

Seventy Times Seven

“Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.”

—*Matthew 18:21,22*

IN THIS FINAL ARTICLE OF the series, “The Bible Versus Tradition,” we will examine the subject of forgiveness. Christian theology has long emphasized the importance of the godlike quality of forgiveness, as well as its basis of mercy and love. Even among non-Christian religious beliefs, the noble aspects of these qualities of character are often taught.

While the teaching of forgiveness has been part of religious services, sermons, and schooling for centuries, sadly, it has not been put into practice nearly so much. The “traditions” of fallen mankind which have often taken the place of forgiveness are all too common—vindictiveness, character assassination and hatred, to say nothing of outright retribution and “payback.” Such traditions are even defended as being in harmony with the godly principle of justice.

In the pages which follow, we will examine the Bible's testimony on the important subject of forgiveness. As we do so, it will become evident that the qualities of justice, mercy and forgiveness, as taught in the Bible, all work in harmony with each other. Indeed, the misbegotten, man-made traditions of hatred and payback have no place in the divine arrangement, nor should they be found in the life of those striving to emulate the Creator's character.

FORGIVENESS—A QUALITY OF GOD

To study the Scriptures is to find great emphasis placed upon the quality of forgiveness. First and foremost, our Heavenly Father considers it important to point out in his Word that he is a forgiving God, and that his entire plan for the recovery of mankind is a plan involving forgiveness. This facet of God's mind and heart has too often been either overlooked completely or not understood in its fullness by a majority of his intelligent creation.

As the divine principles were set forth throughout the ages by the prophets, it is said that those writers desired to understand the things they wrote. (Dan. 12:8,9; Matt. 13:17; I Pet. 1:10-12) Their limited view of this wonderful aspect of the Creator stimulated in them a keen interest in the outworking of his plan for man. How was it to be accomplished? How could God be "just, and the justifier" of those who were sinners? (Rom. 3:26) They were observers, too, of the fact that there was "no place where earthly failings are more felt than up in heaven," as the poet has so wisely written. We have come to appreciate this fact also, because God so often

expresses in his Word the love he has for his human creation, even though they be sinners.

In the Book of Exodus, we are told that Moses wanted to know more about God. This is to be expected of all those who have come into relationship with God to any degree. Their search invariably leads them to conclude that the beauty of God and his character is immeasurable. Moses actually asked to see God, but the Lord told him that would be impossible. He said, “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.” (Exod. 33:20) God did, however, show himself to Moses in the only way he can be revealed to mankind, and that is through a description of his character. He declared himself with these words: “The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.” (Exod. 34:6) These words are the epitome of the united testimony of the Bible. Everything we read in the Scriptures confirms that this is indeed an accurate characterization of our God.

FORGIVENESS, MERCY AND JUSTICE

In his statement to Moses, the Heavenly Father emphasized another significant point about himself—that he is a merciful God, “Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty.” (vs. 7) The point is made that the forgiving quality of our Creator is not only a manifestation of his loving desire to favor his faithful people, but that he loves even those who are out of harmony with him. His method of dealing with them is expressed in three harmoniously combined attributes, as pointed out

in the foregoing verse—“keeping mercy,” “forgiving iniquity,” and the exercise of justice as shown in the words, “by no means clear the guilty.”

We can readily see the importance of the principle of justice coming into play in the matter of salvation. If God simply forgave those who sinned out of the goodness of his heart, and said, “I forgive you; do not sin anymore,” it is clear that a door would be open for great laxness, and lowered appreciation for his high standards of righteousness. If God so dealt with one sin, to be consistent he would have to with all others alike, and the lofty principles of life which he has set for his people would tend to be degraded. It would no doubt be said by those who erred, “Sure, I made a mistake, but God will forgive me,” and such a sentiment would likely be expressed again subsequent to future errors. Thus, the principle of justice, which is so vital even in human relationships, but especially so with God, would lose its essence.

Justice is so fundamental with God that the psalmist says it is the very foundation of his throne: “Justice and judgment are the habitation of thy throne: mercy and truth shall go before thy face.” (Ps. 89:14) The Hebrew word in this verse translated “habitation” means “fixture or established place, foundation.” The Bible stresses the fact that while God is a God of mercy and forgiveness, having a great desire to recover all sinners, he will not “clear the guilty” by any means that violates his foundation attribute of justice.

In the verse partially quoted earlier from Exodus 34:7, God continues by reminding us how justice worked after the fall in Eden with regard to

the human family. The Lord said he visited “the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.” In other words, the sins of “father” Adam, of which Eve was counted as a part, together with the accompanying sentence of death, have been passed on to all of his “children” through inheritance from one generation to the next, all the way down to our time.—Gen. 2:24; Rom. 5:12; I Cor. 15:22

Notwithstanding his foundation quality of justice, the clear message of the Bible is that the Creator is also a God of great mercy, and his plan of salvation for man’s recovery from sin is based on forgiveness. Still, it has been said by some that forgiveness was but little demonstrated in God’s past dealings with men. In the beginning he surely did not forgive Adam but administered a severe sentence for his transgression. However, the Bible makes manifest that, in the end, God intends to forgive Adam. In fact, all that yield themselves to the righteous principles of Christ’s coming kingdom will be forgiven. The Prophet Jeremiah wrote concerning this glorious “new covenant” arrangement, and of God’s statement: “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (Jer. 31:31-34) God’s plan for the future age is built upon his merciful forgiveness and is designed to bring into his favor all who have repentant hearts for having transgressed his law.

OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

We generally view God’s actions during Old Testament times as being very exacting and, perhaps,

harsh applications of justice: “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” (Exod. 21:24) However, when we study more deeply, we are impressed by the elaborate arrangements God had made for the remission of sins under Israel’s Law Covenant. We have come to recognize these as pictures, or prototypes, of the much greater redemptive work to be accomplished through Christ Jesus. The Apostle Paul makes this connection and comparison repeatedly in his writings, particularly in the Books of Romans, Galatians and Hebrews.

In the fourth and fifth chapters of Leviticus are found descriptions of various ways in which sins could be remitted. The first of these is in chapter four, verses 16-20, which describe the specific means by which a sin would be “forgiven” by the offering of a sacrifice by the priest on behalf of the sinner. It was a forgiving arrangement, and not necessarily an “eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” However, it was requisite that first the sinner acknowledge his trespasses against God’s law and admit that he was a sinner. Remission was accomplished by going to God through the priest in the ordained way, with an appropriate “sin” offering. By both acknowledging the sin, as well as by following the prescribed actions for its expiation, God’s justice would be satisfied, his mercy and forgiveness could be exercised, and the sin remitted.

God honored this arrangement which he had instituted with the nation of Israel throughout his dealings with them under the Law Covenant. Paul later stated that these sin offerings did not make the “comers thereunto perfect,” and therefore they must necessarily be repeated over and over again.

(Heb. 10:1) However, the Lord did accept them when made in accordance with the Law's instructions. On a national level, during the Day of Atonement, the sins of the entire nation of Israel were forgiven for the ensuing year. There again, though, it was necessary to repeat these sin offerings every year.—Lev. 23:26-28; 16:1-34; Heb. 9:6,7; 10:3

The Law Covenant also provided for sacrifices other than sin offerings. There were peace offerings, thank offerings, offerings for trespasses which occurred through ignorance, and gift or "heave" offerings to the Lord. (Lev. 7:1-5,11-13; Num. 18:29) All of these sacrifices of the Law we can well understand as appropriate pictures when we project them into Christ's kingdom and view them as applying to the people of earth offering themselves in dedication to do the will of God. How thankful they will be that their loving and merciful Creator has made an arrangement of better sacrifices whereby they can receive everlasting forgiveness. (Heb. 9:23,24) Mankind then will not bring offerings of animals or meal cakes, but of their own hearts, desiring to do perfectly the will of God.

Though a picture of better things to come, the Law did express God's forgiveness of sin. In Leviticus 4:26, we read concerning the one bringing an acceptable sacrifice for a sin-offering, "It shall be forgiven him." The same statement is repeated in verses 31 and 35. In chapters 5 and 6, these words again appear five more times with regard to various offerings and sacrifices for sins. Thus, it is clear that once an acceptable offering was made, forgiveness would come to the bearer. Undeniably, forgiveness is the underlying principle behind God's method

of salvation, as shown in these and other Old Testament examples.

GOD GAVE HIS SON

The Heavenly Father is truly a God of forgiveness. He prepared the way for man's salvation at great cost to himself. While his mercy would be freely expressed, yet he could "by no means clear the guilty," and violate his foundation attribute of justice. God made the greatest sacrifice possible, the offering of the life of his own Son to take Adam's place, and thus take "away the sin of the world." (John 1:29; Rom. 5:18) Jesus, in recognition of this fact, made this powerful and much venerated statement: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son."—John 3:16

Jesus throughout his ministry continually emphasized the great importance of forgiveness, and the need for recognizing it as a fundamental quality of God's character. In his sermon on the mount, Jesus gave his disciples a new concept of God's law. He drew a contrast between Israel's view which dominated Old Testament times, and the high appreciation which his disciples must learn to observe as Christians. He stated, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven."—Matt. 5:43-45

These words reveal that in order for us to look at our enemies as does God, we will have to transform

our point of view to conform to his. God so loved his enemies, those who were estranged from him and his laws, that he sacrificed the dearest treasure of his heart, his only Son, on their behalf. This higher concept of God's law must be recognized and appreciated by his children who are striving to be made worthy to fill the position of those selected to express God's forgiveness to the world during Christ's coming kingdom.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul indicates that the "tables of stone," which principally expressed the "letter" of the law, are not adequate to teach God's righteous principles to the followers of Christ. (II Cor. 3:3) He is now, as it were, rewriting his law, not in stone, but in the hearts of his people by means of the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Heart appreciation is required to express God's law in the same way that Jesus did. Summarizing God's law, he said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. ... Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." (Matt. 22:37-39) Love, which is given expression through mercy and forgiveness, is thus the real essence of God's law.

CHRISTIANS MUST BE FORGIVING

The Lord is in the process of developing new teachers and instructors for the coming kingdom. These will have that understanding of God's law which, when passed on to the world of mankind, will cause it to be written in their "hearts" and in their "inward parts," drawing them back to God. (Jer. 31:33) To be prepared to function for this great work of the next age, we must become like him.

God set no lesser ones than himself and his beloved Son, Christ Jesus, as examples of how we should view the great principle of forgiveness. In his sermon on the mount, Jesus spoke of this high standard to his disciples: “Be ye therefore perfect [complete], even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”—Matt. 5:48

In this same sermon, Jesus laid great stress on the matter of godlike forgiveness when he taught them to pray. (Matt. 6:9-13) His model prayer incorporated the important theme of forgiveness: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Our Master, emphasizing the importance of this thought, explained, “If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (vss. 14,15) What a sobering thought is herein presented! We cannot expect to be forgiven of our sins by God unless we first forgive others who may have trespassed against us.

HOW MANY TIMES?

No doubt it was as a result of pondering these words that Peter later came to Jesus with the question posed in our opening text as to how many times he should forgive one who repeatedly sinned against him. The fact that he mentioned “seven times” in his question gives indication that this seemed sufficient, perhaps even generous, to Peter. Jesus answered, however, saying that would not be nearly enough forgiveness. To be like the Heavenly Father would require going far beyond any earthly-minded limits.

Jesus replied to Peter, "I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven." The certainty that no one would tally up 490 offenses against himself evinces the fact that there is no limit on forgiveness. As many times as someone, in sincerity, asks for forgiveness, it should be granted, even as God has set no limit on his forgiveness. We have all enjoyed our Heavenly Father's forgiveness far beyond the 490 offenses which Jesus mentioned.

AN IMPORTANT PARABLE

Jesus followed up his statement to Peter with a parable that expresses the matter well from God's standpoint. (Matt. 18:23-35) It is another parable which Jesus begins with the statement, "Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto," indicating that here was a lesson for those who are called to be the children of God.

The parable begins, "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants." One servant owed the king a tremendously huge debt, "ten thousand talents." How descriptive this is of the human family and their relationship to God in the present fallen and sinful state. In like condition we come to God, realizing how impossible it is for us to pay our great debt of sin and unworthiness of life.—vss. 23,24

In the parable, the servant was brought before the king to see if some method of working out his debt could be devised, but it was clear the man did not have anything with which to pay. Neither does the human race have anything to offer God as payment for the great debt they owe to their King. Therefore, the king "commanded him to be sold,

and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.” (vs. 25) Likewise the debt of sin under the sentence pronounced upon Adam included his entire family, the whole world of mankind, selling them into a condition of servitude and slavery.

The servant of the parable pleaded for patience, but the king was aware that the servant could never pay the money he owed. However, Jesus explained, “The lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.” (vss. 26,27) By these beautiful words our Master taught us something which he knew about the character of our Heavenly Father. God is merciful toward the human race and has compassion for them because of their inextricable plight of sin and resulting death.

As in the parable, we, too, go before our Almighty King, Jehovah, bowing down before him, realizing our helplessness, and asking for forgiveness. God, in his great mercy, having been moved with compassion, even long before the foundations of the earth were laid, made provision through Christ to remove our great debt. Of this, Paul wrote: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ... According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.”—Eph. 1:3,4

There is, however, another powerful lesson to be found in Jesus’ parable. The servant who was forgiven of his great debt also had debtors. He began to press for payment from one of them who, by comparison, owed him a very small amount. His debtor also pleaded for patience, but the servant was too

hard-hearted to listen, and had him thrown into prison.—Matt. 18:28-30

We can well imagine Jesus' showing his displeasure with the servant's ingratitude and lack of mercy. By expressing the king's feelings with the words, "His Lord was wroth," he tells us how God would feel about a circumstance of this sort. The king was justly angry, calling him a "wicked servant," and taking away his favor. Jesus said, "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses."—vss. 32-35

It has been written, "To err is human; to forgive divine." The Word of God well confirms this as fact. His plan is a plan of forgiveness. Those who aspire to serve in his kingdom must themselves, of necessity, be forgiving. Let us, therefore, not follow the common "tradition" of fallen man, which tends toward vindictiveness and retribution. Rather, let us mark well and emulate the never-changing, merciful character of God and of his Son Christ Jesus. The time is soon to come when these words of our loving Heavenly Father will be manifest to all people: "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee."—Isa. 44:22 ■