

# Learning to Forgive

*Getting Past the Hurt to Find Healing*



Based on a study by  
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*Pastor James Keen*

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## Introduction

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“Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!”<sup>1</sup>

Why study forgiveness? We must be prepared to deal with the offences that will undoubtedly occur. There is much at stake! The unity of God’s church and our personal walk with God are dependent upon maintaining a loving relationship with others. My personal experience is that a relationship mended biblically after an offence is often stronger than it was before the offence. The methods the world prescribes, however, will not bring a true healing. That is why this study is necessary.

What does God say about forgiveness? Let me tell you now, you probably know less than you think. There are a lot of theories on forgiveness preached and proclaimed by Christians that are not truly biblical. Let us begin by agreeing upon one point. We will seek the answer in God’s Word and let it dictate our beliefs. If we share this common ground we have great hope of fellowship. The purpose of this lesson is not only to define forgiveness but to learn how we can overcome the pain we feel when we are offended. We must overcome that pain in order to do the hard work that leads to forgiveness and healing. It is my prayer that this lesson will go beyond your mind and reach your heart by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18:7 *KJV*

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## Laying a foundation

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Let's begin by carefully defining the words most important to this study. The words, "forgive", "confess", and "repent" are essential to getting a grasp on biblical forgiveness.

**What does it mean to Forgive? Jeremiah 31:34, Isaiah 43:25** - In both passages, we read of God's promise to forgive and remember the trespasser's sins no more, hence the phrase, "forgive and forget". Have you ever really thought about that? Don't just embrace a cliché because it sounds good. Does God actually forget things? Isn't that contrary to His omniscience?<sup>2</sup> If God does forget when He forgives, are we supposed to as well? Have we really forgiven someone if we haven't forgotten the offence? We come up with all kinds of problems with this interpretation. Let's look at the passages in more detail.

The Hebrew word, "remember" as used in the passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah, means to recall or bring to remembrance. It is an active word not passive. By that I mean that one who remembers is actively bringing a matter up again. It doesn't refer to a passive thought or memory that crosses your mind. Therefore when God says that He will remember their sin no more, He is actually saying that He will never bring it up against them again. To forgive is to make a commitment that you will not bring up an offence against the offender again.

This is the commitment we are to make when we forgive another. We are not promising to forget. We have very little control over that. We are making a promise to not hold this sin against the offender or bring it up against them. This is something we can do! This also harmonizes with the doctrine of God's omniscience. Nothing has passed from His mind. Thank God! We don't want a God that can either actively or passively forget something.

**What is Confession? Psalm 32:1-6** – Confession is also confused by many. I've heard many attempts at confession that are vague, insincere, and deceptive. They are often laden with excuses and blame-shifting. Just like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we try to blame someone else for our sin when confronted.

In the 32<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, David describes true confession. In verse five he says, "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid..." His confession was specific, sincere, and honest. He didn't blame anyone else or hide anything. He took responsibility for his action. In Hebrew, the word, "confess" means to hold out with an open hand. Nothing is hidden; all is exposed. In Greek, the word, "confess" means to say the same thing. What does that mean? It means that you say the same thing about your sin that God does. You call it like it really is.

From this, we derive the definition of confession. Confession is completely and openly acknowledging and taking ownership of your sin to the offended party without excuse or blame-shifting.

**What is Repentance? Luke 3:8-14** – As John the Baptist baptized in Judea he required evidence that true repentance had taken place before he brought them into the water. He wanted to see a change. When men asked him specifically what he was looking for, he gave them some examples. Soldiers who were complaining of their wages were to be content. Tax collectors who had stolen

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<sup>2</sup> Omniscience is the quality of God that pertains to His infinite knowledge of all things. Omniscient literally means, "all knowing."

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money from others were to only take the money appointed to them. Repentance is preceded by a godly sorrow over sin which leads us to renounce the sin. In short, repentance means change! The word, "repent" means to turn. It is a change of heart which prompts a change in action.

Repentance isn't merely saying, "I'm sorry." Those words, though commonly used, don't deal with the root issue, which is sin. Saying you are sorry may express how you feel, but it isn't specific. Are you sorry about the consequences of your action? Perhaps you are sorry that someone else took your actions personally and were offended. Neither of the reasons I just expressed touch upon sin. A repentant individual takes ownership of their sin. They confess their offence to the offended party (or parties) and express remorse over the sin. One who is truly repentant is more concerned about the offence than the consequence. Regardless of whether they have to experience a difficult consequence, the repentant individual knows what they did was wrong and is actively seeking to change their behavior. They will also seek the forgiveness of those they have offended. True repentance seeks the forgiveness of sin and the replacement of sin with righteousness.

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## A pattern of forgiveness

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**Ephesians 4:32** – “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.”

This passage is foundational for an understanding of forgiveness. The supreme example and our model of forgiveness is God. We are to forgive even as God has forgiven us. We will not exceed His pattern but must strive to align ourselves with it. This then begs the question, how does God forgive? Each of the points below is a component of biblical forgiveness. For each point, we will see how God models the behavior followed by the commandment for us to imitate these actions.

### **Seek Reconciliation**

God: *John 6:44* – No man can come to Jesus unless He is drawn by the Father. God is the initiator of reconciliation. When man sinned in the Garden of Eden, he hid from the voice of God. God came looking for Adam. It is the same way with us. As John said, “We love Him, because He first loved us.”<sup>3</sup> He is the offended party yet He initiated, fulfilled, and proclaimed the plan of salvation.

Man: *Matthew 5:23; 18:15* – Read together, these passages place us on both sides of the fence. If you are the offender, you should go to the offended. If you were offended, you should go to the offender. If both parties are spiritual you will meet them on the road as they come to talk with you. There is never an excuse to lay this responsibility on them. Just like God initiates reconciliation, so should you.

### **Pray for the Offender**

God: *Luke 23:34* – This is the ultimate example of praying for an offender. Jesus asked His Father to extend mercy to those who were crucifying Him. Never had such love been demonstrated on the earth. To think that the Father would intercede for those who stood mocking the One who created them is humbling. “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”<sup>4</sup>

Man: *Matthew 5:43-45* – Towards the beginning of His ministry, Jesus preached a revolutionary sermon. It turned the religious establishment on its ear by the clarity Jesus brought to the law. During this sermon He challenged those who were offended to consider their enemies in new light. Rather than hate them, love them. Instead of doing evil to them, do good. In place of persecuting them we are to pray for them. This is exactly what the Father does to His enemies. Jesus knew the weakness of human flesh; He endured it for 33 years. Yet, He still commanded us to be holy like the Father in heaven is holy.<sup>5</sup> Prayer is an amazing thing. Through the process of prayer, our hearts can be changed. It is hard to zealously pray for someone you hate. If you pray for them regularly and sincerely, your heart can be changed by the very process!

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<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:19

<sup>4</sup> Romans 5:8, *KJV*

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 1:15-16 “But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.”

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## **Do Good to the Offender**

God: *Romans 2:3-4* – Which of us would be saved without the goodness of God? Perhaps God used some tragic event in your life to allow you to see your need for God and led you to salvation. Would you then deny that He is good? It would be much worse to live an “easy” life, never see our need of Christ and open our eyes in hell. God daily pours out goodness on sinners. Truly, every good gift comes from God!<sup>6</sup> It is this goodness that draws men to repentance. Jesus healed a man who was born blind. His disciples questioned why the man was blind, was it his sin or the sin of his parents? Jesus told them he was born blind for the glory of God.<sup>7</sup> It was this great need that brought this man to Jesus. If you could speak to him in heaven now, I have no doubt he harbors no regret over his former blindness. The Lord makes it rain on both the just and the unjust.<sup>8</sup> Even in difficulty, God is good!

Man: *Romans 12:20-21* – We are called to do good to all, especially our enemies. As witnessed by the New Testament church, the greatest thing that could happen is to see our enemies get saved. Remember Stephen’s prayer while being stoned to death and Saul/Paul’s eventual salvation?<sup>9</sup> God used the kindness and prayer of Stephen for his enemies to turn the world upside down through Paul’s ministry. Just as our Father sends rain on the just and unjust (He spreads His goodness upon all men), we are to be like Him and do good to all men. In this way we can be like our Father in heaven.

## **Forgive the Offender if they Repent**

God: *Psalms 32:1-6* – Does God withhold forgiveness from one who has truly repented? Never! He desires to forgive men so much that He gave His only Son to pave the way. He sends His Spirit to draw men to salvation. He does good to them, giving them opportunity to repent. The psalmist spoke well, “For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.”<sup>10</sup>

Man: *Luke 17:3-4* – The command to forgive is included with the command to lovingly rebuke an offender. We are not given the option of debating it for awhile. If they repent, our forgiveness should be both sincere and swift.<sup>11</sup> We put ourselves in grave danger if we withhold forgiveness. Jesus taught the disciples that if they withheld forgiveness, their Father in heaven would withhold forgiveness from them.<sup>12</sup> Your fellowship with God is at stake. You cannot be close to Him while holding a grudge against another.

## **Respect the Work of the Church**

God: *Matthew 18:17-19, John 20:21-23* – Before departing to His Father, Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom (church) to His disciples, which were representatives of His early church. The keys gave them authority to forgive sin. This was not power over everyday sin, but sin that an individual committed that was brought before the church body. Jesus designed a disciplinary

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<sup>6</sup> James 1:17

<sup>7</sup> John 9:2-3

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 5:45 – “That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.”

<sup>9</sup> Acts 7:55-60

<sup>10</sup> Psalms 86:5, *KJV*

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 11:25

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 6:14-15 – “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

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process within the church that encourages men to deal with their sin. It begins as a private matter and remains there if it is resolved. Yet, if men persist in sin, the process moves forward and begins to involve others until it ultimately reaches the whole congregation. It was in this context that the disciples were given authority. If an offender was brought before the congregation and refused to repent of their sin, the church had authority to exclude them from fellowship. If the offender repented, they had authority to forgive the sin. The Lord, looking down from heaven would respect and support the work of the church when done correctly. He has placed a great responsibility in the hands of His bride, a process that He supports and respects.

**Man:** *2 Corinthians 2:8-11* – Paul, as an apostle, had the responsibility of guiding the early churches. In this matter before the Corinthian church, Paul previously advised them to discipline this rebellious member.<sup>13</sup> At the time of this writing, the offender gave evidence of repentance and Paul encouraged them to restore him to church fellowship. However, it is interesting to note that Paul would forgive only if they forgive. Even as an apostle, Paul respected the authority of the church. He was not above it. How much more should we respect the authority of the church in matters of discipline? If God respects the process and Paul the apostle respected the process, we should too.

## **Implement Consequences as Necessary**

**God:** *2 Samuel 12:13-14* – David committed several horrendous sins during his affair with Bathsheba. He dishonored not only his name, but the name of God and of His people Israel. In love, God sent Nathan to confront David about his sin and bring him to repentance. David quickly repented and Nathan confirmed God's forgiveness.<sup>14</sup> Yet, the Lord still implemented consequences. Why? Didn't God forgive him? Yes, he did. This forgiveness allowed David renewed access to God. What then was the purpose of the consequence?

We cannot sin without consequence. Through repentance, we restore our fellowship with God. Consequences, however, have unique and important purposes. They (1) protect us from further sin; (2) protect others who might be harmed from future sin; and (3) protect the reputation of the Lord. David's sin caused the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme God's name. By taking the life of David's child, God's displeasure was manifested. People who heard this sad news knew that the Lord looked upon David's sin with great displeasure. It reaffirmed His holiness. This event also served as a painful reminder to David about his sin and no doubt steered him away from future transgressions. Finally, the consequence was a warning to others to obey God's will for their life. Truly, the way of the transgressors is hard!<sup>15</sup> The consequence was painful but effective.

**Man:** *1 Timothy 3:1-7, Acts 15:36-40* – In the first passage listed here we read the qualifications of an elder. There are certain sins that a man can commit which disqualify him from this office. Truly, we can be forgiven of any sin. Yet, there remains a consequence for some sins which limits the role we can play in His church.

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<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

<sup>14</sup> As a prophet of God, Nathan was able to reveal to David that God had pardoned his sin. This is not something God has called His people to do today. God can reveal this directly to men through the Holy Spirit.

<sup>15</sup> Proverbs 13:15, *KJV*

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The passage in Acts recounts a disagreement between Paul and Barnabas regarding whether John Mark should be allowed to accompany them on another missionary journey. Barnabas argued for his inclusion, Paul for his exclusion. The issue was not whether John Mark could be forgiven; it was whether his role in the impending missionary journey should be withheld as a consequence for deserting them the last time. We know that Paul at least wanted to let more time pass before he was willing to rely on John Mark again. This was a consequence. We know that eventually Paul did rely on John Mark and the Lord used him in a great way.<sup>16</sup>

When consequences are implemented, they must be motivated by love. Remember the three purposes: to protect the individual from further sin; to protect others from the damage that could be caused by further sin; and to uphold the name and honor of the Lord. It would be wise to involve the help of others who are both spiritual and uninvolved in the offence to construct consequences that further the purposes of God.

## ***Give Place to God's Wrath if there is no Repentance***

God: *Nahum 1:2-3* – The Lord alone sees the heart.<sup>17</sup> He possesses all knowledge and is perfect in truth and righteousness. The power to execute judgment also belongs to Him. In totality, these attributes enable Him to perfectly and righteously execute wrath on those who have sinned. He has promised to repay those who do not hide themselves in the blood of His Son.<sup>18</sup> As the writer of Hebrews says, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”<sup>19</sup>

Man: *Romans 12:19, James 1:20* – In all the previous points we explained how God has set an example that we are to follow. In this point, however, we differ. God has reserved the capacity to execute vengeance for sin upon evildoers for Himself and to governments to whom He has delegated responsibility over their citizens.<sup>20</sup> We as individuals are not to seek vengeance.<sup>21</sup> Yet, like God, we are to find comfort and solace in His justice. When all attempts at reconciliation have failed, we must trust that He is intimately aware of every aspect of the transgression. He sees the hearts of both parties and He alone has the capacity for perfect judgment. As we are commanded to give place to God's wrath, we are in the wrong when we take vengeance into our own hands. We think too much of our capacity for judgment and too little of God's faithfulness to fully resolve the matter. Just trust Him.

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<sup>16</sup> 2 Timothy 4:11 – “Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry.” John Mark was also used by the Lord in writing the Gospel of Mark, considered by some to be the oldest of the gospels.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Samuel 16:7

<sup>18</sup> Colossians 3:3 – “For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.”

<sup>19</sup> Hebrews 10:31, *KJV*

<sup>20</sup> 1 Peter 2:13-14 – “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.”

<sup>21</sup> It is important to distinguish between vengeance and church discipline. The focus of vengeance is judgment. The focus of church discipline is restoration. We are not to seek vengeance. We are to utilize the steps of church discipline if necessary.

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## What happens when we withhold forgiveness?

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An unresolved offence is not to be ignored or shoved under a rug. If so, we would not have the instructions given to us in Matthew 18 regarding church discipline. How am I supposed to act towards one that refuses to repent for an offence? What do I do if I've tried everything taught so far in this lesson and they still refuse to hear me? If they are a fellow church member, it would ultimately result in their exclusion from the church body because of the hardness of their heart. In that situation, we are given instruction. Paul taught the church at Corinth that they were to withhold fellowship from the offender.<sup>22</sup> There is to be a difference between the way we treat them before and after the offence. It has to do with the depth of the relationship.

When we offend God, it places a schism or division in our relationship.<sup>23</sup> Our prayers sometimes feel muffled or as if they go no farther than the ceiling. Our spiritual joy seems diminished as we lose out on our intimacy with Him. God is still good to us. He still loves us. Yet this loss of fellowship is the very thing that can drive us to our knees in repentance.

In Matthew 18, Jesus taught that one excluded from church fellowship is to be considered as a heathen man or a publican.<sup>24</sup> To the Jew, the heathen was one excluded from the lineage of Abraham and the promises of God. A publican was a tax collector for the Roman Empire and a traitor to his people. The implication is that the excluded one was to be considered to be either an unbeliever (heathen) or a backslider (publican). The difference is in the depth of our relationship. I am very selective when it comes to close friends. They need to be similarly minded. My closest friends have both a testimony of salvation and a sincere desire to follow Christ as exhibited by their life. These are the ones to whom I most closely relate and can share my heart. We should try to have a good relationship with all men, yet there is a difference between how we treat one of our brothers and sisters in Christ and others in the world.<sup>25</sup> It is this difference that defines the practical implications of withholding forgiveness. You do the offender a disservice by offering forgiveness before repentance. This "tough love" could be what they need to drive them to repentance. There is much more potential for damage when we try to bury sin instead of dealing with it. Buried sin yields a root of bitterness which wreak havoc upon a whole congregation.<sup>26</sup>

If the offender is an unbeliever, we continue to treat them as an unbeliever. We shouldn't expect good fruit from a bad tree. We must continue to be patient and show the love of Christ to those who spitefully use us. As a general rule of Scripture, we should never allow ourselves to get into too close of a relationship with an unbeliever.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:11-13 – "But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person."

<sup>23</sup> Isaiah 59:2 – "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear."

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 18:17

<sup>25</sup> Galatians 6:10 – "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith."

<sup>26</sup> Hebrews 12:15

<sup>27</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:14

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## What about the pain?

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When someone sins against us we are often left with emotional pain. Proverbs 12:18 says, "There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health." Perhaps we were betrayed, insulted, injured, or neglected. I heard an illustration of how a father taught his son to stop speaking in anger by making him drive a nail in the fence every time he lost control. The nails were a constant reminder of his failure to maintain his temper. After a few weeks, the son stopped blowing up all together. The father then told his son that he could remove a nail for each day he behaved well. After a couple months, all the nails were removed and the son brought his father to the fence. The father pointed out that while the nails are gone there remained a hole where each nail had been. Likewise, sinful words and deeds can leave a lasting wound in our heart, even when the offender tries to mend it through repentance. What can fill these holes? What if the offender will not repent and the nail remains?

The path to healing is Jesus Christ. The principles set forth in this study will not heal you. Only God can heal you. These principles are intended to turn your mind and heart to God. Consider Jesus who endured so much grief and insult, yet because of the depth of His relationship with His Father, He bore the cross and was faithful till death. He didn't do this begrudgingly. He prayed for His enemies as they crucified Him. He loved until the end of His life and rose again with a great love that offers forgiveness to all men.

The Word of God correctly interpreted is the instrument of the Spirit of God that can successfully operate on our hearts.<sup>28</sup> Prayerfully consider, prayerfully meditate on, and prayerfully implement these truths. Set your eyes upon Jesus.<sup>29</sup> It is the Word,<sup>30</sup> the Son,<sup>31</sup> and the Spirit<sup>32</sup> that reveal God to us. God is love.<sup>33</sup> You can only love if you abide in Him.<sup>34</sup> Let me tell you from experience that when Jesus comes by and heals you, the healing is real. Again, let the truths presented in this study drive you to God. This isn't an academic exercise. It is experiential.

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<sup>28</sup> Hebrews 4:12 – "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

<sup>29</sup> Hebrews 12:3 – "For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds."

<sup>30</sup> Psalm 119:97-100

<sup>31</sup> John 1:18

<sup>32</sup> John 16:13-14

<sup>33</sup> 1 John 4:16

<sup>34</sup> John 15:4

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## A love that sets us apart

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**1 Corinthians 13:1-3** – Love is an essential ingredient to any work that will please God. The possession and use of spiritual gifts outside the context of love makes them spiritually unfruitful. How does this then relate to the steps of forgiveness outlined above? If our motive is not love, then our efforts to reconcile will be corrupted, unfruitful, and displeasing to God. The effort to reconcile with an offender should be as much for the offender's benefit as ours because the motive is love.

**1 Corinthians 13:4-7** – In the definition of love, can you find a loophole that will excuse you to hate someone who wrongs you? Is there a sin another can commit against you so grievous that it cannot be covered by love? Indeed, "Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins."<sup>35</sup> "He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends."<sup>36</sup> Peter also said, "And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins."<sup>37</sup>

The last three passages just quoted often cause a lot of confusion regarding forgiveness. If love covers sin, doesn't that mean we just let the offence go and never confront the individual? Let me ask you a question based on Ephesians 4:32, which teaches that we are to forgive as God forgives. Is God being unloving towards men by presenting the gospel, convicting men of their sins, and drawing them to repentance? God forbid! John 3:16 makes it clear that God sent Jesus, Who is the gospel, because of His love for the world. We read in Romans 2:4 that it is the goodness of God that draws men to repentance.

If therefore God is exhibiting love by confronting us with our sin and encouraging us to repent are we being unloving by confronting a brother or sister about their sin? Leviticus 19:17 says, "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him." What a profound statement! To leave your brother or sister wallowing in sin is to hate them. This harmonizes with the Apostle John, who said, "But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?"<sup>38</sup>

But what about the splinter (mote) and the beam mentioned by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount?<sup>39</sup> Doesn't that passage teach us to withhold judgment from others and avoid pointing out their sins? The focus of that passage is the attitude with which we approach others. We are not to judge (condemn) others. Only God can condemn them.<sup>40</sup> However, we are to be spiritual and discern all things.<sup>41</sup> The difference between judging and discerning is love. One that judges seeks to condemn the offender and exact vengeance against them. The one who discerns seeks to restore them in love. If love is the most important of all Christian virtues, could it be that Jesus is telling us that the beam in the eye of a judgmental Christian is a lack of love? I believe so. If that is the case, then we should first get our attitude fixed and then try to help the one who has fallen into

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<sup>35</sup> Proverbs 10:12, *KJV*

<sup>36</sup> Proverbs 17:9, *KJV*

<sup>37</sup> 1 Peter 4:8, *KJV*

<sup>38</sup> 1 John 3:17, *KJV*

<sup>39</sup> Read Matthew 7:1-5 and Luke 6:41-42.

<sup>40</sup> James 4:12 – "There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?" *KJV*

<sup>41</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:15 – "But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man." *KJV*

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sin. As a matter of fact, that is exactly what Jesus said, "...first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye."<sup>42</sup>

This is hard. No really, having this type of loving attitude is VERY DIFFICULT. However, hard isn't bad, it's just hard. The capacity for this kind of love is not natural for fallen man. When Adam was confronted with his sin, he blamed Eve. When Cain became jealous of Abel, he killed him. Once the curse came, Biblical love left man's heart. With that said, one who truly knows Jesus Christ has acquired this supernatural capacity for love.

**Matthew 5:43-48** – Jesus contrasts the love that comes from Him and the love that is in this world. God is love and therefore all true love comes from Him. His is the source of love. We use the word "love" frequently but it isn't until we truly know the Lord that our definition is expanded to embrace its original meaning. God's love sets us apart from the rest of the world. With that said, it is still a difficult task for us to achieve Christian love.

**2 Peter 1:5-9** – As we read through this list of Christian virtues, where do we find love? It is at the end. In a sense, it is the pinnacle of godliness. It is the goal for which we are striving. Paul said, "and now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."<sup>43</sup> Love is the greatest because it alone will endure throughout eternity. Hope will end in realization and faith in sight. Love is also the greatest virtue because it is necessary for any Christian work to stand.

## **Learning to Love**

**1 John 2:7-11** – In this passage, John speaks of the commandment to love God and others. He calls it an old commandment because it was given in Old Testament times. However, he also calls it new because it was finally personified and made possible by Jesus Christ, the light of the world.<sup>44</sup> Jesus showed us how it is done; He set the high water mark. Never before had man seen the perfect example of love. He is now our standard.

In this passage, John not only tells us that we should love, but shows us how to love. It is only when Jesus dwells in our heart that we have a capacity to love like this. It is only when we abide in the light that we will exhibit a love like this. Let's elaborate on this a little further.

**Galatians 5:22-26** – This is the oft memorized passage on the fruit of the spirit. Sometimes these words become so commonplace that they lose their significance. Fruit means evidence. If God's Spirit is in you and in control of your life, the result (fruit) will be the virtues listed in the passage. They aren't called the fruit of a good person, but the fruit of the Spirit. Love is the first of the fruits mentioned and we know it is the preeminent fruit. Only God can produce these traits in you. The Apostle Paul recognized this truth when he told the Thessalonians, "... the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men..."<sup>45</sup>

Jesus told His disciples, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me."<sup>46</sup> Jesus called it abiding in the vine. John called it abiding in the light. Paul called it walking in the Spirit. I believe it is all synonymous.

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<sup>42</sup> Matthew 7:5, *KJV*

<sup>43</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:13, *KJV*

<sup>44</sup> John 9:5 – "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.", *KJV*

<sup>45</sup> 1 Thessalonians 3:12, *KJV*

<sup>46</sup> John 15:4, *KJV*

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Now I want you to notice something. We just read Galatians 5:22-26, which speaks of walking in the Spirit. Let's back up and read Galatians 5:19-21, which describes the works of the flesh. Does the pain you feel over the offence committed against you fit into one or more of these categories? Try reading Ephesians 4:29-32. Is your pain described there? Notice that in Galatians we are told to walk in the Spirit to avoid these sins. In Ephesians, we are told these attitudes grieve the Holy Spirit. He is grieved because we are walking in the flesh and not allowing Him to fill us. The key to dealing with the pain is to walk in the Spirit. How do we walk in the Spirit and abide in Christ? It is a daily effort to be found surrendered to Him. The passages we have just discussed will lead us to some answers.

Before we can be filled with the Spirit, we have to be emptied of the flesh. The Spirit and the flesh are at war with one another and cannot be reconciled without the flesh being resurrected.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the flesh must be crucified as Paul told the Galatians.<sup>48</sup> In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus said, "And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold."<sup>49</sup> Immersing yourself in sin will prevent you from being filled with the Spirit. Without the Spirit, you have no capacity for true Christian love. Your love will effectively wax cold, just as Jesus said.

It isn't enough to empty ourselves of sin; we must also be filled with what is good and pure. In John 15:10, Jesus said, "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love." We must prayerfully seek Christ's commandments (God's Word) with a heart bent towards applying the Word. His truth will grant us the perspective we need to love others. It is only in the light of God's revealed Word that we know of our sinfulness, the justice of hell, and the mercy of the cross. From this vantage point, we will clearly see the mercy extended to us that we can extend to others.

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<sup>47</sup> Galatians 5:17, *KJV*

<sup>48</sup> Galatians 5:24

<sup>49</sup> Matthew 24:12, *KJV*

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## Promises that grant perspective

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We just established that the key to dealing with our pain is to be filled with the love of Christ. God's Word contains many great and precious promises that will enable us to escape love-quenching iniquity and put on the love of God.<sup>50</sup>

**The Great Opportunity: 2 Corinthians 4:8-12** – Paul summarizes the things he suffered for the sake of the gospel. Some of sufferings were situational; some were personal. We know he was tormented by several people during his ministry.<sup>51</sup> As he sums his sufferings up, however, he shares a perspective that allows him to endure. God was revealing the life of Jesus Christ through his sufferings. He leaned on the Lord to handle each trial in a godly manner and as a result Christ was shown forth from his life. This benefited both lost and the saved.<sup>52</sup>

We need to look at every trial as an opportunity. This isn't a quaint expression you find written on a calendar. This is God's truth! He is yet again allowing a circumstance which will showcase His amazing love, power, and wisdom. Your life is the medium He is choosing to use to bring glory to Himself. You might be tempted to say, "Why don't you pick someone else?" While we never enjoy difficulty, when we submit to God and allow Him to bring beauty from ashes we are always better off at the end than the beginning. Remember Job?

**God allowed this to happen: Genesis 45:4-5, 50:19-21** – This is perhaps another perspective on the same point we just discussed. Joseph faced heart wrenching difficulty like few have known. He was betrayed by his brothers, falsely accused of a crime he did not commit, and thrown into prison by a master that he had served diligently. If anyone would have justified bitterness about the difficulties of life it would be Joseph. Yet any bitterness he may have felt did not endure because of the perspective he held. God allowed all this to befall him for a reason. Others can contrive all sorts of evil against us but God alone decides what we are allowed to endure.<sup>53</sup>

Consider this, the one who blames God for their problems is closer to the truth than the one who believes that God somehow lost control and evil befell them outside of His permissive will. Neither is correct, but the former individual is closer to a proper understanding of God. The Lord never loses control. He also promises to work all things out for good for His children who love Him.<sup>54</sup> We need to understand that He is powerful, wise, and loving. When you truly believe in these aspects of God's nature, you will find an amazing peace in the midst of any difficulty.

This truth will also help you curtail some of the strong passions that arise from any perceived injustice. Joseph knew very well that his brothers sinned against him with a malicious intent.

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<sup>50</sup> 2 Peter 1:4 – "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust." *KJV*

<sup>51</sup> 2 Timothy 4:14 – "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works:"

<sup>52</sup> Philippians 1:14 – "And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear."

<sup>53</sup> Isaiah 54:17 – "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue [that] shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness [is] of me, saith the LORD."

<sup>54</sup> Romans 8:28-29 – "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren."

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However, he knew that nothing transpired in his life that did not pass through the Lord's hand. This truth allowed him to have love towards his brothers instead of bitterness. Think about Christ standing before Pilate. He said, "...Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above:..."<sup>55</sup> He had a great love for everyone who was complicit in His crucifixion. How did He do it? He knew that everything happening was part of His Father's plan. He worked through this truth in the Garden of Gethsemane on His knees. He fully trusted the character and ability of His Father and therefore was able to have compassion on those who meant evil against Him.

**God will grant you a blessing for handling this trial well: 1 Peter 3:8-12** – Not only is there purpose in our pain but also promise. One of the points that impacted me when I read this passage is found in verse nine. Peter begins by stating that we should not respond to being hurt by seeking to hurt the offender but rather we should respond in a positive and loving manner. Why should we do this you ask? Peter goes on to explain, "...for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing."<sup>56</sup> What does this mean?

Peter is explaining that we should expect difficulty, opposition, and trial because we were called for that very purpose. Remember Jesus taught that we did not pick Him but He chose us and set us apart to bear fruit.<sup>57</sup> Our fruit is often borne through distress and difficulty.<sup>58</sup> With this pain comes promise. God has a very special blessing for His children that are faithful through adversity. Paul suffered a great many offences from his persecutors and looked at it this way, "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."<sup>59</sup> He also said, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory;"<sup>60</sup>

Many people are discontent with their wages, believing they are worth much more than they are paid. When God gives you a blessing for faithfulness in hardship there will be no smidgeon of discontent. Rather, your mouth will be agape as you exclaim that your obedience was not worth nearly as much as He repaid. After all, you can only obey through His power, right? This is what God has in store for those who learn to love those who have despised them.

Consider Christ. If anyone had a clear picture of the Father's goodness it was His only begotten Son, Jesus. The Bible tells us that He endured the cross by looking towards the glory that awaited Him.<sup>61</sup> He kept His eyes on the great gift that His Father would bestow upon Him for obedience. Was His horrible death worth the price? He thought so. Paul told the Philippians that because of Christ's great love and obedience, God has exalted Him and gave Him a name above every other name in this world. On that great day, every knee, both angelic and mortal, will bow before Jesus

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<sup>55</sup> John 19:11, *KJV*

<sup>56</sup> 1 Peter 3:9, *NASB*

<sup>57</sup> John 15:16 – "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and [that] your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you."

<sup>58</sup> John 15:2 – "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every [branch] that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit."

<sup>59</sup> Romans 8:18, *KJV*

<sup>60</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:17, *KJV*

<sup>61</sup> Hebrews 12:1-3

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and confess that He is the Lord.<sup>62</sup> Though someone may have tried to cause you pain by an offence, you stand to gain a far greater reward by returning good for their evil.

**Satan's goal is for you to stay bitter: 2 Corinthians 2:10-11** – Paul is quick to point out that he would follow the church's lead when it conveyed forgiveness. If they forgave someone, then he would too. Why? Because he knows how Satan works. The most dangerous weapon against the forces of evil is a true church unified in love towards one another and God. The potential is limitless. Think of the early church in Acts and how people were saved daily and saints were growing in the word and ministering to one another.<sup>63</sup> The world was turned upside down by their message and Satan's kingdom was dealt a serious blow.<sup>64</sup> How can Satan stop such an assault? It is actually pretty easy. He just uses you.

The writer of Hebrews used the illustration of a plant to describe this problem. He called it the "root of bitterness".<sup>65</sup> If you've ever pulled weeds you know how important it is to get the root. If you don't, the yard may look better for a few days but within a week you'll be out there pulling the same leaves up again. If the root remains it is just a matter of time before there is trouble. Frustration or anger with another individual needs to be resolved not buried. If it is buried, it germinates into a root. That root will grow up and cause all sorts of problems. It will manifest itself in the way you treat the other person, speak to them, speak about them, etc... The potential danger is unthinkable. Not only will this root affect you, but as the writer of Hebrews says, many will be defiled by it!

I am convinced that the root of most church splits isn't a doctrinal disagreement. Those issues can usually be resolved through prayerful and humble study and discussion. The root is usually bitterness that creeps in. It starts with one person and then spreads to the others they influence. As it manifests itself, people start choosing sides. The end result is not just disharmony but total division. A good illustration of this deadly downward spiral is found in the book of 2 Samuel.<sup>66</sup> Absalom, David's oldest son, was bitter with his father over the way he handled the rape of his sister Tamar by his half-brother Amnon. Absalom killed Amnon and was only allowed back into the kingdom after several years of exile. Rather than resolve things with his father, he harbored his anger and grew a deep root of bitterness. He eventually began a campaign to turn the people of Israel against his father and was successful for a short time in usurping the throne. Many people died and the nation was seriously hindered and it can all be traced back the bitterness of one individual.

Remember what Paul said; this is Satan's device. This is how he works. Let's not be ignorant of it. The great swell of anger and frustration you feel after an offence needs to be dealt with or it will become deadly to you, to others, and to the cause of Christ. Don't let Satan ensnare you here. Bitterness can be cured as well. The antidote is Biblical reconciliation. Work towards reconciliation.

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<sup>62</sup> Philippians 2:9 – "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And [that] every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

<sup>63</sup> Acts 2:42-47

<sup>64</sup> Acts 17:6 – "And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also;"

<sup>65</sup> Hebrews 12:14-15 – "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;"

<sup>66</sup> 2 Samuel 15:1-37

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**Lighten up a bit... don't take yourself so seriously: Ecclesiastes 7:21-22** – Solomon was blessed with wisdom from God that surpassed all others.<sup>67</sup> The book of Ecclesiastes, like the book of Proverbs, is filled with countless pearls of wisdom. Despite his wisdom, Solomon wasn't always respected or trusted. He was sometimes second-guessed by those around him. Some even cursed him behind his back. Solomon's advice was to lighten up a bit. Realize that you also have failed in this area many times. Don't take yourself so seriously. Even Jesus was second guessed.<sup>68</sup>

We've already studied the attributes of true love in 1 Corinthians. Some of those attributes include the following: "is not easily provoked",<sup>69</sup> "does not take into account a wrong suffered",<sup>70</sup> and "beareth all things".<sup>71</sup> Doesn't this harmonize with Solomon's advice? Don't forget about Moses. It was because he started taking the cries of the Israelites to heart that he snapped and was denied entrance into the Promised Land.<sup>72</sup> You are not above sin, neither are you above being sinned against.

Jesus told the parable of the debtor slave who was forgiven a great sum by the king.<sup>73</sup> Shortly thereafter the slave turned against another who only owed him a pittance. Once the king found out, he arrested the slave and threw him into prison because he would not extend the same mercy he received to others. As Jesus concluded the parable He said, "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses."<sup>74</sup> If we withhold forgiveness, I believe the pain we will experience from God's chastisement will be worse than any pain we will inflict on another by withholding our love and forgiveness from them.

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<sup>67</sup> 1 Kings 4:29-31 – "And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore. And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all nations round about."

<sup>68</sup> Matthew 26:6-8 and Mark 8:31-33

<sup>69</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:5 (KJV)

<sup>70</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:5 (NASB) – translated as "thinketh no evil" in KJV

<sup>71</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:7 (KJV)

<sup>72</sup> Numbers 20:1-13

<sup>73</sup> Matthew 18:21-35

<sup>74</sup> Matthew 18:35 (KJV)

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## So now what?

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It is time to put these principles into action. Before we do, let's consider some questions we should answer before we approach someone else about an offence.

1. ***Do I have all the facts? Proverbs 18:13*** – Even if you think you have the facts, it is good to approach the meeting with this attitude. Affirm the facts with the individual. Love doesn't assume wrong by another but "believeth all things".<sup>75</sup> Only let the facts persuade you.
2. ***Is this something I should overlook? Leviticus 19:17*** – Is this offence a sin they are caught in that is hurting them and others? If so, it would be unloving to neglect to talk to them. If it isn't truly a sin, try to work past whatever hurt you perceive and move on. Remember, don't take yourself so seriously.
3. ***Is there a Biblical basis for my correction? 2 Timothy 2:24-26, 4:2*** – The one who confronts must make sure they are grounded in the Word. This will be a good exercise for both you and them. The passages in 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy emphasize instructing the transgressor with doctrine (teachings) of Scripture. If you can't define the problem Biblically, is there really a problem?
4. ***Why am I going to talk to them? Is it for their benefit or my benefit? Galatians 6:1-2*** – Examine yourself carefully. The one who goes to the brother caught in the snare of sin must do so out of concern for their wellbeing. They should also be spiritual.<sup>76</sup> There are examples in Scripture of those who confronted Christ in the wrong spirit.<sup>77</sup> In the end, they were the fools.
5. ***What am I going to say and how will I say it? Luke 15:17-19*** – The prodigal son thought about what he would say to his father before he went to him. This was a serious issue. He had sinned against his father and God and needed to repent. Likewise, speaking to one who is trapped in sin is serious business and should be treated accordingly.
6. ***Have I prayed for strength and guidance from the Lord? Colossians 4:2-4*** – Paul requested prayer for his evangelistic ministry. He was confronting men about their sin and need for a Savior. As we know, this message was not always taken well. This is a great example to us. When we confront an offender we are doing the same thing. We are exposing sin and pointing men towards reconciliation. We need to pray!
7. ***Is this the appropriate time to speak to them? Proverbs 15:23*** – Knowing the right timing for a discussion is crucial. It is good to pray about this and seek God's leadership. Generally, it isn't appropriate to start a discussion that cannot be brought to resolution. For example, I don't like being confronted about something just before I preach. It really distracts me during the message.

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<sup>75</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:7 (KJV)

<sup>76</sup> In this context, I believe being spiritual means having a pattern of allowing God's Spirit to have control in your life. You should be walking in the Spirit, as described in Galatians 5:25.

<sup>77</sup> Luke 20:1-8, 20-26

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Also consider other concerns they may have. It probably isn't appropriate to confront someone while they are otherwise occupied, have company, or have just received some bad news. Try asking the person when it would be a good time to talk. If they don't give you an opportunity, however, you may need to confront them prayerfully using your best judgment.

Now that we've finished, take these things to God in prayer. Seek wisdom in understanding and implementing the things you learned. Prove these principles in Scripture. Hold fast to what is good and toss out what is bad. You need a conviction of God about what is true. Finally, prayerfully lean on God for help in putting this lesson into practice. Have faith in Him. I love to remind God's people that the Lord will not ruin His reputation for any man, especially you. If He has promised to do something, He will accomplish it.

Matthew 11:28 – "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."