

Forgiveness, Forgiving, and Forgetting revisited.

This subject which we have here before us this evening brings together what on the one hand goes to the very heart of our relationship with the Lord and what, on the other hand, goes to the very heart of our relationship with people.

Forgiveness - that is, the question of the Lord's forgiveness towards us. Forgiving - that is, our readiness to forgive. Forgetting - forgetting what we assert or insist we have forgiven. Forgiveness, forgiving and forgetting. Under each of these headings questions arise, people being uncertain as to quite what is involved.

Questions arise, for example, such as, "How can I know that such and such I did has been forgiven?". Are there things we can do which are too dreadful for the Lord to forgive us? Are we ever justified in withholding forgiveness from those who have wronged us? And what about those occasions when we have really been hurt or offended? We have forgiven the person, or people concerned, but we can't forget what happened. Have you ever heard someone say, 'Alright, I'll forgive you, but you can guarantee I will never forget what you said (or what you did)'?

First of all, the question of the Lord's forgiveness towards us. We need be in no doubt whatever, that on every occasion and in every set of circumstances, whatever we have done, irrespective of how selfish or hurtful we've been or how seriously we have sinned, either in thought or in intention, the Lord forgives. He doesn't need prompting to do so. It's not as if He has to think about it. 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 His forgiveness towards us.

As is the teaching given through Swedenborg: "The Lord 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). There is then nothing we can do; no breaking of a Commandment so serious; that the Lord is unwilling or unable to forgive. And that's important for us to remember.

However, the Lord's forgiveness - or His complete readiness to forgive - is one thing. The removal of what it is we need forgiveness for, is another. The two things are quite 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, or the reality of the Lord's forgiveness, doesn't mean that what it is we did or wanted to do, 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, maybe even years afterwards. If we don't, it will just keep popping up again and again and again, for all that we have prayed for forgiveness for it.

There is this very real distinction between the forgiving of sin and the removal of it from our lives. We can be completely sure of the Lord's forgiveness on every occasion. But the removal of what it is we seek His forgiveness for is very much in our hands and according to the effort we are willing to make.

Sins are removed or remitted, according to, and as a consequence of, the reforms and redirections we introduce into our lives with the Lord's help. "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" (Matthew 6: 14-15).

This brings us then to the second part of our 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 also forgiving ourselves.

It's interesting, and must be significant, that of all the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, the one which Jesus singled out and went on to speak about was this one regarding our forgiving others. . "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" As we've seen, we rightly depend, or count, on the Lord's willingness to forgive.

In turn, and as Christians, we should strive for a similar willingness with ourselves to forgive. 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."

This doesn't mean that we do not call for or even insist upon, amendment, change, reform of the other person's behaviour and attitudes, even restitution for damage caused. What we do not do is hold whatever it was against the other; harbour resentment; or quietly wait for an opportunity to do something similar to them, like they did to us.

We find at times one of the hardest things to do is to forgive, and this must be at least part of the reason why Jesus singled it out and put such special emphasis on it. To forgive unreservedly. Not to carry around with us our hurts, our grudges, our resentments, our remembrance of things long past. Families have broken apart because one or other party can't forgive an injury which took place long ago. They'll not bring themselves to speak with one another and all this kind of thing.

However being ready or able to forgive applies 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 perhaps happened years ago and about which we only feel sadness and shame, will be unaccountably reawakened, and all the guilt and heartache associated with it, and memories of the hurt it caused, come flooding back into our minds.

The story of king David's flight from Jerusalem during the rebellion of his son Absalom, has, in its deeper, spiritual meaning, much to teach us about this. As David left Jerusalem, the rebellion at that stage threatening to be a successful one, the man called Shimei came out and shouting tauntingly, reminded David of his past misdeeds. All the 'ghosts' from the past were reawakened. All David's sins remembered and called up against him.

And the interesting thing is how David reacted. He didn't stop, fight, argue, dispute or deny what was being said. Instead, he simply seems to have acknowledged the accuracy of the recollections now hurled at him and moved on. Abuse, dust, dirt and stones, were all thrown at David, but he wasn't going to enter into combat with Shimei or allow his followers to do so.

In Swedenborg's theological writings we read of how in order to induce temptation and to bring us to a sense of despair about ourselves, our unseen spiritual associates from hell, reawaken our memories of things done in the past, remind us of sins committed, now better forgotten and never remembered. As in the work, *Arcana Caelestia*, or *Heavenly Secrets*: "In temptations, evil spirits excite and draw out all the evil things which the man has done and thought, and thereby accuse and condemn him. Thus the conscience is hurt; and the mind comes into anxiety." (para. 8159).

As in the case of David, it is not a matter of arguing, disputing, or denying what it is we are reminded. Nor is it an occasion for a new round of guilt feelings, anxiety, and despair. Rather do we acknowledge the memory; reaffirm our trust in the Lord's forgiveness for it; resolve yet again to avoid it in future; and go on from there. This is the point at which we need, in a very real sense, to forgive ourselves.

It is often said, and perhaps we have said it ourselves, that we have a willingness to forgive, but that we can't forget. And this brings us to the third and final part of our subject. Forgetting what we say we have forgiven.

So long as we continue to believe that whoever it was, really meant what they did, or said; really set about to hurt or injure us; that they coolly planned what they did; that their comments and their actions were really them, then, yes, we will find it difficult to forget. But these are the times when we need to be ready to prefer another explanation; to look for excuses; to put a kinder, milder and more merciful interpretation on what happened and why it happened.

We feel duty bound to forgive, so we say we do. But so often there is no mercy with us; no looking for possible reasons which might explain what we found to be an obnoxious comment or behaviour. And the thing is that by excusing, or being ready to; by being ready to make allowances; we provide a basis in our thoughts into which the angels of heaven can inflow and be present. And once they are present with us we shall much more readily let the thing fade into the past where it belongs.

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