

*Forgive  
As The Lord  
Forgave You*

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## INTRODUCTION

It is so easy to offend another. What do you do when you become aware that you have hurt somebody? Do we need to confess all our sins to God? What happens if we forget to confess one sin? How should a Christian handle a person who has sinned against him or her? Should we wait for the other person to repent before we forgive? How do we know if their repentance is genuine enough? Perhaps you would like to help someone who struggles to forgive another. As you read this book, you will encounter Biblical and practical answers to these and more questions.

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## Lesson 1: Why should I forgive?

Forgiveness is a central theme in the Christian faith. The Lord Jesus taught quite often about forgiveness. While dying He audibly forgave those who were crucifying Him. In fact, Jesus gave His life in order to make forgiveness possible.

### Secular arguments in favour of forgiving

Christians are not the only ones that promote forgiveness. A growing number of non-Christians, even atheists, also encourage forgiveness. Those who choose not to forgive, or are unable to do so, may find themselves restricting their social interaction in order to protect their hurt emotions. They may be afraid of being open and vulnerable, afraid of trusting themselves to others. In fact, some sociologists see forgiving as the way to liberate the victim by taking power out of the hand of the offender. In very pragmatic terms, life is too short to spend it agitated and angry, mulling over painful situations in our past, imagining wicked ways of getting even, or consumed by regrets. Secular counsellors conclude that it is better to forgive, to let go of the past, and get on and enjoy what is left of life!

### Additional Christian reasons to forgive

Christians have added and stronger reasons to forgive. A Christian, of course, will also enjoy some of the emotional, physical and social benefits of forgiving, but that is not the primary reason why he forgives. Even if forgiving had none of these obvious benefits, the Christian would forgive because he is instructed to do so by the Lord Jesus. The Christian is called to forgive others because he himself has already been forgiven by God.

A commandment: It is an imperative for us Christians to learn to forgive one another. “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, *forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you*” (Eph. 4:30-32). When we forgive we are obeying a commandment.

The Bible also contains some warnings for those who choose not to forgive. We may call these ‘negative reasons’ to encourage forgiveness, but they are real and should not be dismissed lightly.

Spiritual stagnation: You may have noticed that in the Bible the commands urging us to forgive are often connected with teaching about prayer. When the Lord Jesus was delivering the Sermon of the Mount, He begun the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ with the words: “Our Father in heaven,” and later continued, “Forgive us our debts.” And why or how will our Father forgive us? — “as we also have forgiven our debtors.” At the end of the prayer the Lord Jesus explained: “But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matt. 6:9-15). Take note: this is a solemn warning. As we shall explore in more detail in the following lesson, this does not mean that we lose our salvation or that we shall cease being children of God. What then happens when we “do not forgive men their sins”?

If someone has sinned against us and we refuse to forgive, then something grave happens in the spiritual world: we restrict the freedom of the Holy Spirit and grieve Him. We can still sing hymns, but the Holy Spirit is grieved. We can still take part at the Lord’s Supper, but the Holy Spirit is grieved. Yes, we can still talk about the Bible, preach the Word and participate in

good Christian activities, but we shall not be in communion with Him. We shall have no fresh experience of Him. We shall have no fresh water to give. We stagnate!

Hardened conscience: Children like to play. They play 'mommies and daddies,' teachers, shopkeepers even church meetings. They imitate what they see. But we adults can also 'play Christian.' We can easily do so because our conscience has become hardened by lack of forgiveness. We *know* that if we don't forgive that person who has hurt us, our prayers will be hindered (Psalm 66:18). And yet we hold on to an offence and harbour some anger towards that offending person and think that our prayers are unaffected. We may be active and busy with good things but our Christian experience shall lack reality. Our heart will grow hard and we will grow used to pretending.

Bitterness defiles: Lack of forgiveness is one of the things that will produce a root of bitterness in our heart, and this bitterness will cause trouble and contaminate other people. In Hebrews 12:15 we read, "See to it that no-one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." A bitter wife will influence her husband and children. A bitter man will influence his church and workplace. Bitterness cannot be hidden for long. It will find a way to express itself, and when it does, it will defile others.

### **Helping resources**

Empowerment: When God asks us to do something, He also supplies the power to do it. Sometimes the task before us may seem impossible. In our own strength, forgiving some people is impossible, but every Christian has the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9) and God's Spirit not only motivates obedience, but also empowers that obedience. The apostle Paul faced many internal and external challenges, but never alone. He tells us that he worked and struggled "with all [Christ's] his energy, which so powerfully works in me" (Col. 1:29). You and I can also access that power in order to forgive.

Supporting community: Every Christian forms part of the Church, the body of Christ. It is not Christ's intention that a Christian should live his life alone. In local Christian communities we can care for each other. We can "gently restore" fellow believers. We are told to "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:1-2). The prayer support of some trusted Christians friends may be of critical importance in taking the step to forgive, and especially so when serious harm has been committed, or where demonic forces are involved. When struggling to forgive, don't give up. Seek support from fellow Christians. "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

### **Glass in your arm!**

Imagine an accident where a young man falls through a glass window. At the hospital they clean his wounded arm, but by mistake leave a sharp splinter of glass imbedded in his arm. With care and time, the arm will heal nicely on the outside. Soon he will be able to move his arm nearly as freely as before the accident. He is happy to be at home and feeling nearly normal again. But soon he will discover one or two movements that cause him a great deal of pain. Such movements make him want to stop and scream!

Those who have not forgiven somebody walk around with a sharp piece of glass in their arm. The presence of glass becomes obvious when a person 'jumps' or displays an abnormally strong reaction to a particular topic, situation or person. If a young man has not forgiven his dominant mother who regularly yelled at him, he is likely to be very sensitive to those who

scream and to those in authority. If a young woman has not forgiven the unknown man who tried to rape her in the park, she may no longer be able to enjoy a walk in a park and will find it very uncomfortable to watch a film where a woman walks alone at night. She may try to stop the film or walk out. Something has touched the glass in her arm.

What is the solution? Some secular psycho-therapists may help by identifying your painful movements and teach you how to live avoiding those movements. Following their advice will reduce your pain. But that is not the Christian way. The Lord Jesus invites his followers to “forgive from the heart,” to remove the glass. It will require cutting the arm open and removing the foreign object. The process may well be very painful. For a while the arm may bleed again, but this is the only way, it is Christ’s way, to restore normal movement to the arm.

Do you perhaps have glass in your arm? Do you want to help someone else who does? The practical Bible teaching in this Study Course will help you remove glass from hurting arms, so that we may all function freely and happily in the Master’s service. Healed arms can build and serve others.

A number of Scriptures make it clear that ‘God’s forgiving’ and ‘our forgiving’ are related. His forgiving is the basis for our forgiving. His forgiving illustrates how we should forgive. His forgiving is the prime incentive for our forgiving. It makes good sense, therefore, to start by taking a closer look at God’s forgiveness. We shall begin to do so in the following lesson.

## **MAKING IT PERSONAL**

- For you, which are the 2 strongest reasons to forgive another?
- Do you think that ‘lack of forgiveness’ could be an issue that is affecting your walk with Jesus? Could it be that you have a splinter of glass in your arm?
- **Prayer:** ‘Lord God, please use the time I spend with this Study Course to speak to my heart. Make me aware of any ‘splinter of glass’ in my life that may need removing. Make me receptive to listen to your voice. Amen.’

## Lesson 2: Seeking God's Forgiveness

Imagine that a thief has just snatched your sister's handbag and is now running down the road. As he reaches the corner, a policeman appears and catches him. After listening to the thief's financial needs at home, the policeman decides to forgive the thief, allowing him to continue his run with your sister's handbag! How would we feel towards that policeman? You may admire his generosity but not his sense of justice! Forgiveness and justice are closely related concepts.

How does God forgive? It would be easy to think that since God is God, He can simply say 'I forgive everyone' and that would be the happy end to the story. But this would ignore the important issue of justice. God is the "righteous Judge" (2 Tim. 4:8). He is the "only one Lawgiver and Judge" (James 4:12). Justice and its administration are important matters. In order to forgive, God must also satisfy justice. God acts in *grace* when He gives us something good that we don't deserve. When God forgives, He simultaneously acts in grace and satisfies justice.

### Becoming a Christian

What happens when someone becomes a Christian? I first realize that I am a sinner, and I accept that as true. I come to the Lord Jesus and ask Him to forgive me. I hand myself over completely to Him, and He gladly receives me. I am now born again – I have begun a new life. Which of my sins are forgiven by God at the moment of my conversion?

### Legal Forgiveness

When we recognize that we are sinners, repent, and trust in the Lord Jesus for our salvation, God declares us forgiven. "In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Eph. 1:7). God can forgive us because justice has been satisfied. The Lord Jesus "has freed us from *all our sins* by his blood" (Rev. 1:5). God's forgiveness ensures that *all our sins are forgiven* and therefore we shall never be condemned. "When you were dead in your sins... God made you alive with Christ. *He forgave us all our sins*" (Col. 2:13). Read this verse again. Let the greatness of its message reach your soul: 'All my sins are forgiven – those I have committed in the past and also those that I am going to commit in the future!' The simple reality is that when the Lord Jesus died on the cross, all our sins were still future sins. All our sins, past and future, were totally forgiven when we were born again! Some call this 'Legal Forgiveness,' pointing out that, "There is now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). Our eternal salvation is now secure because *all* our sins have been forgiven. "By one sacrifice [the death of Christ] he has made *perfect for ever* those who are being made holy" (Heb. 10:14).

### Receiving God's Legal Forgiveness

For a sinner to benefit from Christ's death at Calvary, *repentance* is required. Repentance is more than feeling bad about what one has done. Judas Iscariot, for example, felt bad about what they were going to do to the Lord Jesus, he recognized that his betrayal was sin, his remorse was such that he returned the 30 silver coins and then committed suicide (Matthew 27:3-5). But he did not repent. He was not forgiven (Acts 1:25). Repentance is more than sorrow or remorse. In the Bible repentance is described as a change in heart, mind or attitude that will necessarily lead to confession and a change in behaviour. This repentance leads to forgiveness.

Human repentance is a serious matter. The Lord Jesus explained to his disciples that “*repentance* and *forgiveness* of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). A few days later Peter stood up in Jerusalem and urged the crowd: “*Repent*, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord” (Acts 3:19). It is clearly stated in Scripture that sinners only benefit from God’s forgiveness if they *repent*. God has no alternative way to offer Legal Forgiveness without Christ’s sacrifice and without our repentance. That is why God “commands all people everywhere to *repent*” and “is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to *repentance*” (Acts 17:30, 2 Peter 3:9).

At conversion we may specifically confess to God a number of sins which are a burden to our souls, but recognition and confession of individual sins is not a requirement for Legal Forgiveness. We are not conscious of many of our sins. We forget many others. A complete detailed confession of our sins is a practical impossibility. Thankfully this is not required. God extends His Legal Forgiveness to all those who turn to Him with a sincere and repentant heart.

### **Are some sins forgiven twice?**

As you read your Bible, you will soon come across verses such as 1 John 1:9, where the apostle John urged his Christian readers to “confess their sins” in order to be forgiven. Why should a Christian confess his sins if all his sins have already been forgiven at conversion? Will God forgive the same sin twice? Was the first forgiveness not sufficient? Was it not complete? We noticed in the previous lesson that after the Lord Jesus taught on prayer He added, “If you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:15). But hasn’t the Father forgiven every Christian *all* their sins at conversion? Is God threatening not to forgive a sin He has already forgiven? Scriptures such as these, lead Bible students to conclude that there are two types or kinds of forgiveness. The first has to do with salvation, Legal Forgiveness, and the other has to do with fellowship with the Father, and they call this ‘Fatherly Forgiveness.’

### **Fatherly Forgiveness**

When as children we sin and offend our heavenly Father, we require Fatherly Forgiveness. This forgiveness has nothing to do with our salvation. At conversion, we receive Legal Forgiveness, our debt is paid, we have peace with God, there is no condemnation, and we are made children of God. When we as children disobey we become *disobedient children*. We remain His children, but the joy in the relationship is gone. This joy and harmony with God is restored through Fatherly Forgiveness.

The teaching of 1 John 1:9 is that we receive this Fatherly Forgiveness when we Christians ‘confess’ our sin. The teaching of Matthew 6:15 is that God will withhold this Fatherly Forgiveness from those Christians who do not forgive those who sin against them.

### **Receiving God’s Fatherly Forgiveness**

The apostle John, as an old man wrote: “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2). Through the years, the apostle John must have seen many Christians sin in one way and another. As born again believers, we do not want to sin. Our aim is not to sin. But unfortunately, sometimes we do! We are not encouraged to spend long hours of introspection seeking possible failures in our past. We

simply ask the Lord to bring to our mind any sin that needs to be confessed. And once we become conscious of some sin, we should not delay in repenting and confessing it to the Lord.

King David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged the murder of her husband. It was a secret affair. He probably thought that in time sin would be forgotten, so he chose to keep silent: Later he wrote, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer." Then David found the solution. He explains, "Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD' and you forgave the guilt of my sin" (Psalm 32:3-5). Do you want to enjoy that freedom again? Honest confession is the only way!

### **Do you need a bath, or do your feet need washing?**

When the Lord Jesus washed the disciples' feet, he used this occasion to teach Peter important lessons on humility and service. The Lord also hinted at the difference between Legal Forgiveness and Fatherly Forgiveness when He explained, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you" (John 13:10). The 'bath' here represents God's Legal Forgiveness, that forgiveness of sin that we receive at conversion. As we live our Christian life, as we walk here on earth, our feet can get dirty. On a fairly regular basis our feet will need a wash. The 'wash' here represents God's Fatherly Forgiveness.

### **MAKING IT PERSONAL**

- Perhaps you go regularly to a Christian church, but have you been born again? Have you ever entered the Lord's presence and prayed with all your soul something like, 'Dear God, I recognize that I am a sinner and that I have offended you. Thank you for sending the Lord Jesus to suffer and die on a cross so that you could forgive me. Please forgive me now. I give myself to you. Come into my heart Lord Jesus, and take control of my life'? If you are not yet a Christian, why not yield to Christ today?
- Do you have 'dirty feet'? Are you aware of some sin in your life that needs confessing?
- **Prayer:** 'Dear God and Father, thank you for paying such a high price so that I could be forgiven. Thank you that your great sacrifice shows how much you love me, how worthwhile I am in your sight. Amen.'

## Lesson 3: When we sin against others

Have you ever sinned against someone else? It is easier to recall events where we have been the victims, where others have sinned against us. Perhaps that is the reason you are studying this course, seeking some Biblical guidance on what to do with that pain, frustration or anger towards with an unrepentant offender. Please be patient and read on. We shall begin to address that issue in the next lesson. But, as Jesus taught, before we consider the sins of others, we must first take a close look at ourselves.

### We need clean eyes

Jesus said: "How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself *fail to see the plank in your own eye*? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Luke 6:42). Of course we cannot literally have a plank in our eye! The reference to a plank is an obvious exaggeration designed to impress upon us that we can miss the obvious. There can be some very obvious sinful acts and attitudes in our life that we 'simply fail to see.' In our hurry to expose and correct the sins of others, we can easily fail to see our own sin.

### Confession

Have I sinned against another? Have I hurt someone? Have I said something to somebody with a superior attitude or with an angry tone of voice? Have I written a letter or an e-mail with words that could harm another? Maybe you're thinking: 'Yes, but he deserves it! Perhaps I have exaggerated a little, but 80 percent of what I wrote is true. At least I was sincere!' You can hold on to your arguments, you can repeat them to yourself a thousand times, but that will not set you free. You must confess your 20 percent. The only way to walk free is to acknowledge *your* share of the problem, to confess *your* sin.

Consider the parable of the Prodigal Son. When he finally recognized what he had done and where he was, he said to himself, "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you" (Luke 15:18). He had sinned against heaven and against his father. When we sin we can also harm two parties: We sin against a fellow human and by doing so we also sin against our heavenly Father. In order to set the matter right, we must confess our sin to our heavenly Father and He will grant us His Fatherly Forgiveness. In addition, we must not forget the horizontal element – we must also seek the one we have sinned against and say, 'I am sorry, I have done wrong, please forgive me.'

### Restitution

After we have confessed our sin to God and to the person we have offended, sometimes it may be possible and appropriate to go a step further: we will want to offer to repay or fix the damage we have caused. The Bible calls this restitution. The Israelite was required by law to pay back what he stole or damaged and add 20% to it. Moses explained this way: "When a man or woman wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the LORD, that person is guilty and must confess the sin he has committed. He must make full restitution for his wrong, add one fifth to it and give it all to the person he has wronged" (Numbers 5:5-6).

In New Testament days, sometimes those who collected tax for the Romans also asked for more than was required in order to put into their own pockets. We are told that Zacchaeus

“was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.” After he met the Lord Jesus, he repented and his heart and life changed: “Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount’” (Luke 19:1-9). What generous offer! The Christian is not under the Jewish law, but genuine repentance will usually be accompanied by a deep desire to make amends. Where possible and appropriate, we will also want to offer some form of restitution.

### **Obey – just do it!**

When I was quite young I learned this lesson. One of my hobbies was to collect coins from different countries. One day I visited one of my cousins, who also had a coin collection, a much larger one than my own. She had a number of repeated coins, including a small but interesting one which I had not got. When no one was looking, I quietly slipped it into my pocket. Once at home, I happily put the coin in my collection. But soon I began to feel guilty about what I had done. I would tell myself that my cousin had lots of coins and would not miss it. That it was one of her repeated coins and therefore she did not really need it. That it was a small coin and that it was really of very little value. I reasoned that if I would have asked her for it, I was pretty sure that she would have given it to me. With such arguments I would convince myself for a while. But my internal restlessness would soon return. I simply felt too embarrassed to contact my cousin and explain what I had done. I became very frustrated with myself. How could I have been so foolish as to take that coin home? I was not free. It was only an insignificant little coin but it was destroying my joy during the day and making me restless at night. What could I do? Eventually I wrote a short explanatory letter, stuck the coin to it and put it in the post. Now I was free again! It felt so good!

What kind of letter should you bring to the post office today? It is worth the embarrassment, because after you send it you are free. The personal frustration associated with the embarrassment is also very useful – it helps us not to do it again! Right now I would like to encourage you, or to put it even more strongly, I would like to urge you in the name of the Lord Jesus to set things right: If you have hurt someone in your family, perhaps your mother, your father, your son or your daughter – decide now to apologize and set things right. If you have said, done or written something harmful to a brother, do not justify your action by reasoning: ‘Oh yes, he is a very difficult brother, he has hurt many other people too!’ That may be true, but that is his problem! - If you have done something wrong to him, then confess your sin, clean your side. My dear brother, my dear sister, it is so wonderful to experience the freedom that Christ has purchased for us! The enjoyment of your freedom may be just a phone call, a letter or an e-mail away. Do it and you will be free! But please, do it right now!

### **Don’t let that happen to you!**

Perhaps you are a new Christian. You are consciously rejoicing in the fact that you have been forgiven by God! That is fantastic! It is a fact that the Lord Jesus came to set captives free. But you will soon discover that not every Christian actually lives and enjoys that freedom. The Lord Jesus has opened the prison doors and removed the locks from our chains. He has set us free, but we can refuse to let go of our chains! We can remain in bondage, not because the blood of Jesus is not powerful enough to free us, but because we refuse to admit and confess when we sin against another. Please don’t let that happen to you! The Lord Jesus has paid a high price to secure your freedom and He wants you now to enjoy that freedom to the full!

**But my failure is 'serious'**

Maybe you are aware that you have committed a very serious offence. You may fear that admitting and confessing your sin will lead to financial or legal difficulties, or it may affect your standing in the church or in society. It may deeply hurt and embarrass your family. As was true in the case of King David, silence does not help. Your awareness of unconfessed sin will eat away inside you. It will either paralyze you or turn you into an active hypocrite.

The principle of repentance and confession holds for all sin, be it the theft of a small coin, or adultery and murder. We start by acknowledging and confessing our sin to God. If we have sinned against a third party, usually something should be said to the victim and those affected. In some complex situations, it may be best to first approach the leaders of your local church or a Christian counsellor, following the instructions found in James 5:16, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other." The assistance of mature Christians can be very valuable (Phil. 4:2-3). Generally speaking, the good of the victim should be our guide. Sometimes you will need external objective advice in order to determine what is best for the victim and how you should proceed.

**MAKING IT PERSONAL**

- Are you aware of having wronged someone else? Have you confessed it to the Lord? He now wants you to say to the one you have offended: 'I am sorry, I have done wrong, please forgive me.' Will you do it?
- If you have caused damage, can you fix something? If you have taken something that is not yours, can you take it back or pay for it? Have you tried?
- **Prayer:** 'Dear heavenly Father, if I have a plank in my eye, please help me see it and confess my own faults. Amen.'

## Lesson 4: When others sin against us

Now we turn our attention to that uncomfortable situation, when knowingly or unknowingly other sin against us. How should we respond? The basis for Christian forgiveness was explained by the Lord Jesus Himself by using a short story. You probably know the parable, but please read with attention the 15 verses that follow. The king in the story represents our heavenly Father. As you read, try to imagine how the king must feel towards his servants as the story unfolds.

### The parable

“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. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow-servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. His fellow-servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow-servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ‘This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart’” (Matt. 18:21-35).

The king must have become aware that this particular servant owed him a huge sum of money and that he was defaulting on his repayment agreement. That is always a painful situation for all concerned. Then the settlement day came. The servant had defaulted and deserved to be sent to be punished. But, surprisingly, the King looked at him kindly and said: ‘I know you really can’t pay me back. The sum is too large. I have decided to cancel the totality of your debt. You may now go home.’

Did this man deserve the cancelation of his debt? No! No-one deserves forgiveness. Forgiveness is always an act of grace – it must always be given freely and voluntarily. Notice that the king did not say, ‘I will forgive most of your debt, and please sign this repayment programme for what is still remaining.’ No! Christian forgiveness is always free and also complete.

### How much have you been forgiven?

My dear sister, my dear brother, the beginning of this parable is a vivid and emotional illustration of our conversion. We came in desperation to the Lord Jesus seeking forgiveness and salvation. Some of us were more aware of the magnitude of our debt than others. We were all condemned sinners but some were more conscious of this than others. Are you aware of the huge size of the debt you had that has now been forgiven? Some Christians are

unaware of the filthiness of their own sin. They are thankful, but they think they have been forgiven little. Once we become aware of the magnitude of the debt which Jesus has cancelled for us, our hearts will begin to soften. We shall become a little more prepared to follow that generous example, and also forgive the debts of others.

Think carefully about this. Whatever someone else has done to offend you, it is small compared to what you have done to offend God. God knows all about you. He is aware of each one of your bad thoughts. Maybe you're thinking: 'Oh, I have never killed anyone,' but perhaps you were once so angry you would have liked to! Or, 'I have never had an adulterous relationship,' but sometimes you have found the idea quite attractive – you haven't, only because you are afraid of possible negative consequences. God knows your thoughts; He knows all the places and websites you have visited. The blood of Jesus Christ has completely cleansed you from all this filth. This is the wonderful freedom that Christ has purchased for us. And now the Lord Jesus says to you, 'Because I have forgiven you so much, I want you to go and forgive your brother and your sister.'

In this parable the king is deeply disappointed with the forgiven servant who did not want to forgive his fellow servant. He says, in other words, 'Look, I have just forgiven you an impossible debt of millions, why can't you have the kindness of heart to forgive a small debt of one hundred denarii?' - It is true that this person has hurt you, he has ignored or rejected you, she has said something untrue about you, he has stolen something from you. What he or she has done is wrong, it is sin, it is a real debt. It is not a matter of pretending the debt is small, neither of making evil deeds look less evil. Sin is sin. A debt is a debt. The point is that all inter-human debts are small compared with the way you and I have offended God. In this parable Jesus says so. And He knows what He is talking about.

What does God expect us to do? The king said, "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow-servant just as I had on you?" We are to forgive others freely and voluntarily. Forgiveness is always an undeserved gift. Jesus ends his parable by urging all Christians to "forgive your brother from your heart."

### **Who shot Tim?**

Tim formed part of our Christian congregation. He seldom missed a Sunday worship meeting. He would arrive in an interesting electric wheelchair - an attraction to the children. As a young man, soon after he graduated from Oxford university with a degree in mathematics, he was enlisted in the army to support the Allies during the Second World War. He joined a parachute regiment. A year or two later, he was dropped, together with many other Australian soldiers over France. He was shot at while in the air, hanging helplessly from his parachute, and since then he has been paralyzed from the neck down. Who shot him? He died last year without knowing who had shot him. For close to 60 years no one admitted the offence, no one repented, no one asked to be forgiven. And yet Tim forgave that unknown German soldier. Together with my children, we visited him in his hospital-home. He showed us some of his photos and wartime certificates. We listened to his story. There was no bitterness in his voice. He was healed inside. He was a happy brother in his electric wheelchair.

### **Heart Forgiveness**

The ideal situation is when the offender admits his sin, repents, confesses his sin and seeks to make some form of restitution. The ideal final goal is reconciliation – the restoration of the broken relationship. The Lord well knows that in this fallen world such a desirable ideal and

such a noble goal may take a long time to become reality, and that in many cases it will never happen. Should the victim continue to wait for the offender to repent? What can the victim do to free himself from that inner turmoil, from those 'jailors' that 'torture' you, from that pain that from time to time eats away inside his soul? The Lord Jesus gave us the answer at the end of that parable: "Forgive your brother *from your heart*" (Matt. 18:35). Some refer to this as 'Heart Forgiveness.'

When we recall the injustice committed against us, face the pain it has caused in our heart and pray, forgiving the offender in the name of the Lord Jesus, we have forgiven him from our heart. Heart Forgiveness is a decision of our will. It is an act of obedience based on the fact that we have also been forgiven. It is a 'letting go' in the name of Jesus. When painful or angry thoughts return, we remind ourselves of that moment when in the presence of God with all our heart we forgave that sinful act against us. We reaffirm that decision. This is no simple psychological trick to avoid the serious work required to serve justice or achieve reconciliation. Heart Forgiveness is usually difficult and very painful, but it is what removes the acid, reduces the pain and allows the Lord to begin to heal our wounded soul. Heart Forgiveness is the first step, and it depends only on the attitude of the victim, and not on the attitude of the offender.

### **MAKING IT PERSONAL**

- Take a minute to consider how much the Lord has forgiven you. Think of your selfish and rebellious attitude towards God and others. The good things you should have done but haven't. The pain you have caused to others. Those secret sins that only God knows. Try to grasp the magnitude of the forgiveness you have received from God.
- Do you have moments when you feel angry towards someone because of what they have done against you? Is it now time to forgive those who have sinned against you?
- **Prayer:** 'Dear loving Father, thank you for forgiving me so much! I know that I do not deserve your forgiveness! Help me to forgive those who sin against me. Amen.'

## Lesson 5: When should I forgive?

It is clear from Scripture that God expects us Christians to forgive those who sin against us. We forgive others because we ourselves have also been forgiven by God. The next important question to answer is: *when* should we forgive those who sin against us? ... at the *beginning*, when we become aware of someone's sin against us, before we have had the opportunity to seek the offender, before he has repented? Or at the *end*, after we have had the opportunity to contact the offender, after he has become conscious that he has sinned, after he has repented, that is, when the offender sincerely and humbly comes and asks us to forgive him?

### Where some Christians disagree

It puzzles me when I hear Christians say things like, 'Since this difficult brother who split our happy local church has not yet repented, I must patiently hold back my forgiveness.' And, 'That arrogant sister, who spoke evil of my husband twenty years ago, still shows no sign of repentance. Therefore I have not forgiven her. But, I am prepared to forgive her as soon as she repents.' Such Christians have found some justification for postponing forgiveness. In practice it means that they will frequently not forgive, because most offenders do not come back asking to be forgiven.

The Lord Jesus considered important the act of forgiving. As we have already seen, God's Fatherly Forgiveness depends on our forgiving others "when they sin against you" (Matt. 6:14-15). Teaching on prayer, the Lord Jesus said, "When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (Mark 11:25). Jesus did not say 'when you stand praying, if you notice that your offender is repentant, forgive him.' These instructions to forgive are not conditional on the repentance of the offender.

All Christians agree that we should forgive those who sin against us. Where some Christians disagree is on *when* we should forgive. We shall now spend some time considering what the Bible says about this matter. This is important because confusion usually leads to paralysis! We need theological clarity in order to act.

### If he repents, forgive him

Those who consider that forgiveness should wait until the offender repents have their reasons. Let's consider some of these reasons.

(a) Jesus said 'forgive if he repents': In Luke 17:3 we read, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and *if he repents, forgive him*" (Luke 17:3). What can we learn from this text? Notice that this text has a clear mandate: if a fellow believer falls in sin, we should approach him. Once he repents, we should not hold back our forgiveness. Notice that this text does not prescribe how we should deal with offending unbelievers. Neither does it prescribe what we should do if the offender is dead, cannot be contacted or does not recognize that he has sinned. The text affirms only a positive message: that a repentant brother should be forgiven. It does not affirm the negative: that an unrepentant person should not be forgiven. For guidelines as to what to do with an unrepentant person we should look elsewhere in Scripture.

(b) The word 'forgive' implies repentance: Some Bible students include the idea of 'repentance' in their definition of the word 'forgiveness.' These seek to find in every Bible text

that mentions forgiveness some reference to repentance. There is no one Greek word that is always translated 'forgive'. The New Testament contains four different Greek words that are sometimes translated 'forgive.' The Bible translator must determine from the context when the word 'forgiveness' should be used. As we shall see later in this lesson, the Bible contains some very clear examples where forgiveness takes place even though the offenders are not repentant. Of course it would be fantastic if all offenders repented, but 'forgiveness' in the Bible does not always imply repentance.

(c) We are to forgive 'as' God's forgives: Here some would argue that since God only forgives sinners when they truly repent, we should also only forgive those who truly repent. It is true that God's forgiving is an example for our forgiving. But in what ways are we to imitate the way God forgives?

### **God's forgiveness is a model for our forgiveness**

The fact that sometimes the same Greek word is used when God forgives and when humans forgive implies that there are similarities. When God forgives, the eternal destiny of the forgiven person changes. Clearly this does not happen when we forgive. There are, therefore, also differences. The following well-known texts point to a connection between God's forgiving and our forgiving.

- (1) Colossians 3:13 "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. *Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*"
- (2) Ephesians 4:30-32 "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, *forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*"

What is the point of comparison implied by the 'as' and 'just as' in these texts? It does not necessarily imply that God's way of forgiving and ours are identical. The "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" is, on the one hand, an incentive, a reason or a motivation for us to forgive others.

But the "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" also suggests that we have something to learn from the way God forgives. The Greek word for forgiveness used in both these texts is *charizomai*, the word for forgiveness that includes the word for 'grace' (*charis*). This choice of word suggests that the 'as,' the direction of the comparison, points to an act of grace rather than to a legal transaction. These texts *do not* teach that *all* our forgiving must be conditional on the repentance of the offender. Rather, we learn that there are rich parallels of grace between God's forgiving and our forgiving: God forgives freely and generously, so should we. God forgives all sin, so should we. God forgives and no longer recalls the offence, neither should we.

### **Examples of forgiving without repentance**

While our Lord Jesus was being crucified, he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Over the last 2000 years, this expression of undeserved forgiveness has become a powerful inspiration to many. We admire such a generous act of forgiveness. To pray such a prayer while experiencing the agony of death, shows that the Lord Jesus Himself, perhaps as man, had already forgiven them with all his heart.

The followers of Jesus accepted His teaching on forgiveness and followed His example. As Steven was being stoned to death, “he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:60). Stephen was not stoned in his sleep! He had just finished delivering a long historical speech about God’s dealings with Israel. He saw the furious eyes of his listeners as he told them the truth. He heard them accusing him and soon the crowd were “yelling at the top of their voices.” Then they grabbed him and pulled him out of the city. They picked up some large stones and began to stone him to death. It is at this point that he falls to his knees and prays, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” How could he do this? I think we can all agree that, to pray such a prayer while experiencing the agony of death, shows that Stephen, like the Lord Jesus on the cross, had already forgiven his offenders with all his heart.

During his last days, the apostle Paul lived difficult and disappointing moments: “At my first defence, no-one came to my support, but everyone deserted me.” Then he adds, “May it not be held against them” (2 Tim. 4:16). Notice that these are not expressions of intention. They are not expressing willingness to forgive. They are sincere, painful and unconditional prayers of forgiveness. They are examples of Heart Forgiveness. Church history has many more examples of Christians who forgave those who persecuted, tortured and killed them. Surely such decisions to forgive were not mistakes. Rather, they are clear signs of transformed hearts.

## **MAKING IT PERSONAL**

- When you are praying, you may be reminded of someone who has done you much harm. What does the Lord Jesus expect you now to do?
- Are you waiting for someone to return repentant before you forgive? How long have you been waiting? Are you going to continue waiting? Why?
- **Prayer:** ‘Dear Sovereign God, it comforts me to know that nothing escapes your notice. Thank you that I can forgive and that you will take care of justice. Amen.’

## Lesson 6: Misunderstandings about forgiveness

We shall attempt to clarify what the Bible means and does not mean when it asks us to forgive. Misunderstandings can stop us from taking that important decision to forgive. Misunderstandings can also lead us to say 'I have forgiven,' when in fact we have not forgiven - we have used the correct words but our heart and attitude have remained unchanged. In this lesson we shall clarify five common misunderstandings, and in the following lesson another five.

(1) It is not fair: Some people say, 'Forgiveness? No! It's not fair! People should pay for the wrong they have done.' I think most of us can identify with this concern. In the Bible, forgiveness and justice are connected (Col. 2:13-14). As an act of grace God can freely forgive a repentant sinner because justice has been served: The Lord Jesus was punished for that sin (1 John 2:2; 2 Pet. 2:24). God Himself will always take care of justice. It is in His nature to do so. We, the hurting, the offended, are asked to freely and graciously forgive.

We had a number of counselling sessions with a 26 year old young man, the son of Christian parents. When he was 13 years old he began consuming drugs. He came to our church seeking help because he was desperate. Together with another brother we spent two or three afternoons talking with him about forgiveness, trying to show him from the Bible how important this is. He wrote down a list with the names of all those who had deeply hurt him over the years, a list that included his father. Then we started praying. He went down the list, one name at a time, praying and forgiving them in the name of Jesus. Finally we came to the last name on his list. Although he was a rather rough and tough type of young man, he broke down and began to weep. He stopped praying and said: 'No, not this one. I can't forgive him. I promised myself that some day I would kill him.' We asked him to explain such strong emotions. This was the man who had introduced him to the drug scene. 'When I was a boy,' he said, 'this guy always gave me free drugs. He got me hooked. He has ruined my life. He must someday pay for this. I'm going to kill him... But if I forgive him, I can't kill him... So I can't forgive him.'

We explained to him that this man had sinned not only against him but also against God. In his frustration and anger this young man thought that if he forgave the drug dealer, the man would be completely free. That would not be fair. It came in conflict with his sense of justice. But God is the final judge and no-one and nothing escapes His attention (Rev. 20:11-15). Even after we have forgiven, the offender will still have to give an account of his offence to God. If appropriate and possible, the offender may also need to give account of his wrong deed to a human authority. But God calls us to forgive.

### Revenge?

In Romans 12:19 we read, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." It is not our task to seek revenge. We leave such matters with God. We can, and sometimes should, promote the cause of justice – but without seeking revenge. We may need to report an offence to the police - this may be the responsible thing to do. But we do not do this in order to seek revenge.

(2) Pretend nothing has happened: To act as if nothing has happened is to minimize the seriousness of sin. The Lord Jesus does not call us to pretend nothing has happened. On the

contrary, we recognize that someone has hurt us, that they have sinned against us, and then, conscious of this fact, we forgive them in the name of Jesus.

(3) I can't forget: Some say, 'To forgive is to forget. And since I shall never forget what he has done to me, I can't forgive.' Recall the story narrated in the first lesson - about the young man who fell through a glass window. As long as a sharp splinter of glass remains in our arm, we shall experience regular painful reminders of the offence. We shall never be able to forget. Once we forgive from our heart, the glass is removed. In time our arm will heal and full movement will return. Some experiences we shall never forget. The scar on our arm will stay with us to our dying day. But after we have forgiven from our heart, the pain connected with the memory will gradually decrease. A time will come, perhaps sooner than you expect, when you will notice that the Lord has healed you to such an extent that you no longer feel any pain when thinking about the offence. Through forgiveness the Lord has healed you. In fact, after we choose to obey the Lord Jesus and forgive the undeserving offender with all our heart, the irritation, the anger, the pain, the desire for revenge will begin to give way to a mixture of sadness, concern, pity and compassion towards the unrepentant offending person.

(4) I will be exploited: 'If I forgive these evil people they will continue to hurt me.' Yes, that may happen. But forgiving does not necessarily mean that everything carries on as before. An employee caught stealing may well be forgiven and then dismissed from his function – to protect the integrity of the company. A wayward husband may be forgiven by his wife and then be told that a prudential time of separation will follow – to protect the wife and children from possible further pain. You may forgive that uncle who sexually abused your child, but you will also report him to the Social Services and forbid him to enter your home when your children are alone. If we have forgiven from our heart, these preventive measures may be carried out without anger or bitterness.

One Sunday morning, while we were away at church, some thieves broke into our house in Colombia and took off with a number of items. The thought that unknown people had been walking through our house, looking through our shelves, wardrobes and cupboards was uncomfortable. We felt insecure and disrespected. We chose to forgive those unknown thieves. But we still informed the police, changed the house keys and reinforced the metal bars outside all our windows. After forgiveness it may be very appropriate to take some serious preventive measures. Forgiveness that leaves the door wide open for repeated sin is no virtue. It is irresponsibility.

(5) The offender will not improve: Protecting offenders from the consequences of their sin usually does not help the unrepentant offender. It even may not be helpful for the repentant offender. Forgiveness does not eliminate the responsibility to pursue the matter further for the benefit of the offender. After forgiving, the correct and responsible thing to do may be to call the police, arrange a temporary separation, or dismiss the dishonest cashier from the shop. Of course these measures will protect the victims from further abuse, but they are also intended to bring the offender to his senses, to help him improve.

It is usually healthy and instructive for the offender to live some of the consequences of his or her actions. Even after God forgives, the forgiven sinner may live with some of the painful consequences of his or her sin. "A man reaps what he sows" (Gal. 6:7) is a law of life. An important and significant difference is that after you have forgiven from your heart, you can collaborate with the police without anger in your heart. You can fire the dishonest employee

not out of frustration or revenge. You will be motivated by Christian love and compassion; you collaborate with these measures because you are honestly convinced that in the long run, this action will benefit the offender most. Our Lord Jesus made it clear that we should show love and kindness even towards those who could be classed as 'enemies': "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you" (Luke 6:27-28). Following a curse of justice after we have forgiven in our heart is not an act of revenge, but can be an act of kindness that will help the offender mature and improve, or an act of protection that will reduce the chances of future injustice.

## **MAKING IT PERSONAL**

- Are you living with an incorrect understanding of forgiveness? Does this lesson help you in some way?
- When you think about those who have offended you, what is your dominant emotion: compassion or a desire for revenge? Should something change?
- **Prayer:** 'Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for bearing the punishment of my sin so that I could be forgiven. Please give me the strength and courage to forgive others. Please give me the wisdom and courage to know what steps I should follow after I have forgiven. Amen.'

## Lesson 7: More misunderstandings about forgiveness

In this lesson we shall explore and correct 5 more incorrect notions associated with the act of forgiving.

(6) I will forgive if: Some people agree to forgive, but under certain conditions. That is not forgiveness. Of course we hope that the offender will repent, or at least not offend again, but our forgiveness should not depend on that. The apostle Peter had a similar concern: "Lord" he asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" The Lord Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matt. 18:21-22). We are to forgive from our heart without conditions. Forgiveness is a gift of grace, and grace is never deserved. It is free.

(7) I don't I feel like it: Some think that it is hypocritical to forgive an offender when deep inside they don't really feel like forgiving him. But if we wait until we feel a warm desire to forgive, we shall probably never forgive. The Lord well knows the workings of our heart. Some serious offences cause such levels of pain, confusion and distress that to say 'I forgive' in the middle of the turmoil will be meaningless. When confused or in shock such words will probably not be connected to our hearts. But as the confusion clears and distress calms down, we shall feel more connected with reality. Soon it will be time to consider forgiveness. Forgiveness is seldom motivated by warm feelings. It is usually a painful act of obedience. The Lord Jesus instructs us to forgive with all our heart (Col. 3:12-14). What are we going to do? He expects us to obey, to act, to forgive – even when it hurts!

(8) To forgive is to be reconciled: The apostle Paul defines the message of reconciliation when he wrote, "God was *reconciling* the world to himself in Christ, *not counting men's sins against them*" (2 Cor. 5:18-19). Clearly forgiveness and reconciliation are connected. God can see the heart. Once we are *forgiven* by God we are at the same time also *reconciled* with Him. At that very moment full communion is established, celebrated and enjoyed. Frequently this is also the case when we Christians forgive, but sometimes the celebration and enjoyment may take some time. After the Lord has forgiven a young man for picking a fight while drunk, his broken glasses will remain broken and his bruised nose will normally take time to heal! Although forgiveness makes reconciliation possible, forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. In very serious offences, forgiveness is often only the first step in a slow movement towards reconciliation.

Christian counsellors encounter extremely difficult situations where trust has been seriously and repeatedly abused, and where the emotional damage has been deep. Consider situations such as child abuse, rape, psychological manipulation, adultery or murder. Yes, we are called to forgive even in such situations. But forgiveness does not change the past. Forgiveness does not change the heart of a perverted offender. After forgiveness, rebuilding a relationship may sometimes be unsafe or unwise. In such special cases there will be forgiveness without reconciliation.

(9) Saying 'I forgive you': We have already seen that we are to forgive our offenders from our heart before they repent. Some may never repent. We don't even have to meet them in order to forgive them. And yet, here lies an important concern: When should we tell the offender that we have forgiven him? Normally we express our forgiveness by telling the offender 'I forgive you' or 'I have forgiven you' after the offender has repented. However it is worth

taking note that Scriptures do not supply us with general guidelines to cover all situations. But in difficult situations, we can expect from God the needed wisdom (Matt. 10:19, James 1:5). For the timing, you and I will need to depend on the Lord for guidance.

There may be some exceptional situations where it is very helpful for unrepentant offenders to hear that you have forgiven them. Why did the Lord Jesus on the cross audibly express forgiveness? Why did Stephen express his Heart Forgiveness to those who were stoning him? After forgiving in our heart, we shall be prepared to communicate that forgiveness when we hear that the offender has repented or as soon as the Holy Spirit makes it clear to us that it will be beneficial to the offender or for the kingdom of God.

Consider, for example, the positive effect of a public offer of forgiveness by the parents of a missionary murdered by Muslim fundamentalists. Their public expression of forgiveness for the unrepentant murderers sends a clear, deep and powerful message of God's grace to the Muslim world.

### **Forgiving without saying 'I forgive you'**

Sometimes it is wrong to tell the offender that you have forgiven him before he has recognized and repented from his sin. It is well worth choosing the right moment to express your forgiveness, to ensure it will benefit the offender. Your motives may well be good and noble, but saying 'I forgive you' at the wrong moment can have a very negative effect on the attitude of the offender. Your offer of forgiveness can be misinterpreted. Put yourself for a moment in the shoes of an offender who thinks his wrong doing is a joke, a minor triviality or that in some way it was justified. How could he respond to an offer of forgiveness?

You agree with me: Because the offender feels that his offence was a 'necessary evil' or a joke or a triviality, your offer of forgiveness can easily be interpreted as expressing agreement with his point of view. If this happens, the offender will be one step further away from recognition of sin and repentance.

I may do it again: Because the offender is not repentant, he is very likely to repeat the offence, against you or against someone else. Your offer of forgiveness will easily be understood as a 'green light' to repeat his actions. The matter is not so serious. If this happens, the offender will be one step further away from recognition of sin and repentance.

You are trying to manipulate me: Consider a situation where a sister in your congregation spreads her suspicion that you have been unfaithful to your partner. The circulation of this lie has caused much pain to you and your family. You have taken the decision to forgive her in your heart, and have encouraged your family to do the same. As a family you will now express that Heart Forgiveness with undeserved acts of kindness towards this offending sister. Should you now tell her that she is forgiven? To verbally express your forgiveness to her without her acknowledgement of sin may not be helpful to her. She will probably understand your offer of forgiveness as an act of manipulation: that by telling her that she is forgiven you are implying that she is the 'sinner' - but she is convinced that you are the sinner. If this happens, the offender will be one step further away from recognition of sin and repentance.

### **The right moment**

In Genesis we read the sad story of Joseph being sold as a slave by his brothers. They sinned against him. The life of Joseph is clear evidence that he had forgiven his brothers

from his heart. Years later he meets them again. But before considered it appropriate to declare, disclose or communicate his forgiveness, we read how he tested his brothers, seeking evidence of a change in their attitude (Gen. 42-44). The embracing and kissing of his brothers followed, and was an expression of his heart forgiveness.

Sometimes offenders are not ready to hear our expression of forgiveness. Their response could be similar to those who reject the gospel message: “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces” (Matt. 7:6). It is clearly important to choose the right moment to say ‘I have forgiven you.’

(10) I just can't: Someone said to me that if an offence was too difficult to forgive, he would pray, ‘Lord, you forgive this person because I can't.’ That is avoiding the issue. That is not obedience. God forgives sinful men and women only when they repent. He knows what He is doing. But He calls on us to forgive from the heart those who sin against us. He also works within us to empower us to obey Him (Eph. 3:20; Col. 1:19). For some, just the possibility of forgiving makes them feel very angry. For others it simply feels impossible. But if the Lord is asking you to do it, it will be possible! He will give you the strength. He will be with you before, during and after your forgiving. A better prayer would be, ‘Lord, I am weak, I feel incapable of forgiving him. Strengthen me, help me to forgive him.’ And then, in the name of Jesus, forgive him. Sometimes, as referred to lesson 12, demons can be involved which obstruct the process of forgiveness. In such cases, the prayerful support of fellow brothers and sisters may well be necessary.

## MAKING IT PERSONAL

- Have you been hesitating for a long time considering the possibility of forgiving someone? Has something in this lesson opened your eyes to the need to take some form of action?
- Could it be time to make some movement towards reconciliation? Perhaps by telling one of your offenders that you have forgiven them?
- **Prayer:** ‘Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for forgiving me and for *telling me* that I am forgiven. Help me to obey you even when I don't feel like it. Amen.’

## Lesson 8: What happens if I choose not to forgive ?

When we become aware that someone has sinned against us, something hurts inside. Our feelings may oscillate between unbelief and anger, disappointment and resentment, depression and desire for revenge. Injustice hurts. This pain in our hearts is very damaging to our spiritual and physical health. The acid of non-forgiveness, which slowly eats away at our hearts, can even turn God's children into depressive, aggressive or vengeful people. To see how this works, consider the life of three Old Testament characters:

### **Mephibosheth became depressive**

As a child, Mephibosheth could not run around with the others boys. He had no wheelchair. As a young man, he had to be lifted on to a donkey and lifted off again. He was crippled. And all this complication in his life was caused by that nurse who dropped him when he was a small boy (2 Sam. 4:4). I wonder how many times he must have wondered why that woman could not have been a just a little bit more careful. He was born healthy. He came from a healthy family. But now he had to live the life of a crippled man. Can you imagine those moments of anger and depression as such thoughts circulated again and again through his head?

King David was looking for the descendants of Saul in order to show kindness for his son Jonathan's sake. It turned out that Mephibosheth was the only one left and now David wanted to find him. But where was Mephibosheth now? In a place called 'Lo Debar' which means 'no pasture.' What a sad and depressing situation: a man who was born in a palace, who belonged to the royal family, now lived crippled in a desert, an arid spot with no pasture. Do you think he missed the irony of his hopeless situation? If only this nurse would have done her job properly. Nurses are supposed to look after children, not turn them into cripples! 'I was not born for this!' 'I belong to the royal family but live in misery!' 'This is not fair!'

Lack of forgiveness slowly but surely eats away at the human heart. In time it can negatively affect your view of yourself. When he was brought into the presence of King David, he said: "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?" (2 Sam. 9:4-8). Mephibosheth, a grandson of the first king of Israel, now considers himself worth less than a dog - a dead dog. We are all made differently. For some the decision not to forgive will drive their thoughts along the paths of self-pity, low self-esteem and depression. Because of what another has done, 'I am now worth less than a dog. In fact, I'm a dead dog - I'm worthless!'

### **Jephthah became aggressive**

Let us look at another example: "Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute. Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. 'You are not going to get any inheritance in our family,' they said, 'because you are the son of another woman.' So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a group of adventurers gathered around him and followed him" (Judges 11:1-3).

Due to no fault of his own, Jephthah was born different from his brothers. He was considered 'second class' at home because he was not the son of his father's wife, but the son of a prostitute. For a number of years Jephthah was allowed to benefit from the comforts of his father's home, but his half-brothers clearly did not accept him as one of them. They didn't think he was worthy to receive a share of their father's inheritance. One day they drove him

out of their father's house! Can you imagine that painful scene? Where would he go to? The hate of his half-brothers forced away from everything he had loved and known and into a poor and uncertain future.

Can you imagine what happened in the heart of this young man? His reaction was different to that of Mephibosheth. His resentment did not lead him to depression, but to aggression. He excelled in strength and violence. He attracted a following of adventurers.

Years later, the elders of Gilead called Jephthah back. They recognized his capacity to fight and wanted him to be their commander against the Ammonites. "Jephthah said to them, 'Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now, when you're in trouble?'" (Judges 11:7). One can nearly feel the pain in his voice: 'you drove me away.' 'Your father was also my father.' 'You drove me away from my father and from my father's house.' 'I had done nothing wrong, but you hated me.' Here was a man with pain who had not forgiven his brothers. He was now a grown man, but he had not forgotten the hate of his childhood. He was still tied to the unpleasant history of his family. He sensed a need to prove himself before his brothers. By becoming strong and aggressive he could prove to himself and to others that he was valuable. 'You did not value me, you did not consider me worthy of the family name... but I am valuable, I am a strong fighter, I am a first class warrior. Others need me!' He was not a free man; he was still bound to his childhood problems. Lack of forgiveness affects the way we live. Our decisions are influenced by our painful memories. The Lord Jesus wants us to walk free from our past. He wants us to forgive.

### **Samson became vengeful**

Samson is another unhappy example of what can happen to some who choose not to forgive: "Then [Delilah] called, 'Samson, the Philistines are upon you!' He awoke from his sleep and thought, 'I'll go out as before and shake myself free.' But he did not know that the LORD had left him. Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison" (Judges 16:20-21). What a sad end for a servant of God. Imagine how he must have felt. A large-framed, muscled man, a man built for a purpose, a Spirit-filled man, but now blind and chained to a mill, spending his days walking round in circles. He had lost his freedom. He had lost his eyesight. He could no longer wink at the beautiful girls. As he turned the mill round and round in darkness, he became increasingly frustrated, angry and bitter. He began to think of ways to take revenge.

Then something happened that gives us a glimpse into what was running through Samson's mind. "Then Samson prayed to the LORD, 'O Sovereign LORD, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes'" (Judges 16:28). He is willing to die in the pursuit of his goal. And what was his goal? He is not thinking of the future wellbeing of the nation of Israel. He is not thinking of the honour of God nor of fulfilling his divine calling. He is thinking of revenge. 'Lord, I am angry because I walk in darkness. They gouged out both of my eyes. It is painful. It is humiliating. It is hopeless. I don't want to go on living like this.' Samson died a bitter man, seeking revenge for the loss of his eyes.

### **What is happening to you?**

We are all different, so we all experience and respond differently to rejection, injustice and pain. But in some areas, the refusal to forgive from our heart affects all Christians in a similar

way: (a) We lose joy in the Lord: because all forms of disobedience affect our communion with the Lord (Psalm 51:7-13). (b) We lose effectiveness in ministry: because our prayers will be hindered (Psalm 66:18). (c) We lose freedom: because what we do and don't do will be influenced by the expectation of others and by the memory of painful experiences (Gal. 5:1). (d) We shall defile others: because unresolved hurts find ways to express themselves (Heb. 12:15).

Can Christians become vengeful, depressive or bitter? Yes, this is possible! Unfortunately it does happen! Can Christians lose joy, effectiveness, freedom and become a bad influence on others? Yes, this is possible! And it can happen to you or me too! Regardless of the pain someone has inflicted on you, these negative effects are not inevitable. That is the wonderful good news! By forgiving from the heart you can break those chains that bind you to that unfair, wicked and painful episode in our life. By forgiving the persons who have sinned against you, you will be set free to fulfil your divine calling in life.

### **MAKING IT PERSONAL**

- Are you aware of some conflict situation in your life that has generated feelings of bitterness, depression or aggression in your life? Like Samson, do you find yourself thinking of ways to 'get even'? Are you prepared to forgive, to 'let go' and be free?
- Are you aware of such strong negative emotions in the life of someone close to you? Could it be that they need help to forgive?
- **Prayer:** 'Dear heavenly Father, thank you that you have purchased me from slavery and have set me free. Help me to forgive those who sin against me so that their sin will not limit my freedom. Help me to stand in that freedom, to enjoy it, to live out your calling for my life. Amen.'

## Lesson 9: Set free to be a blessing to others

This will allow us to be clean, free and useful in God's hands.

In the previous lesson we considered some of the negative consequences of choosing not to forgive. In this lesson we shall see how the freedom we experience after we forgive allows us to be a clean and useful instrument in God's hand.

### What is involved in forgiving?

Forgiveness means to unilaterally cancel a debt. It means to purposefully set aside your moral rights. It involves cutting a rope that links you to a particular situation, memory or person. Forgiveness is the decision not to hold the sins of another against him. It involves putting an end to our personal claim. In the name of Jesus you consciously decide to 'let go.' That is why when you forgive you are in a very real sense 'set free.' Jesus said: "If the Son set you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:32-36).

To forgive does not involve trying to minimize the magnitude of someone's sin. It does not involve trying to find explanations and justifications for the sinner. No! Forgiveness means recognizing the true awfulness of what this person has committed, giving it the name God gives it: 'sin,' and then, in the name of Jesus, letting this person go. To forgive means to accept living with the negative and painful consequences caused by the sin of another. This last statement is very important. Let me illustrate it.

### A careless drunk driver

Suppose you are riding home on your bike. As you cross a junction a car does not stop at the red light but drives straight into you. The car is driven by a drunk driver. You are rushed to hospital, and, unfortunately, they must amputate your right leg. Now you have to spend the rest of your life with only one leg. Why? Whose fault was it? It was the fault of this selfish, irresponsible, drunk driver. Every time you move from your bed to the bathroom, every time you drop your soap as you take a shower, every time you see your friends run or play football... you remember that accident and that careless driver. Your life has been completely changed by this accident. The life of the careless driver has returned to normal, but your life has been irreparably damaged. He sinned and you are paying for it. This is clearly not fair, but unfair things do happen.

What does it mean to forgive the careless driver? It does not mean that we agree with what he does or has done. It does not mean that it doesn't matter. It means that we accept to live with the negative and painful consequences caused by the careless driver. We shall forgive him in our heart when we bring ourselves to pray, 'In the name of Jesus I forgive the irresponsible driver for what he has done to me. I accept to live with the limitation of having only one leg.' Such a prayer will not give you your leg back, but it will set you free from the harmful emotions generated by this accident.

Now I would like to draw your attention to the stories of two Biblical 'victims' whose lives were seriously and irreversibly affected by the sin of others.

### Joseph

"Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph! Is my father still living?' But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. Then Joseph said to his

brothers, 'Come close to me.' When they had done so, he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you... And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterwards his brothers talked with him" (Gen. 45:3-5,15).

What do Joseph's childhood memories look like? He would recall being despised by his older brothers for sharing his dreams with them. There was the clear memory of the day when his brothers sold him as a slave to some merchants. He had begged them to take him home, but they didn't. He felt hurt, afraid and lonely. There was not much 'good' he could remember from his childhood years with his brothers. Today some would refer to him as a psychologically damaged child. As he moved on from childhood he had plenty of time to think again and again about these painful experiences. But Joseph did not reason that the harm done to him was too great to be simply forgiven. He forgave! And by forgiving he became a free man. And when we are free, God can use us to be a blessing to others.

Joseph's ability to forgive in his heart and live without bitterness is exemplary. As a young slave he was falsely accused by his master's wife of attempted rape and sent to prison. "But while Joseph was there in prison, the Lord was with him, he showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warden" (Gen. 39:20-21). In prison, Joseph helped a government employee who promised to help free him. But as the long weeks turned into months, nothing happened. "The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him" (Gen. 40:23). Joseph had good reasons to feel angry, bitter, even vengeful. But he didn't. It is remarkable to see how Joseph's attitude towards God and the sins of others, allowed him to 'flower' despite of the arid soil he is planted in.

### **A Jewish young lady**

The second example concerns the young Israeli girl that lived in the house of Naaman. "Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, 'If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy'" (2 Kings 5:1-3). For a moment try to imagine yourself in the shoes of that young lady. Imagine the fear in your small town when rumours spread that a band of armed men from Aram had been seen approaching. Imagine the screams and the panic as these fighters attack - violently destroying all resistance. For some reason you were not killed but taken captive. After a very long journey, you are handed over to be a maid in the house of your kidnapper, the very one who had led that unfair and evil assault. How would you feel? She would meet Naaman regularly. His presence, his voice, would bring back so many painful memories. Perhaps she thought of ways to take revenge. Maybe the idea of mixing some poison in his food had crossed her mind. Today some would refer to her as a psychologically damaged child.

And what did this young girl do? She forgave Naaman! How do we know? Because of her behaviour. When she heard that Naaman had leprosy, she did not jump up and down with joy. She didn't thank the Lord for a taste of 'sweet revenge.' No! She expressed concern for him. When you forgive, you are set free to be a blessing to others, even those who have hurt you. Notice that the young girl was not kidnapped as a baby. She was old enough to remember that back home lived a useful prophet, a man of God. The act of forgiving had

allowed her emotional wounds to begin to heal. She could still remember what Naaman had done, but without anger, and with decreasing pain. God could then use her to save Naaman.

### **What options do you have?**

Perhaps you are currently suffering due to the mistakes, the carelessness, or the selfish acts of people in your life – in other words, the sins of others. Perhaps your mother was a heavy smoker, and you now have health problems. Maybe you had a very dominant father. He has destroyed your career options by limiting your study opportunities. Perhaps you were rejected by someone important in your life. Perhaps your son or daughter has chosen to marry the ‘wrong’ person. Maybe some dominant people have managed to divide your local church. Their wrong decisions and actions have affected you. You hurt now because of them. What options do you have? What can you do?

You can try to seek revenge. You can wallow in self pity. You can try to run away. You can try to prove that you are ‘able’ or ‘worthy’ ... or you can choose to obey the Lord Jesus and forgive each of them from your heart. Regardless of the path you choose, your past and its damaging effect won’t change. The young man in our story will remain with one leg. Joseph will not recover his lost childhood. The Jewish young lady will continue to be a slave. Your choice determines how you live with your injury or limitation. Choosing to forgive will allow you to accept your injury or limitation; it will open the door for joy; it will set you free to be used by God to be a blessing to others.

### **MAKING IT PERSONAL**

- Forgiving involves letting go of a personal claim. Are you holding on to some personal claims?
- Are you living with some painful consequence of somebody else’s sin? In forgiving, have you consciously accepted to live with that injury or limitation?
- **Prayer:** ‘Dear Lord, I want to be free to be used by you to be a blessing to others. Give me the strength and courage to accept and embrace the injuries and limitations in my life caused by the sins of others. Amen.’

## Lesson 10: The act of forgiving

Sometimes forgiving involves humbling ourselves. Sometimes forgiving involves letting go of a reason which we think validates our selfish or awkward behaviour. Sometimes our pain, resentment or bitterness has become so much a part of us, it has nearly become a part of our identity. Forgiving will mean you will need a new reason to live, a new frame of reference. Fear not. The Lord will strengthen you during and after your forgiving.

Who is that person who has hurt you? For some it will be your father or your mother. Perhaps they are old now or perhaps they have been dead for a number of years. But you still feel hot and angry when you remember how he or she treated you. Perhaps you are thinking of a brother or a sister in your local church. If we take our Christian life and our local Church seriously, unjustified or exaggerated criticism by fellow believers hurts very badly. Can you imagine yourself completely free from that frustration, annoyance, pain anger towards that person who sinned against you? The Lord Jesus wants you to let go of your chains and walk out free. When? Why not today?

### Deciding to remove the glass splinter

Consider again the story in the introduction of this course, where a young man falls through a glass window. Although his accident may have happened weeks, months or even years ago, the sharp piece of glass may still be imbedded in his arm. It must be removed. It is now time now to set things right. The Lord Jesus commands his followers to forgive from the heart, that is, to remove that piece of glass. How can it be removed? It will be necessary to cut the arm open again in order to extract the foreign body. Forgiveness is painful! To go back in our minds and recall nasty things that others have said or done to us, and then say aloud 'I now forgive... I now let him or her go...' - that is painful, and in some cases *very* painful. But the glass has to be removed so that the arm may heal properly. Are you willing to face the possible pain and remove it?

### Forgiving an adulterous husband

A few years ago we heard that the husband of a fairly strong and active sister in our congregation had left her. We knew that he was working in another city, but the news now was that he was also living with another woman in that city. By looking at the sister, you could not tell that anything had changed. She was as active and cheerful as ever. The only change we could notice was that she avoided her husband's family who were also part of the congregation. My wife and I invited her without her children to our home for a chat. Of course we soon began talking about her children and her husband. 'If he wants to make a life with someone else, that's fine with me!' Then she added, 'I shall look after my children, and life shall soon feel normal again.' She spoke with a calm confident voice, a confidence designed to protect her from further pain. It was not the first time her Christian husband had been unfaithful to her. She had had enough of him. She wanted him out of her life.

On a second visit we began to talk about forgiveness. At first she resisted, thinking that if she forgave him, she would have to welcome him home and be humiliated by him again. Once she understood what Heart Forgiveness is, and why it is so important, she began to soften. Later that day, after a struggle and with many tears, she prayed and forgave her husband. Her husband has not come back, but from that day she has a special peace in her heart. She stopped speaking badly about her husband to their children. Within a few weeks of her forgiving prayer, we noticed that again she became good friends with the family of her

estranged husband. Forgiveness does not mean that everything returns to what it was before, but it does help us to be more Christ-like in our behaviour; it does make it possible for some strained relationships to begin to heal.

### Three steps

Are you prepared to obey the Lord Jesus and forgive all those who have sinned against you? Are you willing to do so now? In order to forgive from your heart, I suggest you follow these simple steps:

1. Ask your heavenly Father to work through His Holy Spirit in your mind, to bring to your conscious memory those people who have hurt you and which you still need to forgive. Simply follow the prayer of King David: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me..." (Psalm 139:23-24). Let the Holy Spirit do the searching. Resist the temptation to engage in unhealthy introspection. If one or more names come to mind, write them down.
2. Look at the name or names, and consciously decide that you are going to obey the Lord Jesus and forgive each one of these people.
3. Pray over each of the persons on your list, one by one. Bring each before the Lord, and then in the name of the Lord Jesus forgive them. Let them go.

To help you in this process, I have included two suggested model prayers. There is nothing magical about these prayers. If you want something to happen in the spiritual world, I suggest you use the words of the prayer with honesty and pray to the Lord God with all your heart. The model prayers are simply tools. If you find this difficult, invite a Christian brother or sister that you trust to support you in prayer while you pray and forgive.

### First prayer

Dear God and Father, I thank you for speaking to my heart as I have studied this course. I am grateful for your wonderful and complete forgiveness. I thank you that you know everything about me, even the things that no-one else knows, and you still love me. Thank you that the blood of the Lord Jesus was shed also for me, and that His blood has cleansed me from all my sin. Thank you for forgiving the totality of my great debt.

I also thank you that you have made me aware of the importance of forgiving those who have sinned against me. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you have shown me how to forgive. I am now prepared to obey you and forgive all those who have hurt me. Please bring now to my mind any and every person which you want me to forgive, Amen.

Now stop and wait in His presence – give Him time to work inside you. If the Spirit of God has brought one or more names to your mind, write them on a sheet of paper. If in doubt, I

suggest you write that name down too. Do not try to justify what these people have done to you. Simply acknowledge that they have sinned against you and against God. Because you are a Christian, because you want to obey your Lord and Master, you are going to forgive them right now. Do not say: 'I would like to forgive him' – that is only a good intention. But say, 'I forgive him' – that is a real transaction.

Pray individually and specifically for and over each person that you have on your list. You could use words similar to those in the following model prayer. I would recommend you pray out loud, maybe softly but still audibly. It helps bring into the open an internal conflict.

### Second prayer

- My God and Father,
- Today I want to forgive ... [here use the person's name], because of what he/she has done to me ... [here describe to the Lord in some detail what he/she has done to hurt you].
- And Father, that has made me feel ... [here try to explain to the Lord how you have felt about that person, about their sin and about yourself].
- Father, I now let it all go!
- Father, in the name of the Lord Jesus I forgive ... [here use the person's name].
- I accept living with the consequences of their sin against me.
- I renounce the right I sometimes feel I have to take revenge.
- Please strengthen me and heal my hurting emotions.
- Thank you, Father, that you have now set me free from this burden.
- Heavenly Father, now please bless ... [here use the person's name].
- In the name of the Lord Jesus, Amen.

### MAKING IT PERSONAL

- If you have not done so already, we suggest you ask the Lord to bring to your mind any person you need to forgive. Perhaps you could use the words of the first prayer.
- Take a sheet of paper, and write the name or names of those people the Holy Spirit brings to your mind. Decide to forgive each one of them.
- Seek the presence of the Lord. Use the words of the second prayer to forgive each of the people on your list. Take your time with each name.
- **Prayer:** 'Dear Lord, I want to obey you and forgive today. Help me to do it. Amen.'

## Lesson 11: Moving on - Living in forgiveness

You have sincerely forgiven the offender from your heart. You are now very willing to tell the offender that you have forgiven him, but are waiting for some sign of repentance. Perhaps you have already told him that you have forgiven him. What next? We shall first address some very practical matters and then look ahead at your new way of living. Forgiveness sets us free to 'move on!'

### What about the offender?

The Lord loves the offender and wants to save him or restore him. Sometimes the Lord will make it clear that after Heart Forgiveness the next step is to let the matter rest (1 Cor. 6:7). Sometimes the Lord wants to use the one who has been offended to help the offender come to his senses (Matt. 18:15-17). And sometimes it is not your responsibility but that of others to pursue the matter.

### Is reconciliation always possible?

Some of those who have sinned against us have moved away out of reach or have died. We are to forgive them but reconciliation is not an option. For most minor offences, reconciliation in a relationship takes place as soon as forgiveness has been expressed. In more serious offences, forgiveness is often only the first step in a slow movement towards reconciliation. In extremely difficult situations where trust has been seriously and repeatedly abused, and where the emotional damage has been deep, after forgiveness, rebuilding a relationship may sometimes be unsafe or unwise.

### What about the Local church?

Depending on the gravity of the offence, some issues should be reported privately to your church leadership, because after all, they have the God given task to "keep watch over you" (Heb. 13:17). This is particularly important if the offending Christian is not repentant (1 Cor. 5:9-11). If the offender forms part of another Christian congregation, I would recommend, if they consider it appropriate, that the leadership of your church contact the leadership of the offender's church so that they can exercise pastoral care over the offender. If you were to contact the offender's church directly it would easily be interpreted as a vengeful act. If other Christians are involved in helping and counselling you or the offender, pray for them, and allow the Body of Christ to do its job!

### What about justice?

Our God loves justice. If the offence involved material elements, should we pursue compensation or some form of justice after we have forgiven? To ignore completely the material consequences of an offence, could fall under 'sheltering offenders' which, as discussed in lesson 6, is usually not wise. If you and the offender are both Christians, another factor should be taken into account: the public testimony of the Christian church.

1 Corinthians 6:1-7 "If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? ... I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another, and this in front of unbelievers! The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?"

The fact that we Christians are born again and have the Spirit of God within us does not eliminate the possibility of sinful behaviour. We can and do sometimes treat each other unfairly. We can hurt each other badly. In harmony with the teaching of the Lord Jesus, the apostle Paul encourages fellow believers to talk together and resolve their differences. If progress stagnates, seek the help of wise and respected believers among you. The main concern of the apostle in this text is not fairness or personal justice, but the testimony of Christ and the Christian community in the eyes of the unbelieving world. Because we love the Lord Jesus and desire to promote the kingdom of God, sometimes we may need to suffer material loss. We know that the Lord Himself is aware of this injustice, and He will reward any loss we incur for His sake. This peaceful acceptance of loss is only possible if we trust Him and have forgiven the offender from our heart.

### **Self-Forgiveness**

One of Satan's descriptive names is "the accuser of the brothers" (Rev. 12:10) because day and night he recounts the sins of the saints. In most situations, we forgive ourselves at the same time as we receive God's Fatherly Forgiveness. It is wonderful when those we have offended also forgive us. But it is worth noting that self-forgiveness is something different from accepting God's forgiveness and from accepting the forgiveness offered by others. The reason we can forgive ourselves is because our heavenly Father has forgiven us. Self-Forgiveness is based on God's Fatherly Forgiveness and not on the response of the offended party.

If after you have accepted God's forgiveness you still experience moments of painful remorse, bitterness, perhaps even hatred towards yourself, you must take the decision to forgive yourself. If you are currently struggling in this area, may I encourage you to enter the Lord's presence through prayer and thank Him again for His full and complete forgiveness for that sin that still torments you. Visualize yourself as that repentant prodigal son being accepted, embraced and completely forgiven by your happy heavenly Father. Then, in the Lord's presence, say 'In the name of Jesus I now forgive myself for having done...' Forgive yourself and then believe, accept and rejoice in that forgiveness.

### **It is time to move on**

When we have been deeply offended, the offence has absorbed a great deal of our time and energy. In our minds we have relived the situation many times. We have explored many 'what if' scenarios. We have played with complicated plans to seek justice or even revenge. It is easy to see how a life can be lived in function of an offence, that is, much of what we do and don't do become linked directly or indirectly with that offence. The very good news is that forgiveness frees us from that bondage and allows us to move on away from our past.

After forgiving, some of those angry thoughts may come back. We *know* we have forgiven, but sometimes we don't *feel* like we have forgiven. What should we do? We should do exactly the same as we do with every satanic lie and wicked thought: "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). Like a computer virus detector, we identify the offending thought, and take it to Jesus. We then choose to believe the truth: I have forgiven Him in the name of Jesus. Almighty God will deal with his sin, but as for me, I have obeyed the Lord Jesus and forgiven him. I have 'let go.'

Seek to replace the old, negative, destructive thought patterns with new, positive, edifying thoughts (Phil. 4:8). Detect those thoughts that revolve around you, the forgiven offender and the forgiven offence, and replace them with thoughts about the Lord Jesus, what He has

done for you and what He is now doing in building up His church. The apostle Paul lived through many injustices and painful moments, but his life did not revolve around himself and his problems, but around his Lord and Saviour: "For to me, to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). He did not live in the past, but kept moving on. He explains it like this: "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14).

Life here on earth will never be perfect. We Christians know that. The Bible is very realistic about it. But in this dark fallen world we are called to be different, to shine for Jesus. Like all the saints in the Old and New Testament, we also anticipate a new and perfect reality, where "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4). And we are not there yet!

### **MAKING IT PERSONAL**

- Are you caught up in a conflict that involves money or material possessions? Is the way you are handling the situation honouring the Lord? Should you change something?
- Are you trying to help in some conflict or sinful situation that should now be brought to the attention of your local church leaders? How could you best do that?
- **Prayer:** 'Dear heavenly Father, I thank you that I can 'move on!' after forgiving. It is also my sincere desire to say: 'For me to live is Christ.' Help me. Amen.'

## Lesson 12: Helping others forgive

Promoting forgiveness, peace and reconciliation is a wonderful task. In the Sermon of the Mount, the Lord Jesus pointed out that this task has a blessing attached to it: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9). Are you at peace with God? Are you at peace with yourself and your fellow humans? If so, the Lord may wish to use you to help and encourage others to forgive and move on!

Most Christians who listen to a Biblical message on forgiveness or study a course like this one will be able to come into the Lord's presence, seek His strength, and forgive those who have offended them. But some may need a little extra encouragement. For a few, the pain is so deep that they will not be able to forgive without the prayer support of fellow Christians. Counselling and praying with others will take time and energy, but it will be very well invested. Christians who forgive are 'free' Christians, and free Christians grow and are a blessing to others.

### Observe carefully

In my experience, very few people come asking for help in forgiving. They come for counselling for something else, and during the conversation we touch on the topic of damaged relationships and pain, and then forgiveness becomes the necessary topic. Ask the Lord to give you wisdom and sensitivity (James 1:5; Phil. 1:9-10). Keep your eyes and ears open. If a Christian has a sharp glass splinter in his arm, something will show.

I recall counselling a man in his fifties who had a fairly uncomfortable stutter. One often felt an urge to help him by finishing his sentence for him. We suggested some counselling sessions simply because he always had a reason why he should not be baptized yet! What was holding him back? We wanted to help him move on. During the following conversations, it emerged that he was conceived during a short adventure his unmarried mother had with a married man. His birth was a 'mistake,' and his father had done his best to disown him. He decided not to visit his father again, after a very unpleasant visit when he was about 10 years old. Since then he has not seen him again. As you can imagine, his father was on the list of people he needed to forgive. It was emotional and painful, but he did it. At the end of the last session, we invited him to pray. After he left, my fellow counsellor and I looked at each other in amazement. He prayed without stuttering! It is amazing what forgiving can do!

### Listen lovingly

Avoid the temptation to jump into action with your new 'forgiveness kit!' People are not projects. Every Christian carries the dignity of a child of God and should be listened to carefully. If you are not trusted, if your concern is not genuine, the hurting 'victim' will not want to share his story with you. If that is the case, stop. Don't try to force doors open. But if he feels loved, accepted and safe, a few simple questions will be enough to allow them to share their burden (Prov. 20:5). Again, as you listen, keep your eyes open for evidence of any glass splinters. Sometimes the painful event is so painful and so recent, and their thoughts and emotions are in such a state of confusion, that it is best to focus on listening, empathising, loving and affirming. The theme of forgiveness will have to wait for later.

### Explain Biblically

There is much miss-information about forgiveness. Take plenty of time to talk about the issues raised in this course. Some Christians say they have forgiven, because they know

that is what Christians should do, but in their heart they have not forgiven. Some Christians carry a theology that allows them to forgive only if the offender is repentant or if justice has been served. Such a believer will require clear Biblical explanations. Forgiving is a very emotional matter, but until the mind understands what forgiveness involves and does not involve, you will not be able to move forward.

### **Encourage prayerfully**

Now you turn your attention from the *mind* to the *will*. Forgiving needs a decision. Why should they forgive? What are the advantages? Does the Lord expect them to act? Is this the right time? Remember that you are encouraging a decision to forgive, but the Holy Spirit must do His work (John 16:8; 2 Cor. 5:20). Heart forgiveness must come from their heart. If you put the victim under pressure to forgive, he may pray the words, but his heart will remain cold and disconnected. Only when the person says 'yes, I now understand what forgiveness is' and 'yes, I now want to forgive' should we lead him to the two prayers suggested in lesson 10.

### **When a believer cannot forgive**

Sometimes a Christian can be convinced that he should forgive, he desires to forgive, he may have taken the decision to forgive, but somehow, he just can't bring himself to say 'I forgive' – something stops him saying it. I would not have thought this possible until I encountered such a situation myself. One of our new sisters tried to forgive her husband. During the counselling session she began to pray: 'In the name of Jesus I f... f ... f...' And she couldn't go any further. The words could not leave her lips. It was clearly a spiritual battle. This is a situation where the words in James 5:16 apply. These spiritual battles are real battles, genuine struggles in the spiritual realm.

We talked extensively with her about this issue of forgiveness. She agreed with the Biblical explanations, she agreed that she needed to forgive, and she wanted to do it. She wrote a long list of names of people who had badly hurt her, people she wanted to forgive. We supported her in prayer as, in prayer, she went down her list of names forgiving one by one. Working through a list of names can be a long and tiring process. Sometimes the whole process can feel rather mechanical. But don't give up, it works! When we pronounce forgiveness, something really happens!

She skipped over the name of her husband and we carried on down her list of names. At the end, of course, we came back to her husband. It was her husband who had forced her into a life of prostitution. She moved back and forth restlessly in her chair. 'Do you want to forgive him?' we asked. 'Yes,' she said, but she could still not pray aloud that simple prayer. We tried together for half an hour. The time was up, so we decided to stop and continue the next week. During the following days, the fellow counsellor and I discussed her situation. He suggested that, given her background, perhaps she was being held back by demonic forces (1 Thes 2:18; Eph. 6:11-12). For the next counselling session, we decided to fast and pray, following the words recorded in Matthew 17:21.

When we next met, she confirmed that she wanted to forgive her husband. But again she could not say the words of the prayer. I felt quite frustrated. It was only a short little prayer. She only needed to say aloud, 'I forgive him.' Why could she not repeat it? After about half an hour of praying and trying, she eventually pronounced the word 'forgive.' Then she got stuck when she had to pronounce the name of her husband. She was no psychiatric patient. A spiritual battle was taking place. After more than an hour, she managed to forgive her

husband audibly in prayer. After praying she lifted her eyes up from looking at the floor and looked at us. Her face had changed. It was radiant! She had forgiven! She was now free!

We should never judge a brother or a sister who is finding it difficult to forgive. They may be discouraged and think that they will never be able to forgive. Such people can forgive, but maybe they need the help and support of fellow Christians.

### **Conclusion**

Has the Lord spoken to you in some way as you have studied this course? What are you going to do about it? Please don't put this course in a box or back on the shelf. Leave it visible next to your bed or on your desk as a reminder to respond - until you do what the Lord is asking you to do.

1. Perhaps you are aware that you have offended someone. What can you do? Seek forgiveness. Write that letter, send that email, make that phone call, make that visit. Respond and you will be set free.
2. Perhaps you are aware of pain or even bitterness in your heart against someone who has hurt you. What can you do? Forgive from your heart. In the name of Jesus, remove that sharp glass splinter from your arm today! Respond and you will begin to be healed.
3. Perhaps you are now aware of signs of bitterness in others caused by some stagnant conflict in their family or local church. What can you do? Our heavenly Father wants to use normal people like you and me as His agents to explain and encourage forgiveness and reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-20). Respond and God will use you to help others.

### **MAKING IT PERSONAL**

- Do you love others enough to want to invest some of your time and energy in their internal well being? Are you too busy? Should you change something?
- Is Christian counselling something for you? Could you work together with someone with a little more experience and learn from them?
- **Prayer:** 'Dear God and Father, thank you that you work through normal human beings. Please use me to help and bless others. Amen'