

Forgiveness, Forgiving And Forgetting

This subject which I have chosen to talk about this evening brings together what on the one hand goes to the very heart of our relationship with God and what, on the other, goes to the very heart of our relationship with our fellow men and women. Forgiveness - that is, the matter of the Lord's forgiveness towards us; Forgiving - that is, our readiness to forgive; and Forgetting - forgetting, that is, what we assert we have forgiven. Forgiveness, forgiving and forgetting. As we think about them, questions arise in our minds with regard to all three. There are times, are there not, when we are in doubt about God's willingness to forgive. The question is sometimes asked, and for good reason, whether there are things, or whether there is anything, for which He will not forgive us. And then when it comes to us and other people, are we ever justified in withholding forgiveness from those who have wronged us? Your first response may be to say 'no'. At the same time there are things people do which make forgiveness very difficult. And we might well sympathise with those who, in certain situations, do find it difficult to forgive. Finally, there is the age-old question, 'How do I forget what I have forgiven?'

Let's look, then, at the question of the Lord's forgiveness towards us.

We need not doubt that on every occasion and in every set of circumstances, whatever we have done, irrespective of how selfish or hurtful we have been, or how seriously we have sinned, either in thought or intention, the Lord forgives. He doesn't need prompting to do so. It's not as if He has to think about it or that we have to stir Him into action by long prayers or self-imposed sacrifices to do so. The truth is that He never turns away from us; never withholds His love from us; never ceases to be on hand unhesitatingly ready to extend forgiveness towards us. Having told Peter that he should be ready to forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven - an ever-willing, never tiring, readiness to forgive - what, when we think about it - must be His own response where His forgiveness is sought? "The Lord", we read, "forgives every man his sins, and never punishes for them, and does not even impute them, because He is Love Itself and Good Itself." (*True Christian Religion* 409). The point is worth repeating, because it is important and because so many worry about this: There is nothing we can do; no breaking of a Commandment so serious; that the Lord is unwilling or unable to forgive.

However, the Lord's forgiveness is one thing. The removal from our lives of what it is for which we stand in need of that forgiveness, is another. The two things are distinct and different. We can go down on our knees and pray for forgiveness for something we've done or would have liked to do, and we can be certain that the forgiveness prayed for will be forthcoming. There's no question about that. But the fact that our sin is forgiven doesn't mean it is removed from our lives. This is where we have got to set about shunning and avoiding that particular thing in the days, weeks, months and maybe even years afterwards. If we don't then it will just keep recurring again and again and again, for all that we pray for forgiveness for it. And here is where the other side of the teaching quoted a moment ago enters in. "The Lord" we noted "forgives every man his sins, and never punishes for them, and does not even impute them, because He is Love Itself and Good Itself." But then it goes on, "nevertheless, sins are not wiped out on this account; for that can only be done by repentance." (ibid).

We have this point brought out in the Bible where God's forgiveness is spoken about. As to His willingness to forgive we are left in no doubt whatever. Psalm 86, verse 5, for example:

"You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon You." But then there is the teaching that if God's forgiveness is to be effective with us; that if the sin for which we pray forgiveness is to be removed from our lives; there is that which we must do. And this is brought out, especially, in the second Book of Chronicles Chapter 7, verse 14: "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

Isn't there though - you may well be asking - a statement somewhere that there is one sin for which God won't forgive us? And the answer is, yes, there is. In Matthew's Gospel Chapter 12. "Whoever says a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come". It's pretty dramatic, isn't it?

Once again though the teaching touched so far upon holds good here. God always forgives, in every situation, in every set of circumstances, whatever it is that has taken place. If there is something that remains unforgiven the fault is ours, not God's. And what these words in Matthew are saying to us is that it is possible to do something whereby God can't reach us and forgive us. Not that He doesn't try or doesn't want to. But because we remove ourselves at such a distance from Him. Well, what is that thing?

The Holy Spirit is the Lord's presence with us which grows as we live according to the teaching He has given us. If we accept and live by the teaching of the Lord and then turn around and reject that teaching we sin against the Holy Spirit. And this is the danger pointed to. Take the Commandment forbidding adultery, for example. If you accept that as true and build your life and marriage around it but then knowingly and consciously, quite aware of what you are doing, turn around and reject it, you have sinned against the Holy Spirit. And what you have done remains unforgiven because you have destroyed something which previously gave the Lord a foothold in your life. He can no longer use that Commandment concerning adultery with you. You have yourself destroyed its whole point and purpose in your life.

We move on then to the second part of the subject, the matter of our forgiving others the wrongs and injuries they have caused us. Indeed, it's more than that. It's the question of our forgiving others and of forgiving ourselves. Both are involved. It's interesting and must be significant, that of all the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, the one which the Lord singled out and went on to speak about was this one concerning our forgiving others. "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." As we have seen, we rightly depend on the Lord's willingness to forgive us. In turn, and as Christians we should - indeed, we must - strive for a similar willingness to forgive people who transgress and offend against us. And there's a tremendous challenge there. As we spoke of it earlier, "an ever-willing, never tiring, readiness to forgive". That really is something, isn't it? And yet this is what is asked of us. More than that, it is what is commanded us. "Then Peter came up and said to Jesus, Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jesus said to him. I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." (Matthew 18: 21,22).

This doesn't mean that we meekly submit to whatever is handed out to us or that we do not call for, even insist upon, apology, amendment, change and reform of the other person's life and attitude, even restitution. What we do not do is hold whatever it was against the other, harbour resentment, or quietly wait for an opportunity to do something similarly hurtful to them.

We find it at times one of the hardest things to do, to forgive. And this must be at least part of the reason why the Lord singled it out and put such special emphasis on it. To forgive unreservedly. Not to carry our hurts, our grudges, our resentments, our remembrance of things long past, around with us.

Being ready or able to forgive applies, however, not just to other people. It also applies where we ourselves are concerned. We all know how it is that the memory of something which happened years ago, perhaps, and about which we only now feel sadness and shame, will be accountably re-awakened and all the guilt and heart-ache associated with it comes flooding back into our minds. And that it the time to re-assert our trust in the Lord's willingness to forgive, that He has forgiven that thing, and to resolve again our determination to avoid it in the future. That's all that is required by way of response to such memories. How do I, though, forget what I have forgiven. Many people say they can't.

If you are, yourself, asking that question, also ask yourself, first of all, whether you have really forgiven the wrong that was done you. Often people haven't though they say they have. The old resentment and hurt is still there. Ask yourself also whether you are not enjoying holding something against another, enjoying the fact that in your own mind you can grind down their image and reputation. And if, after you have sorted through these questions, the inability to forgive is still there, be prepared to look at, consider, and finally grant the real possibility that there were other reasons and motives which may have caused the offender to do what he or she did. Aim to be more merciful in your judgement. Concentrate on other possible explanations which may have caused them to do what they did. And as you do so you will find it easier to infill your forgiveness with forgetfulness.

The Swedenborg Programme – Number 23.

<http://www.swedenborg.com.au>