

The Faith of Forgiveness

Mark 11:20-21 20 Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. 21 And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away."

²² So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. ²³ "For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. ²⁴ "Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.

²⁵ " And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.

²⁶ "But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

If we could go into the average mental hospital or mental institution, I wonder how many of the patients would be found to have deep rooted bitterness and resentment towards someone in their lives. Bitterness, unforgiveness, nursed hatred eats away at the souls of people, and in some cases, drives them into states of mind that lead them to be institutionalised: severe paranoia, deep depression, so called bi-polar disorder. An anger that burns for decades wrecks and can even unhinge a mind.

For Christians, the issue becomes even more important than merely practical consequences. Not only can Christians face the same horrible consequences: wrecked families, split churches, hardened souls, they can become obstacles to the Gospel for others. The message of Christianity is that man has offended God his Creator, but God in love sent His Son to pay for man's crimes, and take man's punishment on the cross, so that God can forgive man and be reconciled. When Christians harbour resentment, bitterness, and their lives are peppered with unresolved conflicts, it sends a mixed message. If these are those people who claim to know God and have been forgiven by Him, why are they so unforgiving? If their whole faith could be summarised with the word "Forgiven", how can they exist without extending that forgiveness to others?

Forgiveness is not merely about having homes and churches and workplaces with more harmonious relationships. Forgiveness reflects on who our God is, who we say He is, what we claim He has done. It is possible to deny the faith with our deeds, and bitterness and unforgiveness may be one of the most serious ways to do so.

That's why we find the command to forgive repeated throughout the New Testament. We even find a warning that a lack of forgiveness given will mean a lack of forgiveness received.

But even so, forgiveness is perhaps the hardest thing we have to do. Forgiving others for small offences seems easy. But forgiving people for betrayals, for deep slander, for abuse, for victimisation, for manipulation and exploitation is another story. Forgiving strangers can actually be easy but forgiving those who called themselves your friends, or your partners is another. Forgiving your own spouse, your own parents, your own children, your own siblings can seem impossible. Indeed, it can seem like moving a mountain.

And I think that's why in this Scripture we find moving mountains, faith, prayer and forgiveness all poured into one section. Our Lord is walking back to Jerusalem on day three of His passion week. It is Tuesday, and on Sunday He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and declared Himself to be king. Each day He returns to Bethany, about three kilometres away, sleeps there, and then returns to Jerusalem in the morning. On Monday He comes back, and curses a fig tree on his way. The fig tree was a living

parable of Israel and its leaders: fruitless – not giving back to God the fruit of real worship that He sought. He arrives in Jerusalem and cleans out the Temple, where worship has been turned into merchandise. He goes back to Bethany, and now on Tuesday morning He heads back into Jerusalem, where He will be confronted with the religious leaders and debate with them and answer their questions. But as they walk to the city, Peter sees the fig tree that Jesus cursed, and sees it has supernaturally withered up.

Peter remarks on it. As Jesus responds, it sets up a mini-teaching on prayer, faith, and forgiveness. They might even seem disjointed, but there is a unity to them. We can split it into two parts: you must pray with faith, and you must pray with forgiveness. And what we're going to see is how those relate. For us to be a forgiving people, we are going to have to learn to pray with faith to remove that mountain of bitterness.

I. You Must Pray With Faith to Receive

Mark 11:20-21 20 Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. 21 And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away."

²² So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. ²³ "For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. ²⁴ "Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them."

When Jesus responds to Peter, He implies that He (Jesus) had faith. When He had cursed the fig tree, He had trusted in His Father to make of that fig tree a living, visible parable of Israel. And through His faith, God had worked a miracle. Jesus, as the God-Man, exercised faith. As a true man, Jesus lived a life of dependence. He trusted in His Father; He relied on the Holy Spirit; He prayed fervently. In fact, with the exception of one or two miracles, most of them can be said to be not acts of God the Son acting immediately according to His power as God, but as human Messiah, actively depending on the the Holy Spirit to do that work through Him.

Jesus is the model example of one who trusted completely in His Father and leaned completely upon the Spirit. This miracle of the fig tree is another example.

Now Jesus says something which is difficult to understand. He says that someone who says to a mountain, "Be removed" and believes it will happen, without doubting, He will have it. It will take place.

A whole false religion has grown up around these verses. It is the false religion of positive confession, or Word-Faith teaching. This religion uses Christian terms like *God* and *Jesus* and *Holy Spirit*, but it is a very different religion. The god of that religion is in fact man, and man's own appetites. Whatever your carnal heart may want – more money, more health, more possessions, more admirers, more friends, more holidays, more jewellery – God will supply it, if you invoke this magic spell called faith. In their religion, faith is an unquestioned certainty that something will happen. The least amount of doubt is like a mispronounced word in a magic spell - it won't work. But if you can manage a kind of pure, unwavering certainty that you will have the things you want, and you make that faith real by saying it out loud – "I have a yacht in the Seychelles" – then you will have it. This false religion continues to attract thousands, if not millions of adherents, who see in it their lucky ticket to a more prosperous, earthly life.

Jesus does not mean that. How do I know? Because Jesus taught us to beware of covetousness. Because Jesus taught us to pray 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.' Because James tells us in 4:4

James 4:3 ³ *You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.*

So we know that Jesus does not mean what those false teachers make this Scripture out to be. But on the other hand, some people have explained this text in a way that seems to explain it away. They give explanations that don't do violence to other Scriptures, but don't seem to do justice to this text. The kind of statement that can lead to radical misinterpretations is so, because it is itself a radical statement.

So in trying to understand this, we must beware lest we declaw and defang this text until the very force it was meant to have is neutralised.

How do we explain it? We know from 1 John 5:14-15 that the key to being heard and being answered is asking according to His will.

1 John 5:14-15 ¹⁴ *Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.* ¹⁵ *And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.*

We know that according to John 15, when we abide in a loving, obedient relationship, we will have a our prayers answered.

John 15:7 ⁷ *"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.*

When we pray, we call to mind the Word of God. As we rightly interpret and rightly apply the Word of God to our situations, we can have unshakable, undoubting faith. Where God has spoken, His own character stands as surety behind that statement. But as we know, God's Word is mostly in general principles. As our requests get further away from God's general will, and closer into His secret will, we can no longer have faith in what He has said. Faith is not wishful thinking. Faith is not trying hard to believe it will be so, and forcing God to change His mind. Faith is not having faith in faith. As we travel from where God has actually spoken, to where He has not, we enter the realm of, 'If it be Thy will.'. We can still have absolute certainty that God will do what is best and according to His revealed will, but I cannot decide for God what He must do. I can ask Him, with faith in what is revealed, and throw myself upon His mercy.

I would say it is possible that God the Spirit may choose, on some occasions, to give us faith, to give us an inner assurance, and inner certainty that He is going to grant something. But this is not something we can control, nor should we try. This is something which God may choose to do to a submitted, abiding believer, who is praying God's revealed will, and looking for God's mercy.

Now, what does all this have to do with forgiveness? Well, now Jesus is going to build on that foundation of faith-filled prayer, and say something about forgiveness.

II. You Must Pray With Forgiveness to Receive

²⁵ *"And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in*

heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.

²⁶ *"But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."*

What does forgiveness have to do with faith-filled prayer? Well, first, forgiveness can seem like an immovable mountain. Saying that I must forgive everyone seems as implausible and as impossible as telling mountains to jump into the sea.

If you are wounded, or hurt, you will not be able to forgive without faith. You will need grace, enablement and empowerment from a source outside you. That's why when people say, "Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?" the right response is "No! I find nothing in myself to forgive you. But when I look upward and outward, I find in someone else the grace and power to forgive you."

This same faith that we need for truly answered prayer is going to come into play when we forgive others. And here's the good news. You don't need to wonder if it is God's will that you forgive that person. There is no hidden will of God on this one. This is not mysterious, nor is it like knowing if God wants you to take that job or leave the country or if He is going to heal you. He has told you:

Matthew 18:21-22 Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

Luke 17:3-4 ³ "Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ "And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him."

Ephesians 4:32 ³² And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.

Right here, in verse 25, Jesus commands you to forgive the one you have anything against. This is God's will, so you can have undoubting, unshakable faith that this is what God wants. It seems like a mountain, it seems impossible, but it is, without a doubt, what God wants from you.

The next thing you need to notice is when you are to do this forgiving. This is very interesting. When must you forgive this one? Is that person even present? What about the need for them to repent and seek reconciliation?

Here is an absolutely crucial thing to understand about forgiveness. There is both a vertical (you and God) aspect to forgiveness, and a horizontal (you and the other person) aspect to forgiveness. The vertical aspect you do without the other person, you do it while you are praying, you do it while in private prayer with God. In fact, it becomes the basis for the horizontal aspect. You won't be able to do the rebuking or repenting if you haven't done this act of praying.

What must we pray? After all, what does God have to do with my quarrel with another person? Answer: What did Jesus have to do with your sins? Did He commit them? No, but He bore their punishment. He became the sin-bearer, the debt-payer, so that God counts your sin paid for, He counts the offence dealt with, He counts your crimes sufficiently punished. Jesus took your debt, so that God could not write it off, but count it fully paid.

Now when somebody harms you and sins against you, that is a sin. It is a sin against you, but who is it firstly and ultimately a sin against? God. That's why David, who had sinned against Bathsheba, and Uriah, and Joab, and the child that was conceived in Bathsheba, could say in Psalm 51:4

Psalm 51:4 ⁴ *Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight -- That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge.*

Sin is ultimately against God, even when you are harmed. And who took upon Himself the sin of the world? Who paid the price for that deed?

So what goes on in this vertical transaction of forgiveness? Are we praying, *God help me to forgive him?* Are we praying, *God please, give me nicer feelings towards her, because I can't stand her?* Are we begging God to take out our bitterness and miraculously give us love?

No. What did Jesus teach us in the Lord's Prayer?

Matthew 6:12 ¹² *And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.*

Forgive us our debts, even as we count their debts paid for. Count our sins forgiven, even as we count their sins forgiven.

But how can we do that? How can I count that sin done against me paid for? They have never said sorry! He never even admitted to it! She continues to act as if nothing happened! He doesn't even realise how he hurt me! She pretends to be so holy, when she abused me! He stole from me, he lied about me, he cheated, and no one caught him!

In other words, our hearts are crying out for justice. We are saying, right the wrongs! Balance the scales! And up to a point, that is entirely biblical. That resonates with the psalmists who say:

Psalm 94:3 ³ *LORD, how long will the wicked, How long will the wicked triumph?*

or like the perfected saints in glory say:

Revelation 6:10 ¹⁰ *And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"*

But here is where the prayer of faith takes place. God wants us to forgive. We believe that by faith. We also believe that God Himself took the punishment for sins. We believe that God is just. So by faith, we release the person's debt to the cross and trust to God's justice.

It is not wrong to desire justice. It is wrong to take out vengeance on another in your heart. Because who alone reserves the right to take vengeance? Who reserves the right to be the judge and executioner?

Romans 12:19 ¹⁹ *Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.*

So, by faith, while praying, I remind myself that God takes care of justice in His universe. It's His

responsibility. And because of the Cross, I know how committed He is to it. Because of Hell, I know how committed He is to it. When I say “He's getting away with it!” I'm not speaking in faith, but in unbelief.

So I count the debt paid, even as I count my debts paid. I see my massive sin debt against God as paid in Christ, and my fellow human's smaller debt to me also paid. This is why Jesus says, If you do not forgive, you will not be forgiven.

On two levels this happens. If you are a true believer, and you harbour resentment, then you will not experience the joy of assurance of forgiveness. God will chasten you by letting you experience an uncleansed conscience, until you relent, forgive others, and so experience the forgiveness that is yours in Christ.

On a second level, if you keep refusing to forgive, you may well be one who has not understood or experienced the Gospel. Your deep-seated bitterness belongs to someone who has not known the freedom of forgiveness in Christ, and so, in reality, your sins remain unforgiven. You do not forgive, because you have not been forgiven.

True believers forgive. They do their hardest forgiveness work in prayer, where they trust to the justice of God and the work of the Cross and the awful reality of Hell, to believe that no sin goes unpunished, and their longing for justice will be met. Then, relying on that, they release the debt to God. “Forgive me, God, even as I write now, release the far smaller debts to me. I can do that, because You have already paid for them all.”

Once this vertical transaction has taken place – it frees you up to do the horizontal. With the debt released, you can rebuke if necessary. You can receive repentance with open arms. And if the person is unrepentant, you can still treat him as the Bible tells you to treat an estranged enemy – with kindness. Until he acts to restore the horizontal aspect of restored fellowship by admitting his wrong and asking for forgiveness, you can still love him, and pray for him, and treat him well, even though the relationship has not been fully restored horizontally. Why? Because you've done the really hard work vertically. You've prayed, and believed, and released.

George Herbert said “He who cannot forgive destroys the bridge over which he himself must pass.”

If you are a Christian, then you are a forgiven one. You are an ambassador of reconciliation, and bitterness and unforgiveness destroy your message. So do the hard work in silence. Pour out your desires for justice. Make known your fears. Cry your tears of hurt. And then leave the sin on the bleeding body of Christ. Let it be buried with Him, and then see the Risen Lord without the sin. That's how, by faith, you move the mountain of bitterness.