

## Imitating God In Forgiveness

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"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). The perfect standard for behavior is God Himself, and the gospel exhorts all to be perfect as God is perfect. This entails that in whatever ways one may possibly imitate God that he so do. "Be ye therefore imitators of God, as beloved children" (Eph. 5:1 ASV). We would, therefore, do well to imitate God when it comes to forgiveness.

That God places conditions upon forgiveness implies that God will not forgive some, though God desires to forgive all (2 Pet. 3:9). Peter says explicitly to Simon the Sorcerer, "Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee" (Acts 8:22). Peter's words are clear: if Simon wants forgiveness, he must meet the condition of prayer to God. Some, however, will simply not be forgiven. Those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit, by rejecting His word for their life, will not be forgiven (Matt. 12:32). God refuses to forgive the individual who does not practice forgiveness himself (Matt. 6:15). God does not forgive everyone, and Christians cannot run beyond God in forgiving such individuals. Pride and arrogance alone cause us to think that we can accomplish what God cannot. However, where God has forgiven and forgives, we need to be keenly responsible to so imitate Him 1) in who He forgives, 2) in how He forgives, and 3) in why He forgives.

Who does God forgive? God forgives all men potentially and the penitent actually. Jesus spoke about potential forgiveness in Mark 3:28 "All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme." Actual forgiveness, however, comes when an individual repents and turns to God (Mark 4:12). God forgives private sins that are confessed to Him privately (1 John 1:9). God, through Christ, forgives public sins when they are confessed publicly, as Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also: for if I forgave anything, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ" (2 Cor. 2:10). Christ considers those sins that are confessed before the church forgiven; and if Christ so considers them forgiven they are truly forgiven. No individual person or congregation has the right to withhold forgiveness under such circumstances.

How does God forgive? God forgives generously. One of the greatest statements in the Bible concerning God's forgiveness occurs in Psalm 103:10-14:

He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.

The Christian who possesses penitence of heart and who fears God has great consolation, knowing that God's desire and practice is not to deal with us after our sins, but to forgive. In Christ, actual forgiveness is realized, and God refuses to memorialize our sins (Heb. 10:16-18). Would to God that our brethren would be so generous!

Why does God forgive? God forgives because each person has eternal value worth more than the whole world (Matt. 16:26), and He wants them to be saved. God so valued each person that He offered His only begotten Son as sacrifice. Romans 5:6-9 states,

For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.

Each person is at least as precious as the precious blood of Jesus (1 Pet. 1:19). And because God has so offered forgiveness to all men, so ought we to have an attitude of forgiveness. "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph.4: 32). "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye" (Col.3: 12-13). We would do well to imitate God in forgiveness at each moment. Such does not entail forgiving those who refuse forgiveness or who do not seek it. However, for the child of God who stands in a relationship with God of having his sins forgiven, the opportunities for forgiveness are rich and deep. May we be so forgiven and so forgive!