Addressing Forgiveness [1]

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This past Sunday, I attended Southern Cross church, which is a new CESA congregation in Constantia in Cape Town. It was the six month anniversary of their establishment, and for the occasion, the speaker was bishop Frank Retief. He was involved with St James in Kenilworth when, in 1993, it suffered a terrorist attack [2] which killed a number of people and maimed many more. And so he spoke to us about the question of suffering, although it was not a regular sermon. Rather, he spoke to us about the attack, describing the immediate aftermath in vivid detail, and then proceeded to explain how they as a congregation worked through the experience, trying to make sense of that horrid ordeal.

Again, it is not my aim to summarise the sermon here, rather I want to comment on a practical aspect which stood out for me when the bishop mentioned it. He said that after the attack a news crew came to him and asked if he could explain what was going on, because, wherever they went around and asked members of the congregation what their thoughts were, they would get a reply of "we forgive the attackers". Retief then replied that the congregation were responding with their "Christian instinct". As the months and years went by, the reality came to light, however, that forgiveness is a difficult process.

The Importance of Forgiveness to the Christian

Forgiveness is an integral part of the Christian faith. When Yeshua taught His followers the Lord's Prayer, He included:

> Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors.
>
> Matthew 6:12 (WEB)

Yeshua goes on to say that

> For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don’t forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.
>
> Matthew 6:14–15 (WEB)

He later explains the above in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21–35)1. The reason why forgiveness is so important for a Christian is explained by Paul in his letter to the Colossians (see Colossians 3:1–17): we are all equal in that we are all sinners. As Yeshua sacrificed Himself out of love to forgive our sins, so we must forgive others in love. If we harbour anger, hate and malice in our hearts, we shall be judged in the same way when we one day stand before God.

Forgiveness and Justice, and Other Issues

There is much to be said about forgiveness, more than I can go into now. But it should be understood that forgiveness does not forgo justice: if someone wrongs you and breaks the law in the process (e.g. stealing something from you), that person should still suffer the punishment as society (or, at least, the government) deems fit2. If you are wronged but no laws are broken in the process, the justice will be served by God at the final judgement. This judgement will lead to forgiveness if the

wrongdoer is repentant, and condemnation if he or she is not[3]. Some people might debate whether forgiveness from us should be universal, especially if regarding whether a wrongdoer is (truly) repentant. But the Bible is clear that we must not harbour hate in our hearts[4], therefore we must forgive others, even if their crime was hideous and even if they are (truly) unrepentant. What forgiveness necessarily should look like is another question which can be asked: should you always forgive a person face-to-face (if possible), or is it acceptable to do it quietly in your heart?

The Difficulty of Forgiveness

Humans find it easier to forgive certain things than others: it is relatively easy to forgive a sibling for eating that last chocolate brownie which you were craving for than to forgive someone who murdered a family member. Throughout all of our lives, we are exposed to plenty of sins against us with varying severity. Perhaps, deep down, you still hold a grudge against the school bully twenty or thirty years down the line. Perhaps you secretly fume because of how one or both parents treated you while you were growing up. Perhaps someone took a loved one away from you and, even though you know intellectually that you should forgive, emotionally you simply are not able to. All of these examples, and many more, are not easy to deal with. It simply isn't a matter of waking up one morning and letting go of the issue: it relentlessly gnaws at the back of your mind, coming back time and again even after you thought you had stamped it out.

A Personal Struggle

Coming back to my original point, it was Retief's labelling of a "Christian instinct" which struck me: often we know intellectually that we must forgive and our spirit desires to be one of forgiveness, but our hearts are often unwilling or, perhaps even (at a certain point in time) unable. It is lingering issues—outstanding debts—which have been on my mind of late. Those often remain dormant for long periods of time, but are always there, lurking in the shadows of one's mind. When they resurface, they bring anger and bitterness, perhaps even hate. Yes, I have people whom I need to forgive. Mostly these people who hurt me or people around me indirectly, and may be oblivious to what they have done. But their actions (or inactions) have had a significant effect on my life.

But, as Yeshua instructed us, we are obligated to forgive. And we must not forgive reluctantly or conditionally. Therefore, the *process*[5] of forgiveness starts with the desire to forgive: to let go of the hurt for the sake of everyone involved. How the process continues from there, I cannot say, but one needs to employ wisdom and communicate with those around you.

Is there anything you still hold over someone? Does a reoccurring grudge stalk you, sometimes leading you away from a godly life? Perhaps it is time to make peace with the past. I am not saying that it will be easy and I have not offered any clear-cut solutions, but as Yeshua gladly put to death our sins, al be it with suffering, so we must gladly put to death the debts others owe us.

- 1. "Debt" means sin, and our "debtors" are those whom have sinned against us. The language of debt reminds us that something is still outstanding: a punishment. See the brief discussion of sin and justice in the following section.
- 2. Similarly, our sins are only forgiven after justice has been met. This justice was meted out when Yeshua was crucified for our sins.
- 3. This repentance is the repentance at the Cross: the person must have turned to Yeshua as his or her personal saviour.
- 4. See Matthew 5:21–26.
- 5. If you think about the redemptive history given in the Bible, then God's forgiveness of our sins was also a process, completed in the resurrection of Yeshua our Messiah.

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