

"HEAR YE HIM"

A Devotional Series For Radio

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The Sermon: FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES

Scripture: Matthew 18:15-17, and 21-22.

Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? tell seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but Until seventy times seven.

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Forgiveness of enemies is a Christian doctrine. Pagans of the ancient world did not forgive their enemies unless the offense was beneath their notice. Forgiveness of enemies among most non-Christians is esteemed a sign of weakness, not of strength. Even among ancient Israel, forgiveness of enemies was not regarded as a virtue, for several of the Psalms are prayers for vengeance on David's enemies.

As long as men are human, they will continue to offend each other in word and deed. Since we may regard the continuation of offenses as inevitable, each one of us must make up his mind how to deal with them -- both with those we give to others, and with the offenses which others give to us. It is both a physiological and a psychological fact that unreconciled offenses grow in size and significance with every day that they remain unreconciled. Irritation grows to anger; anger grows into resentment; resentment grows into hatred, and hatred breeds more and more hatred not only within ourselves, but in the one we hate. When we hate, we suspect our enemy's every motive, his every intention, his every act. And physiologically, hatred, suspicion, anger, and resentment generate physical poisons within the body which can cause physical illness, and even death. Conversely, a feeling of guilt in one who is hated may do the same thing.

Jesus taught that forgiveness of offenses is a duty devolving upon all Christians. He taught that forgiveness should know no limits. The rabbis of Jesus' day taught that men should forgive each other three times, but no more. Peter thought he was being very generous in offering to

forgive more than twice that, or seven times, but Jesus said that he must forgive until seventy times seven -- or indefinitely, without limits.

An unforgiving spirit, an unwillingness to forgive others, is one offense which God cannot forgive, in the very nature of things. All of us are sinners; no one of us is without some guilt. All of us need God's forgiveness, but if we refuse to grant forgiveness to those who have trespassed against us, we have closed the avenues of repentance to ourselves, and made ourselves unworthy of God's forgiveness. A man who is so concerned about the mote in his brother's eye that he cannot see the beam in his own eye, is in no condition to do very much about removing the beam.

In order that we might be frequently reminded of our obligation to forgive, Jesus gave us the Lord's prayer, which includes the petition: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." The Revised Standard translation puts the last clause in the past perfect tense: "As we also have forgiven our debtors," indicating that we have not even the right to pray for forgiveness until we have already forgiven. Good intentions for the future are not sufficient. We must prove the genuineness of our good intentions by actually forgiving others, before we can ask God's forgiveness for ourselves.

Again Jesus vividly taught the obligations of forgiveness when he told the parable of the unforgiving debtor, who when called to account for a fantastical-stupendous debt, found himself unable

to pay, and was forgiven out of his Lord's magnanimity. Then he went out to a fellow servant who owed him a few cents, and demanded payment at once. When his Lord heard of his unwillingness to forgive a fellow-servant, he immediately re-instated the old debt, and put the unforgiving debtor in prison until he should pay. Jesus concluded the parable with the words, "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses."

Reconciliation of offenses is much more important than acts of worship, for without it, worship is false, hollow, insincere, and unacceptable with God. It does not matter whether you are the one offended, or the one who has given offense; the obligation remains the same -- to reconcile the offense before your worship can be acceptable. If you are before the altar with a special gift, and there remember that someone has a grievance against you, you must leave your gift before the altar, go reconcile the offense, and then come and offer your gift. On the other hand, if you stand praying, and remember that you have been offended by someone else, and that you still hold resentments against him, Jesus said, "Forgive, if ye have aught against any, that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." Offenses must be dealt with in a spirit of kindness. "Judge not, that ye be not judged; condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned; forgive, and ye shall be forgiven." "Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

Though there must always be a willingness to forgive, there are certain conditions which must be fulfilled before forgiveness can be granted in full to an offender. According to Luke's account of Jesus' teaching about forgiveness, we are obligated to a complete forgiveness only if the offender comes to us saying "I repent." To forgive the persistent, unrepentant offender only confirms him more and more in his sin. The thief, the liar, the murderer, or the adulterer who finds that he can "get away with it" and still retain his place in the society and the affections of his friends, is being hindered, rather than helped, by their too easy forgiveness -- for their forgiveness and his persistence in sin only increase

his separation from God; and men can be restored to full fellowship with each other only as they have mutual fellowship with God.

Even if there is no repentance in those who have offended us, we are still obligated to have a forgiving mind, to bear no enmity, no grudges, no ill will, and to be continually hoping and working and praying for a reconciliation. We are always obligated to keep open the channels of reconciliation, to forgive from the heart even if the offender's lack of repentance makes it impossible to forgive in deed, to seek to bring the wrongdoer to repentance and reconciliation with ourselves and with God.

What is forgiveness? It is a covering up, a sending away of our sins; a remission of the punishment due for offenses. It is the extension of graciousness by which the old relationship, which was broken by sin, is restored. Often it is impossible to make such a restoration full and complete, for the consequences of sin may still remain even after the penalties have been lifted. There will always be some memory of what has once happened to destroy that relationship. For many years there may perhaps be some lingering doubt, some slight lack of the former confidence between the offender and the offended. But there will be love, sympathy, understanding, and fellowship.

God does not sanction delaying reconciliation of offenses for any cause. The responsibility falls equally upon offender and offended. The one who first becomes aware of an offense is the one in duty bound to seek a reconciliation and forgiveness. If you remember that your brother has aught against you, it is your duty to go to him. If you feel that your brother has offended you, it is your duty to go and tell him privately, in a spirit of meekness, hoping and praying that there may be reconciliation and forgiveness.

No act of worship, no prayer for forgiveness is acceptable to God unless we have first forgiven all men, for God accepts our worship only if we are at peace with our fellow-man; and he accepts our prayers for forgiveness only if we have already forgiven from our hearts all those who have trespassed against us.