

Forgiveness, Justice, and Reconciliation

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Forgiveness is an attribute of God from which we benefit greatly for, without it, we could repent of our sins 'til the cows came home,' and it would avail us nothing. God's willingness to forgive us is the only reason that we can have eternal salvation, for who among us has not, anytime in our lives, sinned against God? True, it is our repentance coupled with Yeshua's sacrifice that saves us, but it is God's willingness to forgive us that caused Him to send us our Messiah in the first place.

But it is not God's forgiving nature that I want to speak about today, but rather ours. For some reason, men find it hard to forgive, and we sometimes judge each other even more harshly than God judges us. The result is that we sometimes withhold our forgiveness from those who have hurt us, while God Himself does not withhold His forgiveness from us when we hurt Him!

Yeshua was confronted with this issue when Kefa asked Him in Matthew 18:21:

"Rabbi, how often can my brother sin against me and I have to forgive him? As many as seven times?"

And Yeshua's answer to him in verse 22 was:

"No, not seven times, .. but seventy times seven!"

Then Yeshua followed up with a parable to help explain to Kefa the importance of forgiveness (Matthew 18:23-35); the parable went this way:

"Because of this, the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared with a king who decided to settle accounts with his deputies. Right away they brought forward a man who owed him many millions; and since he couldn't pay, his master ordered that he, his wife, his children and all his possessions be sold to pay the debt. But the servant fell down before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' So out of pity for him, the master let him go and forgave the debt. But as that servant was leaving, he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him some tiny sum. He grabbed him and began to choke him, crying, 'Pay back what you owe me!' His fellow servant fell before him and begged, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused; instead, he had him thrown in jail until he should repay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were extremely distressed; and they went and told their master everything that had taken place. Then the master summoned his servant and said, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt just because you begged me to do it. Shouldn't you have had pity on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And in anger his master turned him over to the jailers for punishment until he paid back everything he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat you, unless you each forgive your brother from your hearts."

While there is no explicit commandment in the *Torah* requiring that we forgive our brother, there is one commandment that implicitly means the same thing; in Leviticus 19:17 God says:

"Do not hate your brother in your heart, but rebuke your neighbor frankly, so that you won't carry sin because of him. Don't take vengeance on or bear a grudge against any of your people; rather, love your neighbor as yourself; I am ADONAI."

Rabbinic literature endorses the principle of forgiving others and gives, as the example we are to follow, Yosef's forgiveness of his brothers in Genesis 50:16-21:

So they [Yosef's brothers] sent a message to Yosef which said, "Your father gave this order before he died: 'Say to Yosef, "I beg you now, please forgive your brothers' crime and wickedness in doing you harm."' So now, we beg of you, forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Yosef wept when they spoke to him; and his brothers too came, prostrated themselves before him and said, "Here, we are your slaves." But Yosef said to them, "Don't be afraid! Am I in the place of God? You meant to do me harm, but God meant it for good- so that it would come about as it is today, with many people's lives being saved. So don't be afraid- I will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he comforted them, speaking kindly to them.

But back to Yeshua. Notice that when Kefa asked Yeshua how many times he had to forgive his brother, he asked it just that way, using the expression *"have to forgive him."* Clearly, Kefa was resistant to having to forgive each time his brother sinned against him, and it is often the same with us. Yeshua's parable was given as a warning to Kefa, but it is also a warning to us, that our willingness to forgive others is connected to God's willingness to forgive us.

Similarly, in Colossians 3:13:

"Bear with one another; if anyone has a complaint against someone else, forgive him. Indeed, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive."

Now why should it be so difficult for us to forgive? Probably because there is a lingering part of our fallen nature that causes us to want to lash out against those who harm us. But in Romans 12:19, Paul instructs us not to do that, for he says:

"Never seek revenge, my friends; instead, leave that to God's anger; for in the Tanakh it is written, "ADONAI says, 'Vengeance is my responsibility; I will repay.'"

Many of us do not realize it, but there are not one, but two kinds of forgiveness, and our responsibility to forgive is different for each of them. Let's consider the first one, that I will call "Personal Forgiveness." It is the kind that is commanded in Mark 11:25:¹

¹ In other translations, verses 25-26.

"And when you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive your offenses."

Notice that this Personal Forgiveness is unconditional and is to be granted, not only to brothers and sisters in the Lord, but to anyone who has sinned against us and hurt us. It does not seek to judge the offender, nor does it require that the offender be repentant, and it must be given as soon as possible after the offense is committed so that bitterness does not take root within us and do spiritual damage. This kind of forgiveness comprises a releasing of the matter to God to do what justice requires, and does not retain anger or desire for personal vengeance. Ephesians 4:31-32 says of it:

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, violent assertiveness and slander, along with all spitefulness. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted; and forgive each other, just as in the Messiah God has also forgiven you.

Personal Forgiveness is a manifestation of godly love that we are to give, even to our enemies, for we read in Luke 6:27-32:

Nevertheless, to you who are listening, what I say is this: "Love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone hits you on one cheek, offer the other too; if someone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well. If someone asks you for something, give it to him; if someone takes what belongs to you, don't demand it back. Treat other people as you would like them to treat you. What credit is it to you if you love only those who love you? Why, even sinners love those who love them.

Yeshua illustrated this kind of forgiveness when, in Luke 23:34a, He beseeched His Father in heaven to forgive His Roman soldier executioners who were, even at that moment, subjecting Him to an unjust and painful death;

Yeshua said, "Father, forgive them; they don't understand what they are doing."

Our granting of Personal Forgiveness, and our not harboring bitterness against those who have sinned against us, opens the way for God to forgive us for our sins as well. In the same way, if we do not grant Personal Forgiveness, Mark 11:25², Matthew 6: 14-15, and Luke 6:37 convey the certainty that God will not forgive us either:

For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will not forgive yours. (Matthew 6:14-15)

² *ibid.*

Don't judge, and you won't be judged. Don't condemn, and you won't be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. (Luke 6:37)

Now perhaps you are troubled by what seems to be the injustice of having to forgive a person for committing a sin against you if he remains unrepentant. Well, not to worry. Remember, I said that there were two kinds of forgiveness, so now let us examine the second kind, that I will call "Judicial Forgiveness,"³ and that is commanded in Luke 17:3-4:

Watch yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. Also, if seven times in one day he sins against you, and seven times he comes to you and says, 'I repent,' you are to forgive him.

Judicial forgiveness is different than Personal Forgiveness in several ways that this Scripture illustrates. First, it applies only to brother and sister believers. Second, whereas Personal Forgiveness must be given unconditionally, this kind of forgiveness is only granted if the offending brother repents. I call it "Judicial Forgiveness" because the one who has been sinned against is required to judge whether the offending brother is repentant before judicially forgiving him. And it is different in another way as well, which is illustrated in John 20: 23 which states:

If you forgive someone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you hold them, they are held.

Here you see that if one who is sinned-against forgives his offending brother, God also forgives the brother. Conversely, if one who is sinned against withholds forgiveness because, in his judgment, his brother is not repentant, God honors the judgment and does not forgive the brother either. That is why I call this kind of forgiveness "Judicial Forgiveness" as distinguished from the first kind which is "Personal Forgiveness."

You may ask why I believe that John 20:23 applies only between believers since it doesn't say so!" It is because the verse involves judging, and Scripture empowers us to judge only those who are within the body of believers, but not those who are outside; this principle is spoken of by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:12-13:

"For what business is it of mine to judge outsiders? Isn't it those who are part of the community that you should be judging? God will judge those who are outside. Just expel the evildoer from among yourselves."

Summarizing up to this point:

1. Personal Forgiveness must be granted to everyone, is unconditional, and clears the way for ourself to be forgiven by God.

³ Sometimes termed "Transactional Forgiveness."

2. Judicial Forgiveness, on the other hand, applies only between believers, should only be granted if the offending brother is judged by the victim to be repentant, and clears the way for the offending brother to be forgiven by God.

3. If we are sinned against, one of the first things we must do is exercise Personal (unconditional) Forgiveness toward the offending person. This is vital because, unless we purge ourselves of unholy attitudes that have resulted from our being victims, we are not in a proper frame of mind or spiritual condition to follow through with decisions that are subsequently required of us.

The first thing that we must do after granting Personal Forgiveness is to decide whether or not to overlook the sin because, even when it is permissible for us to seek redress, we need not always do so; the allowance of this choice is spoken of in Proverbs 19:11:

People with good sense are slow to anger, and it is their glory to overlook an offense.

Also, Romans 12:18:

If possible, and to the extent that it depends on you, live in peace with all people.

Some offenses are easily overlooked – especially those that are unintentional, have done no great harm, and are unlikely to be repeated. Although it may seem that overlooking an offense is always the loving thing to do, it is not necessarily so. Our decision should be based upon what is best for the offender and what is protective of others. It should not be based on our own desires or feelings. Also, if an offense is overlooked, it must really be overlooked, meaning that the offender must not be accused of it in the future, and it must not be mentioned again unless it becomes relevant because the sin is repeated.

If the offense is not to be overlooked, our next decision depends upon whether or not the offender is a brother in the Lord. If he is not, it is unlikely that he can be appealed to with Scripture, yet he may come under conviction if confronted with universally accepted principles of conduct and morality. If, after hearing what we have to say he is not disposed to make things right, or he will not listen to what we have to say, or we believe that confronting him may be dangerous, we are permitted to seek help from the secular authorities. This may even involve suing him in the public court in reliance upon Romans 13:1, which states:

Everyone is to obey the governing authorities. For there is no authority that is not from God, and the existing authorities have been placed where they are by God.

If, however, the offender is a brother in the Lord, we are not biblically permitted to sue him in the public courts and, if justice is to be pursued, it must be in a *bet din* of the body of believers. This is clearly stated in 1 Corinthians 6:1-7, which states:

How dare one of you with a complaint against another go to court before pagan judges and not before God's people? Don't you know that God's people are going to judge the universe? If you are going to judge the universe, are you incompetent to judge these minor matters? Don't you

know that we will judge angels, not to mention affairs of everyday life? So if you require judgments about matters of everyday life, why do you put them in front of men who have no standing in the Messianic Community? I say, shame on you! Can it be that there isn't one person among you wise enough to be able to settle a dispute between brothers? Instead, a brother brings a lawsuit against another brother, and that before unbelievers! Actually, if you are bringing lawsuits against each other, it is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?

So, if the offender is a brother in the Lord, we do not subject him to secular judgment; rather, our recourse for justice and reconciliation is through a three-step process that is defined in Matthew 18:15-17 which states:

Moreover, if your brother commits a sin against you, go and show him his fault- but privately, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won back your brother.

That is step one!

If he doesn't listen, take one or two others with you so that every accusation can be supported by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

That is step two!

If he refuses to hear them, tell the congregation; and if he refuses to listen even to the congregation, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax-collector. Yes! I tell you people that whatever you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.

This third step of bringing the matter to the congregation involves convening a *bet din* of elders who hear evidence presented to it and pass judgment that the litigating parties must obey. Those who do not obey the *bet din* are judged and treated as unbelievers, and declared to be outside of the body of believers until they repent. This is known as being "disfellowshipped," or "excommunicated," and the complaining brother is then allowed to seek justice against his adversary in the public courts as if he were an unbeliever.

What I have described in this message is the view of biblical justice held by all Tikkun member congregations, and by most other Messianic Jewish congregations as well. In fact, the Matthew 18 process of resolving disputes and reconciling differences among believers is written into Ohev Yisrael's Constitution, and is a requirement of membership. Explaining the details of how we implement the Matthew 18 process both as individuals and as congregations would require more time than we have right now, so I will defer it to a future teaching, except to say that its goal is to maintain all members of the body of believers as relationally reconciled to one another in the Spirit of Colossians 3:12-15, which says:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with feelings of compassion and with kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; if

anyone has a complaint against someone else, forgive him. Indeed, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive. Above all these, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together perfectly; and let the shalom which comes from the Messiah be your heart's decision-maker, for this is why you were called to be part of a single Body. And be thankful-

And Philippians 4:7:

Then God's shalom, passing all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in union with the Messiah Yeshua.