a very simple subject. Doubtless it is such, but its manifest simplicity does not set aside its grave importance, for I believe there is nothing amongst the saints which so hinders spiritual progress and robs us of our joy, as the lack of a forgiving spirit. It has often been remarked by those who have come amongst the people of God with whom we walk, that it was a matter of great surprise to them to find certain distressing things at work there—things which they supposed could never have been found where the light of the truth was known. My own thought is that God uses these conditions of trespass and offence which occur among us through the allowance of the flesh, to develop

in us the blessed quality of readiness to forgive. It is when we are trespassed against, or our feelings hurt, that the occasion is provided for shewing forgiveness, and by the exercise of that we realise in our hearts the precious joy connected with doing it. If the offence against me hurts, I must remember what my offences were to God. Having dealt with them in the death of Christ, God has found a great joy in forgiveness, and the conditions of failure amongst the people of God furnish opportunities by His grace for our hearts experiencing something of the joy which fills the heart of God in forgiving.

In speaking about forgiveness, whether we refer to eternal forgiveness as connected with God's approach to man in grace, or to forgiveness as it is connected with our relations to one another, we must see that it takes character from God Himself. What makes forgiveness so beautiful in the eyes of heaven is that it is part of the activities of a God of grace. His movements towards men as a Saviour God are manifested in forgiveness. He would have all men to be saved. What God is has given character to what He does. It pleased Him to forgive; it brought joy to His heart. He forgave from the greatest of motives—for Christ's sake, "as God for Christ's sake hath

forgiven you." There is only one kind of forgiveness—as God hath forgiven. And there is one great motive for forgiveness—for Christ's sake. Have you something against a brother or sister? Make use of the opportunity which that gives to be like God, to be moved by the same motive, and grant the same character of forgiveness for Christ's sake. What can you do for Christ's sake? What would you do to be like God?

Note that it is in this epistle which develops the very highest and most blessed features of christian blessing, and correspondingly the highest standard of christian practice, that we are called upon to be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another. If the Spirit is grieved in this sphere of intimacy—one another—I cannot know the joy of association with Christ.

If there is any one in this company conscious of having lost the joy of intimacy with Christ in the circle of the saints, I ask you in all affection as before the Lord, Are you carrying an unforgiving spirit towards another? Is there a rankling bitterness in your heart? If so, seek grace to answer to the word "forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." You may say that the one concerned has not asked for it. Did

God wait until men asked for forgiveness? The one who has offended may have to wait for the joy of *being forgiven* until he repents, but the joy of *forgiving* can be known apart from expressed repentance.

Then, too, it is well to remember that the work of God in the soul of the one who sinned may be held back by the unforgiving spirit of the one sinned against. God would have His people come out in His own character; and, indeed, we are under moral obligation to forgive others since God has forgiven us. Bear with me a moment on this point; how often we forgive (or think we forgive), but it is done grudgingly, as if we were sorry to do it. Sometimes when pressure is brought to bear upon a brother to forgive he will give way, but the forgiveness is, as it were, forced out of him; *that* is not as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven us. That is not the spirit of forgiveness according to God, it is something less spurious and to be scorned. You can apply a simple test to any forgiveness which it may be your privilege to extend. Does it give a thrill of joy to your heart? If not, it is not Godlike, for God has found joy in forgiveness.

I now refer to the passage in Matthew. I began to read at an oft-quoted verse (ver. 20), but it strikes me that some of us have

failed to see that what is developed in the rest of the chapter flows out of the thought of two or three being gathered together to His name. The verse is often quoted and dwelt upon as indicating that where two or three are so gathered, the Lord would be there ; that He would honour their faithfulness by His presence—a precious blessing indeed—but there are consequences flowing out of it. Do you think we could be conscious of the Lord's presence if carrying hard thoughts about each other? Does not His presence with us suppose that there are conditions with us, and does it not impose obligations upon us? I believe that every time we come together to take the Lord's supper or for prayer, we are tested as to the spirit of forgiveness. "When ye stand praying, forgive." (Mark xi. 25.) Not when ye kneel praying, but when ye stand; the standing position is a priestly attitude. "Every priest *standeth* daily ministering." (Heb. x. 11.) It is as though God would debar all priestly service unless there is the spirit of forgiveness, unless we are in spirit one toward another what God is toward us. It is a good thing to test ourselves as we stand to pray, as to whether we are in this spirit.

When the Lord developed this marvellous truth of two or three gathered together unto

His name securing His presence in the midst, there arose in the mind of Peter a most pertinent question. One's first impression may be that that question seems irrelevant and a diversion, but it was not so. Sometimes Peter was wide of the mark in what he said, but this time he brought in something very much in line, something that arose out of the idea of being gathered together in small companies—two or three—with the Lord in the midst. "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? until seven times?"

Peter's question seems to arise out of the thought of small companies of the Lord's people being together—not thrown together by circumstances, but gathered by the work of God, and having the sense of the Lord's presence in the intimate and personal relations of two or three. In such conditions there would be much scope for the exercise of the spirit of forgiveness. In his mind Peter set a limit in the question, "Until seven times?" Seven times was generous enough in regard to ordinary matters, but it did not go far enough for a company of two or three with the Lord in the midst. If in the world you forgave a man his obligations once, you might be commended for it; if you forgave the same man seven times the world would be

amazed, but the thing which to men's eyes would be the extreme limit is not good enough in conditions of intimacy with Christ and one another. When you are in a company that is graced by the presence of Christ you must have, not seven, but seventy times seven. The same brother? Yes. It is just this, that you are in the company of persons who as to the spirit of forgiveness are like God. They can sustain such a place because they love Christ; they can forgive for Christ's sake. Think of forgiving the same brother seventy times seven and enjoying every several occasion! You say, You mean the brother enjoys it. No, I mean *you*, the one who forgives. Think what an appreciation of the heart of God you would have as you approached the seventy seventh time! We can all perceive the blessedness of such a thought, but we have to hang our heads in shame as to working out these things. All will understand of course that seventy times seven is not given as a literal number of times; but is expressive of being characterised by a forgiving spirit.

There are many small matters which come in amongst brethren which in themselves are petty but which carry the possibilities of wider trouble. Perhaps, for instance, some one did not ask you to tea when you thought he or she

should have done so. You say, "What a small thing to speak of." True, but it is the little foxes that spoil the vines. (Song of Sol. ii. 15.) Often it is the working of small, petty jealousies and irritations that hinders the Lord's people from being occupied with what is spiritual. There is a simple remedy lying to hand. It is this: the moment you feel the thing enter your soul—the hurt, the irritation—you can forgive, and the sting has gone. The trespass, if there at all, may have been quite unintentional. It may be so small that you would hesitate to put it on the conscience of another; you may be ashamed to be hurt at such a small thing, but the moment you forgive for Christ's sake, the thing is gone.

I remember hearing, years ago, of a sister who had lent some money to a brother, which he had not repaid. She confided to another that the matter grieved her. He asked, "Do you think he feels it?" "Yes," she replied, "I know he does, for he avoids me." "Well," he answered, "would you like all this feeling to be removed? You can remove it by forgiving him." Forgiveness removes the bitterness and the distance; and that is how God brings men near to Himself. You will remember what the Lord said in the Pharisee's house, "Her many sins are forgiven; for she loved much; but

he to whom little is forgiven loves little." Forgiveness brings about love. A small appreciation of forgiveness goes with a small measure of love.

Immediately following the Lord's answer to Peter's question as to forgiveness is the parable of the unmerciful servant, which sets forth the kingdom of heaven becoming like a king who would reckon with his bondmen. Do not let us miss this; it is intensely solemn! A time of reckoning is coming. The Lord is going to see how near my forgiveness is to His; He is going to measure our forgiveness to each other by His forgiveness to us. The parable does not altogether refer to the future, for it says, "And having begun to reckon"; wherever the end may reach to, the reckoning is presented as having begun. The teaching of the parable unfolds the fact that the one who withheld forgiveness, who did not deal with his brother as God had dealt with him, should be delivered to the tormentors, until he had paid all that was owing to him (that is, to the Lord). What a solemn consideration! It is the governmental consequence of not having forgiven another when we ourselves have been forgiven of God. Through failure to forgive a brother, I may be called upon to pay what I owe. What are these tormentors? Have

you ever seen a person to whom every consideration only yields bitterness? We sometimes meet those who were once happy in the company of the Lord's people, but who are now filled with bitterness. The expression "tormentors" is very strong. It represents the most terrible kind of discipline. It is the Lord's intervention in the life of the one who refuses to forgive. "Thus also my heavenly Father shall do to you, if ye forgive not from your hearts every one his brother."

And now I turn to the passage in James. It is a scripture well worth our consideration. I refer to it because it has been much pressed upon my spirit that there are many dear young people who do not make spiritual progress, and the reason may not be manifest. It reads, "Confess therefore your offences to one another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed." Bear with me in this. Is there any secret sin in your life? anything you are going on with which the brethren know nothing about? Such is a very serious matter, and I feel, with deep concern, for any one in that condition. Perhaps it is the case with some one here; and that you have prayed again and again to the Lord to help you to overcome and get above this thing, whatever it is. You start out in the morning, it may be, with a

sense that the Lord has forgiven you, but before the day is out this terrible secret thing has overcome you again. I feel for you, dear brother or sister, if there be one in this condition, but I can testify to the truth that God has provided a way of escape.

Perhaps you say, Why does not the Lord help me and give me power? I think I can suggest an answer. The Lord loves to use His people. He loves to put them in the position of being instruments of His administrative power. He loves to administer healing and forgiveness through one another. I do not understand from scripture that the Lord would always do Himself what He can give another to do. He uses His people as instruments! They are vessels He has capacitated to express His own movements; they are the product of His own work; why should He not use them? Why should He not use a Paul to administer His bounty? Paul was a vessel formed in divine grace; a strong man naturally, but broken and subdued to Christ, and in lesser measure there are many such.

I believe James has this in view. Let me repeat the verse. "Confess therefore your offences to one another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed." Here, dear brethren, is a way of healing from the terrible

secret thing; *confess it* one to another (not to many). It is so simple. If you are in the grip of something from which you do not get deliverance by confession and prayer to the Lord directly, try a brother; confess it to him. The Lord may be pleased to grant healing through him.

Why does the Lord set up this administrative healing amongst the brethren? Because they are to be the great administrators of His bounty in the world to come. If we do not learn how to administer His bounty to-day, how shall we do so then? What could we tell ten cities of men, women and children of the wealth and bounty of Christ if we had not learnt it in our sojourn here. In the previous verses we are told, "Is any sick among you? let him call to him the elders of the assembly, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord . . . and if he be one who has committed sins, it shall be forgiven him." What blessed features of administration the Lord would work out through His people—healing and forgiveness!

I often ponder the closing verse in James' epistle: "If any one among you err from the truth, and one bring him back, let him know that he that brings back a sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death

and shall cover a multitude of sins." I should like to be "one" as the instrument of the Lord's grace, to save a soul from death and so cover a multitude of sins.

It was on my mind to indicate to you the importance of being concerned as to the exercise of forgiveness. I cannot see that any one can be in the enjoyment of forgiveness from God and refuse it to another. There is no wrong that another can do to me that can approach to the measure of my offences against God. May God help us to forgive, for Christ's sake.

A. E. M.

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