

Toward Understanding the Biblical Concept of Forgiveness

I. Some of the Essential Elements in Forgiveness.

A. The word used most often for forgiveness (Aphesis) has in it the thought of “dismissal,” “release,” “sending away,” and “restoration of relationship.”

B. With these thoughts in mind it seems we are to recognize forgiveness as:

1. “Releasing a person from any grudge,”
2. “Giving up claim to remittal.”
3. “To relinquish demand for requital,”
4. “To remit the penalty,” and
5. “To seek restoration of relationship, and if not possible to maintain an attitude/desire for reconciliation.”

II. Some Significant Passages on Forgiveness.

A. Matthew 6:12, 14, 15

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. . . For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. Matt 6:12,14,15

Observations: The emphasis here appears to be on three aspects. (1) the need to recognize our “debts,” (what we owe God); (2) forgiving others (as we are forgiven); and (3) understanding that failure to do so will bring something of a barrier of fellowship (grieving the Holy Spirit, etc.) between God and ourselves. The “forgiveness” that is withheld from us by God — if we do not forgive, appears to be (#5 above) — fullness of fellowship and not guilt that would keep us out of Heaven. We are told that when we receive the Lord Jesus we are completely forgiven of all guilt (Eph 1:7; Col 2:13; Heb 10:17). The implication appears to be, in this Matthew passage, that we must always forgive those who wrong us, always be in the attitude of forgiveness whenever we pray, and always seeking and ready for reconciliation.

B. Matthew 18:21,22, 35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. (note the parable) "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Observations: The teaching in this passage is on constant forgiveness from the heart! And, as so emphatically taught in the parable, any lack of forgiveness, will limit our fellowship with God and force Him to deal with us as we deal with others.

C. Mark 11:25,26

And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

Observations: The teaching appears to be the same as in the two passages above. The emphasis is on constantly doing it and maintaining that attitude.

D. Luke 17:3,4

So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

Observations: The message is the same as above — with emphasis on # 5. Here we are reminded that forgiveness has to do with a willingness for reconciliation and the giving of reconciliation for restoration of fellowship. And, that willingness must be constantly given to those who may continually work against us and then constantly seek forgiveness (reconciliation). The implied pattern is that we are to forgive (reconcile) the way God continually forgives (reconciles — 1 John 1:9) with us.

E. Eph 4:32

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Observations: The thought here is the meaning of love (kindness and compassion) — in relationships and how that love is to be expressed in forgiveness. We are to forgive according to the pattern of how we are forgiven by God. Totally forgiving people (as God has with our guilt), and then, being willing to reconcile (as God does with us).

Victor Matthews