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## **HOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND 'FORGIVENESS'?**

Forgiveness features in a major way in a Christian life. And there are two distinct aspects to this subject. THE EASY PART to understand is that all of us need God's forgiveness to blot out our guilty past. THE DIFFICULT PART to understand is our responsibility in forgiving other people who may have said or done wrong or hurtful things to us. While there are clear biblical instructions for us to forgive other people, it is the putting into practice of these instructions that sometimes becomes an issue for some of us.

The Bible makes clear that there are conditions we must meet before God will forgive our guilt. But does that mean that there are also conditions other people must meet before WE should forgive their wrong actions towards us, or should our forgiveness for other people's actions really be unconditional?

Let's take a closer look at this whole subject of forgiveness and see what actually happens when forgiveness is extended to guilty parties. Let's start off by looking at the process of God forgiving our sins.

### **GOD'S FORGIVENESS OF OUR SINS**

This is usually the easy part for us in God's Church to understand.

At repentance we came to understand that our sins had cut us off from God (Isaiah 59:1-2). The problem was our guilt before God. We came to understand that in order to be reconciled to God, and thus to receive access to God, we had to repent and to be baptized (Acts 2:37-38). Forgiveness of our past sins made reconciliation with God possible (Romans 5:8-10). But forgiveness required the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ, giving His life to make salvation for mankind (and therefore also for us specifically) possible (Hebrews 9:22).

In this whole process the word "forgiveness" has only one meaning. In English there is no ambiguity when we use the word "forgiveness". This word always implies first of all the existence of GUILT in some form or other, and secondly the remission of that guilt. The English word "forgiveness" means: TO PARDON, TO GRANT RELIEF, TO STOP FEELING RESENTMENT AGAINST SOMEONE. And in our relationship with God we understand God's forgiveness to be a reference to having our GUILTY past blotted out.

So yes, when we use the verb "to forgive" there is really no ambiguity in our minds regarding the meaning of this word. It presupposes the existence of some guilt which requires forgiveness.

**BUT THAT IS NOT ALWAYS THE CASE WHEN THIS WORD "FORGIVE" IS USED IN THE BIBLE!**

In the Bible there is a certain amount of latitude in the way the words "forgiveness" and "to forgive" are used.

There are in fact **three** different **Hebrew words** in the Old Testament which are all at times translated into English as "forgive" or "forgiveness". The use of three different Hebrew words should indicate to us that their meanings are likely to be broader and more complex than the meaning of our one English verb

"to forgive".

There are also **three** different **Greek words** in the New Testament which are all at times translated into English as "to forgive". These different Greek words also require some examination.

It is unfortunate indeed that in the Old Testament the translators chose to translate three different Hebrew words with the one English word "forgive", and that in the New Testament they chose to translate three different Greek words with the one English word "forgive". In so doing the translators completely obscured certain facets of the meanings of these Hebrew and Greek words. The distinctions between these words (both in Hebrew and in Greek) were blurred by this indiscriminate translation into English as "forgive".

So now let's look at the different Hebrew words that are involved here.

### **HEBREW WORDS FOR "TO FORGIVE"**

1) The first Hebrew word is "**SALAH**" (also transliterated as "calach"). This word is used 46 times in the OT. The most important thing for us to understand is that **THIS WORD IS USED EXCLUSIVELY FOR GOD!** Never does the OT describe anything done by human beings as "salah"! Never does one man in the OT ask another man to extend "salah" to him. This word is translated into English as "**forgive**" or as "**pardon**" or as "**spare**", but it is always applied to something that God does.

In other words, "to forgive" with this meaning is a godly characteristic, an activity reserved exclusively for God. That is why the scribes in Mark 2:7-8 reasoned "who can forgive sins but God only?". They **KNEW** that in the OT "salah" is used exclusively for God. And they correctly identified Jesus Christ's reference to "the forgiveness of sins" with the Hebrew word "salah".

To make this quite clear: we human beings are simply not capable of extending "salah" to another human being, no matter how "forgiving" our attitude may be! We could have the best and most converted attitude in the world ... and we would still not be capable of extending "salah" to another human being! It is **ONLY GOD** who can extend "salah"!

The reason why only God can extend "salah" to us human beings is simple. "Salah" involves the forgiveness and blotting out of **GUILT!** And it is only God who can remove guilt! When we "forgive" others, we cannot blot out their guilt! That's simply beyond us!

When we can understand **THIS FACT** correctly, then we should be able to understand that when the NT instructs us to "forgive" other people, it is **NOT** instructing us to extend "salah" to them, because that is something we are not capable of doing! Extending "salah" requires **A POWER** that we human beings just don't have!

The first time the word "salah" is used in the OT is in Exodus 34:9, where Moses asked God: "... and **PARDON** ("salah") our iniquity and our sin". Moses was asking God to remove the guilt that had been incurred.

This Hebrew word is also used in the context of the new covenant. In Jeremiah 31:34 we read:

"And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for **I will forgive** ("salah") their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."  
(Jeremiah 31:34)

This is a key feature of the new covenant, that God will remove all the past guilt that had been incurred; i.e. God will forgive sins and iniquities. No human being could possibly do this. No human being can ever "forgive", when the meaning of "salah" is applied to the English word "forgive".

2) The second Hebrew word is "**NASA**" (also transliterated as "nacah"). This word is used 654 times in the OT, and 16 times it is translated as "forgive". This word literally means: TO LIFT UP, TO CARRY, TO BEAR UP. This verb is used for something both God and human beings can do. It is used, for example, in Genesis 50:17.

"So shall ye say unto Joseph, **FORGIVE** ("nasa"), I pray thee now, the trespass of thy brethren, and their sin; for they did unto thee evil: and now, we pray thee, **FORGIVE** ("nasa") the trespass of the servants of the God of thy father ... " (Genesis 50:17)

Here was a request that Joseph should "forgive" what his brothers had done to him. This was not a request for Joseph to remove any guilt they might have incurred, because that would have been something that Joseph was simply not capable of doing, removing any guilt from someone. This was in practical terms a request for Joseph **TO LIFT A BURDEN FROM HIS BROTHERS**, something they had carried around with them ever since they had sold Joseph into slavery. This burden also included the potential threat of retaliation for their actions.

In Genesis 4:13 Cain said: "my punishment is greater than I CAN BEAR ("nasa)". It was a burden with which Cain did not feel he could cope.

To put it in simple terms: where the Hebrew word "salah" focuses on THE GUILT which has been incurred being removed, the Hebrew word "nasa" is used to focus on dealing with THE CONSEQUENCES of the guilt that has been incurred. Thus when Joseph's brothers asked him to "nasa" their wrong conduct towards Joseph, they were asking Joseph to not impose ANY CONSEQUENCES ON THEM for their wrong conduct towards him. However, Joseph's response to their request was not capable of removing any guilt, if guilt had indeed been incurred. Joseph was only capable of extending "nasa" (avoiding some of the undesirable potential consequences of wrong conduct) to his brothers; but Joseph had no power to extend "salah" (the removal of guilt) to his brothers or to anyone else.

Can we see how the distinction between the two Hebrew words "salah" and "nasa" is lost when both words are simply translated into English as "forgive"?

When we understand the distinction between these two Hebrew words, then we can understand what David was really saying in Psalm 51. David had wronged Uriah by first committing adultery with Uriah's wife, and then by having Uriah murdered. And after these actions which clearly wronged Uriah, David said to God in Psalm 51:4 "Against You, YOU ONLY, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight", thereby clearly ignoring how Uriah had been affected by David's actions.

The point is that David was not speaking about "nasa"; here David was not focusing on having the consequences of his wrong conduct removed. David was first and foremost focusing on "salah", asking God to remove HIS GUILT in these matters. David understood that once the guilt had been removed, THEN he could again establish a relationship with God, irrespective of the consequences which his wrong actions might bring upon him. His guilt had to be removed first! And while the consequences of his actions had harmed Uriah (to put it mildly), for his GUILT David was accountable to God, and to God only, and NOT to Uriah!

That's the focus of Psalm 51:4.

3) The third Hebrew word is "**KAPHAR**". This word is used 102 times in the OT. Its basic meaning is "TO COVER OVER". This is the word that is translated as "atonement". In addition it is also translated as: reconcile, appease, pardon, purge, and 3 times as "forgive". "Kaphar" describes an activity that both God and man can engage in. Here are the verses where it is rendered as "forgive".

"Be merciful, O LORD, unto thy people Israel, whom thou hast redeemed, and lay not innocent blood unto thy people of Israel's charge. And the blood **shall be forgiven** ("kaphar") them."  
(Deuteronomy 21:8)

"But he, *being* full of compassion, **forgave** ("kaphar") *their* iniquity, and destroyed *them* not: yea, many a time turned he his anger away, and did not stir up all his wrath." (Psalm 78:38)

"Yet, LORD, thou knowest all their counsel against me to slay *me*: **forgive**("kaphar") **not** their iniquity, neither blot out their sin from thy sight, but let them be overthrown before thee; deal *thus* with them in the time of thine anger." (Jeremiah 18:23)

Here the expression "it shall be forgiven" literally means "it shall be covered over". Let's notice the context of Deuteronomy 21:8 to illustrate the correct meaning of "kaphar".

Verse 1 sets the stage by describing a situation where someone has been murdered, but the identity of the murderer is not known. Even though the identity of the perpetrator was unknown, some guilt had clearly been incurred. In this situation certain people were instructed to bring a specific sacrifice. The purpose of this sacrifice was to absolve the people of the community closest to where this crime had been committed from any guilt, since the real perpetrator was unknown.

Verse 8, quoted above, states "and the blood shall be "forgiven" ("kaphar") them". This statement has nothing at all to do with the removal of guilt! Nothing at all! The people in that community had been innocent all along! So they didn't NEED any guilt removed from them. And IF perchance the guilty man was secretly hiding within that community, THEN after following the procedure outlined in this section THE REST of the people of that city would not in any way be affected by THE CONSEQUENCES of the guilty man's deed. But if the murderer lived within that community, then this specific sacrifice did NOTHING AT ALL for the murderer ... he was just as guilty after this sacrifice had been brought as he was before this sacrifice was brought.

The procedure outlined in Deuteronomy 21:1-8 was designed TO PROTECT INNOCENT PEOPLE FROM THE CONSEQUENCES of the actions committed secretly by someone in their community, or else a crime secretly committed within their jurisdiction by someone from outside of their community. But this procedure was NEVER designed to deal with a guilty party! It was never designed to deal with a murderer whose identity was known.

And so forgiveness of guilt never entered the equation one way or the other. When the identity of the murderer was known, then a completely different course of action was to be followed.

The translators chose to translate "kaphar" as "forgive" in the above three verses where this word clearly applied to an action by God. When this word "kaphar" applied to a man, then the translators opted for a word other than "forgive". For example, in Genesis 32:20 Jacob said to himself "I WILL APPEASE ("kaphar") him (i.e. Esau) with the present". This illustrates that "kaphar" can apply to both God and man, though when it applies to a man then it is never translated into English as "forgive".

This word "kaphar" basically refers to "cover over" the consequences of some or other guilty conduct.

The words "nasa" and "kaphar" refer to the same thing from two slightly different perspectives. Where "nasa" refers to lifting the burden created by the consequences of guilty conduct, the word "kaphar" refers to covering over those same consequences. But neither of these two words refers specifically to removing guilt from a guilty party. Only the word "salah" refers to the specific removal of guilt.

In this context consider also Paul's statement in Hebrews 10:4.

**"For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins."**  
(Hebrews 10:4)

When God extended "salah" to people, THEN the guilt was taken away. As an example, God accepted David's repentance after David had killed Uriah (2 Samuel 12:13), and thus God removed the guilt which these actions had brought upon David. No sacrifices were involved in this removal of guilt from David, since sacrifices couldn't really take away sins.

However, in David's case this removal of guilt did NOT remove the undesirable consequences that David's guilt had incurred. Thus David was told "the sword shall never depart from your house" (2 Samuel 12:10). The consequences remained with David for the rest of his life.

So in David's life we have the following situation: When David confessed his sins, then God extended "salah" to David, by removing David's guilt. But at the same time God did NOT "lift the burden off David" which burden was a consequence of David's sins; i.e. God did NOT extend "nasa" to David. And neither did God extend "kaphar" to David; i.e. instead of "covering over" David's sins, God told David that some of the consequences of David's sins included some of David's wives being openly defiled (2 Samuel 12:11).

Thus God's dealings with David in 2 Samuel 12 reveal that in certain circumstances God MAY actually extend "salah" to someone without at the same time also extending "nasa" and "kaphar" to that person. THIS ACCOUNT highlights the distinctions between these different Hebrew words: while God's forgiveness (i.e. the removal of guilt) was granted to David, the removal of the consequences of that guilt was NOT GRANTED to David. The consequences remained with David even after the guilt itself had been removed by God.

So to summarize these three Hebrew words: Only one word ("salah") involves the removal of guilt for wrong conduct or actions. And ONLY GOD is able to exercise this form of "forgiveness". The other two words ("nasa" and "kaphar") refer to removing some or even many of the consequences of wrong conduct or actions, BUT WITHOUT REMOVING THE ACTUAL GUILT THAT THE WRONG CONDUCT HAD INCURRED.

This latter form of "forgiveness" we can extend towards our fellow-man. We can lift burdens from people who have wronged us; we can cover over their wrong actions or speech towards us; but we can never remove any guilt their wrong speech or actions may have incurred, because at no point were they guilty before us. ALL GUILT is always before God and not before fellow-man; that's David's point in Psalm 51:4. And those who have wronged us were all along guilty before God, and not before us! At no point in this life are we ever entitled to judge THE GUILT of those who may have wronged us; only God can do that. And if we can't judge the guilt of such people, then we ALSO cannot forgive the guilt that may be involved. And that is why the word "salah" is reserved for something that God alone can do.

However, we should keep in mind that when the words "nasa" and "kaphar" apply to something GOD does, then it may very well INCLUDE forgiveness of guilt. God can use any of these three words and include the removal of guilt in the process. But the point is that these two words "nasa" and "kaphar"

don't NECESSARILY include the removal of guilt within their meanings, whereas the removal of guilt is really the main focus of the word "salah". I mention this so we don't become unduly picky. The important point is that our human "forgiveness" is not the same thing at all as is God's "forgiveness" because our human "forgiveness" NEVER involves the removal of guilt. And that understanding is revealed by these three different Hebrew words.

Now let's take a look at the three Greek words that are used in the New Testament.

### **GREEK WORDS FOR "TO FORGIVE"**

As we examine the Greek words involved in this question, we need to understand that not every concept can be described equally effectively in every language. Some languages simply don't have words to distinguish between different concepts, which differences can be expressed very precisely in another language.

As an example, in Old Testament Hebrew there is a very clear distinction between "a feast" ("chag") and "a Holy Day" ("mow'ed"), but the Greek language simply did not have a way to distinguish between "feasts" and "Holy Days". So in NT Greek the same word (i.e. "heorte") is used to refer to both feasts and also to Holy Days, thereby obscuring some of the differences between feasts and Holy Days. Other examples could be cited to make the same point, that where precise distinctions could be expressed in biblical Hebrew, in some cases it was not possible to express those distinctions in biblical Greek, and so such distinctions found in the Hebrew text are to some degree obscured in the NT biblical Greek text.

This is also true for the words that express the idea of forgiveness. Hebrew had one word that was distinctly and absolutely reserved for something that only God can do (i.e. "salah"). But New Testament Greek simply did not have such a word; in this context there was no Greek word which was reserved exclusively for something that only God can do. As a result, when the NT writers wanted to refer to the activity described by "salah" they were forced to use the same Greek word that also describes the activity of "nasa". They had no other option available to them.

### **THAT IS A LIMITATION OF BIBLICAL GREEK!**

It is a mistake to look at biblical Greek and to conclude that since biblical Greek could not distinguish between "salah" and "nasa" THEREFORE these Hebrew words "salah" and "nasa" must mean the same thing. After all, they are translated into Greek by one and the same word. The truth is that Greek was not capable of expressing a distinction between "salah" and "nasa". As far as this subject is concerned, the New Testament does not change THE FOUNDATION which had been clearly laid in the Old Testament. The New Testament can build on that foundation, but it cannot do away with that foundation. The clear distinction between "salah" and "nasa" remains, irrespective of how these words have been translated into Greek.

So now let's look at the Greek words involved in this question.

1) The first Greek word is "**APHIEMI**". This word basically means "to send away". It is used 146 times in the NT, and it is translated 52 times as "leave" and 47 times as "forgive". For example, this word is used in Matthew 6:12, which reads:

"And forgive ("aphiemi") us our debts, as we forgive ("aphiemi") our debtors." (Matthew 6:12)

Now notice Mark 2:7.

"Why doth this *man* thus speak blasphemies? who can forgive ("aphiemi") sins but God only?"  
(Mark 2:7)

What the scribes said was correct, when the meaning of "salah" is applied to "aphiemi". And so Christ's statement "son, your sins be forgiven you" (Mark 2:5) shows that Jesus Christ was and is indeed God. And that implication angered the scribes.

These two verses clearly illustrate the constraints of biblical Greek that I am referring to. In Matthew 6:12 Jesus Christ instructs us to FORGIVE our debtors. In this context Jesus Christ was thinking of the activities described in Hebrew by "nasa" and by "kaphar". But Christ was NOT thinking of the meaning of "salah". In Mark 2:7, on the other hand, the scribes were not at all thinking of "nasa" or of "kaphar"; here the scribes were thinking exclusively of "salah", an activity which is restricted to God in absolute terms. Yet in biblical Greek BOTH VERSES were constrained to use the word "aphiemi".

Keep in mind also that neither Jesus Christ nor the scribes actually used the word "aphiemi", since they were not speaking Greek when they said these things. They were speaking Aramaic, and they were thus able to express the distinctions contained in the Hebrew far more effectively than in Greek. But in translating these comments into Greek the writers Matthew and Mark were constrained to use the Greek word "aphiemi" for both instances.

To state this in plain terms: The Greek word "aphiemi" does not distinguish between the removal of guilt ("salah") and the removal of some or many of the consequences of guilt ("nasa" and "kaphar"). The Greek word "aphiemi" can refer to the whole process or to any limited part of that process alone.

2) The second Greek word is "**APOLUO**". This word is used 69 times in the NT, and it means: TO SET FREE, TO SEND AWAY. Thus it is actually quite similar to the meaning of "aphiemi". It is in fact this word "apoluo" that is used to mean "to divorce". However, in one verse it is translated as "forgive", and that is in Luke 6:37.

"Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: **forgive** ("apoluo"), and **ye shall be forgiven** ("apoluo")." (Luke 6:37)

Here the word "apoluo" is used with the meaning of "nasa" (i.e. to lift a burden from people) or of "kaphar" (i.e. to cover over their wrong actions). But in this verse "apoluo" certainly does not refer to "salah", the actual removal of guilt.

In Matthew 18:27 "aphiemi" and "apoluo" are used together in one context. This helps us to see how these two words relate to each other. Notice:

"Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and **loosed** ("apoluo") him, and **forgave** ("aphiemi") him the debt." (Matthew 18:27)

In this verse "apoluo" is used to convey the meanings of "nasa" and "kaphar", while "aphiemi" is used to convey the meaning of "salah". This statement is significant because it shows that God clearly makes a distinction between these things! There are TWO things that God does in the process of "forgiving".

To show the total and complete removal of ALL GUILT AND ALL ITS CONSEQUENCES (in this example the 10,000 talents that were owed), Jesus Christ actually used TWO words! The reason Jesus Christ said that this servant was "loosed AND forgiven" is precisely because one word alone didn't adequately cover every aspect that Jesus Christ wanted to cover! Christ didn't just mean "forgave",

because that would only have removed the guilt. Jesus Christ meant "loosed AND forgave", because Christ wanted to show that all the negative consequences (i.e. including the 10,000 talents) incurred by the guilt were ALSO blotted out.

Think about Christ's statement in Matthew 18:27!

Jesus Christ was speaking these words in the Aramaic language. And right here Christ revealed a distinction between "salah" on the one hand, and "nasa" and "kaphar" on the other hand. And Matthew retained this distinction by using the two Greek words "apoluo" and "aphiemi" in this one context.

Note also that the whole concept of "forgiveness" was somewhat strange to the Greek culture of the first century A.D. "Forgiveness" didn't really feature in their religious ideas and practices. That is why the NT writers were forced to resort to using two different words, neither one of which really had "to forgive" as its primary meaning. BOTH words ("aphiemi" and "apoluo") really refer to "sending away", but that was the best the NT writers could do to convey the idea of "forgiveness". Recall that even the early Catholic Church viewed forgiveness as something that required "deeds of penance" in order to be granted. In other words: penance is a step that EARNs forgiveness. Penance expresses a flawed understanding of what forgiveness is really all about! And the Greek culture likewise had a difficulty in expressing correctly what forgiveness really is.

With such limitations it shouldn't surprise us that in the NT the distinction between "aphiemi" and "apoluo" is somewhat blurred, since neither Greek word has "to forgive" as its primary meaning.

3) The third Greek word is "**CHARIZOMAI**". This word is used 23 times in the NT, and it means "TO DO SOMETHING PLEASANT, TO SHOW ONESELF GRACIOUS". In 11 places this word is translated as "to forgive".

One verse that illustrates the meaning of this word is Colossians 3:13.

"Forbearing one another, and **forgiving** ("charizomai") one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ **forgave** ("charizomai") you, so also *do ye*." (Colossians 3:13)

Inherently this word "charizomai" has nothing to do with the removal of guilt. In the "quarrel" alluded to above it doesn't matter whether we are in the right or whether the other person is in the right; in either situation we are instructed to show ourselves gracious, and to do something pleasant. Who is guilty and who is innocent doesn't enter the picture. We should always keep in mind how gracious Jesus Christ has shown Himself towards us (Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, Romans 5:8), and therefore we too should show ourselves gracious in our interactions with other members of God's Church. That's the point Paul was making in the above verse.

So the Greek "charizomai" may cover the meanings of the Hebrew words "nasa" and "kaphar". "Charizomai" is something we human beings can and should do.

To summarize these Greek words, we have the following: the Greek words "apoluo" and "charizomai" express the equivalent meanings of the Hebrew words "nasa" and "kaphar", while the Greek word "aphiemi" covers both "salah" and also "nasa" in its meaning.

Thus far we have examined this subject of forgiveness from the perspective of God forgiving us our guilt. Let's now look at this from the perspective of us forgiving other people.

## **THE BASIC DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOD AND US**



As far as forgiveness is concerned, let's look at the basic difference between God forgiving us and us forgiving other people. Let's consider what happens when someone sins. Let's suppose that I have stolen \$1,000 from you. Here is what happens:

1) I immediately incur THE GUILT for having stolen your money. But even though it was your money which I stole that guilt is BEFORE GOD and not before you. Before you I then have a debt, but before God I am guilty. "Debt" means that I owe you something, while "guilty" describes a very negative condition that adversely affects my relationship with God.

2) Meanwhile your spontaneous response to my having stolen your money is typically anger and resentment. You resent what I have done, you want your money back, and very likely you want to see me being punished for what I had done to you. You are the one who incurred damages in this situation, and your righteous indignation clamors for "justice".

3) Now suppose that I deeply regret what I have done, and so I repent before God, asking God for forgiveness for what I have done, and I come to you and also ask for your forgiveness, while bringing back your money.

Here are the possible consequences.

4) Assuming that my repentance is genuine, God will FORGIVE MY GUILT (Isaiah 1:18-19). This enables me to re-establish a right relationship with God, which relationship had been strained or severed when I sinned. Thus totally and completely independent of how YOU respond to my remorse, I can re-establish positive contact with God. God's forgiveness (i.e. the removal of guilt) is absolutely assured provided that my repentance is real.

5) So God grants "salah" to me. Whether or not God also grants me "nasa" and / or "kaphar" is not a foregone conclusion. God MAY in some cases take away some or many of the negative consequences my sin incurred, while in other cases God MAY let some of those undesirable consequences of my sin remain. HOWEVER ...

6) In some cases God MAY also DELEGATE TO YOU whether or not I will also be granted "nasa" and / or "kaphar", since YOU are the one to whom a debt is owed. It was after all YOUR money that I had initially stolen. And God will watch you to see whether you will make the same decisions that God would make in these circumstances. This constitutes A TEST for you! It is a test that many people fail to even recognize when they are confronted with it.

CAN YOU UNDERSTAND THIS?

7) Since you are not able to forgive my guilt, the only thing you are potentially able to do is "lift a burden from off me" (i.e. "nasa") or to "cover my transgression" (i.e. "kaphar") by showing that you accept my remorse and that you "forgive" my conduct towards you (i.e. having stolen from you), and that you are willing to re-establish the relationship that existed between us prior to my sin. This is basically all you are able to do on the positive side. But forgiving my guilt is way beyond your abilities; only God can do that.

8) HOWEVER, you actually have a range of potential responses towards my seeking your forgiveness. You could:

A) Accept my apology (which included returning your money) and be willing to return to the former relationship that existed between us. You are willing to totally forget what I did to you. This is the way God responds to us when we really repent.

B) Accept my apology (and your money) but be unwilling to go back to the way things were between us before I stole from you. You may feel that something in our relationship was destroyed, and that you will never again be able to have the full trust you had previously, since I had betrayed that trust by my action of stealing from you. You determine that you will be friendly and kind towards me, but always on your guard lest the same thing happens again.

C) While outwardly you may say that you accept my apology, in your own mind you may not accept it at all, and from then onwards you are always highly critical of me and of everything I do. I have after all betrayed the trust you had previously placed in me.

D) You may be extremely angry with me, and you reject my apology. From now onwards you view me as an enemy, and all your contacts with me are driven by your hatred. You have a critical explanation for everything "good" that I may do from now on. Yours is basically an attitude of revenge, a desire to "get even". You want to see me punished even though I have returned your money and apologized to you.

You have the power to respond in any of these ways. Option "A" is frequently a response when the one who stole from us is our own child. An example of this is found in Judges 17:1-3, where Micah had stolen 1,100 shekels of silver from his mother. Option "D" is more likely to be our response when we didn't particularly like the person who stole from us to start with. The other options fall somewhere in-between these extremes.

Now the point is this: if we respond with option "A", then we are applying "nasa" and "kaphar" to the fullest extent. And if we respond with option "D", then we are denying any possible application of "nasa" or "kaphar". The others fall between these extremes. And in this way God may allow the defrauded party to determine the degree to which "nasa" and "kaphar" are applied to the repentant sinner.

But it still goes one step further.

9) While God may ALLOW us to respond to someone seeking our forgiveness with any of these options, God also SPELLS OUT exactly which of these options God would like us to apply. And there are no prizes for guessing which of these four options is God's choice for us.

10) All the way through this exercise (of someone asking us to forgive them) we need to keep one thing in mind. It is NEVER a matter of us somehow "forgiving their guilt", because that guilt is not ours to forgive. Even the scribes understood that "ONLY GOD" can remove the guilt of sins (Mark 2:6-7). And IF the guilty party truly repents before God, THEN God will remove their guilt, irrespective of whether we also "forgive" or not. On the other hand, if we "forgive" a guilty individual without that person actually repenting towards God (think of the man Micah in Judges 17, or of Philip baptizing Simon Magus in Acts 8:13), THEN that individual's guilt still remains EVEN THOUGH WE HAVE "FORGIVEN" HIM! The retention or removal of guilt is something we human beings have no control over whatsoever!

11) Put another way, when GOD forgives us human beings, THEN this means that GUILT is removed from the person receiving God's forgiveness as far as the east is removed from the west. This certainly removes a load from their conscience and it enables them to establish (or to re-establish) a positive relationship with God.

But when WE forgive other people, THEN their guilt is totally unaffected by our "forgiveness" of their actions. If we have no direct contact with them (e.g. we forgive someone who may have hurt us years ago), our forgiveness does nothing at all for them. If we do have direct contact with them, and we say "I forgive you", then that has a psychologically positive effect on their minds (i.e. relief that we are no longer upset with them), but apart from that psychological effect it does nothing more for them. THEIR GUILT is forgiven by God ONLY if they genuinely repent towards God for the wrong they had done. Our

forgiveness of their deeds is of minor importance in the removal of their guilt.

Thus if they repent and we don't forgive them, then God will still forgive their guilt based on their repentance. And if they don't really repent, even if we do forgive them, then God will NOT forgive them and their guilt will remain. The retention or removal of their guilt depends totally on whether or not they really repent before God. Our forgiveness or lack of it is not influential in deciding whether or not their guilt will be removed.

12) If that is the case then WHY do we even have to forgive them in the first place? Does our forgiveness actually achieve anything at all?

YES, OUR WILLINGNESS TO FORGIVE OTHERS HAS A VERY PROFOUND EFFECT  
INDEED! BUT THAT EFFECT IS **ON US**, AND NOT ON THE PEOPLE WHOM WE FORGIVE!

In plain language:

It has a very profound positive and edifying effect ON US when we forgive people who have wronged us in some way or other! And it has a very profound NEGATIVE and corrupting effect on our minds and on our character when we refuse to forgive people who have wronged us! This is completely independent of whether such people show any remorse or not. OUR MINDS are affected by our willingness or refusal to grant someone else forgiveness, meaning a willingness to lighten their load.

THIS IS WHAT WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND!

It is God's instruction to us that we should ALWAYS be willing "to forgive" those who have trespassed against us! That instruction is not given because such forgiveness on our part would remove their guilt, because that simply doesn't happen. This instruction from God was given EXCLUSIVELY FOR WHAT IT WILL DO TO OUR MINDS!

When we forgive others the greatest benefit accrues to us ourselves. The people whom we forgive, by comparison, benefit very little from our forgiveness. THEY only benefit if GOD forgives them, since without God's forgiveness their guilt still remains. Their main benefit from our forgiveness is that they feel better, knowing that we are no longer upset with them.

Jesus Christ instructed us to make this specific approach our DAILY attitude. Notice Christ's instructions in the prayer outline.

And forgive ("aphiemi") us our debts, **as we forgive** ("aphiemi") **our debtors.**" (Matthew 6:12)

"For if ye forgive ("aphiemi") men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive ("aphiemi") you: But **if ye forgive** ("aphiemi") **not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive** ("aphiemi") **your trespasses.**" (Matthew 6:14-15)

The point of these verses is that it is OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD that is on the line. In this most basic instruction Jesus Christ didn't say anything about "forgive them IF they have a repentant attitude", or words to that effect. In this instruction THE ATTITUDE of the people whom we need to forgive "their trespasses" doesn't enter the equation. Their attitude is immaterial because our "forgiveness" of their trespasses has no effect whatsoever on whether or not their guilt will be removed. But our "forgiveness" of their trespasses has EVERYTHING TO DO with whether or not God will forgive OUR GUILT! The

reason is that our forgiveness of other people's trespasses EXPOSES OUR ATTITUDE ABOUT OURSELVES TO GOD!

That's what we need to understand from these instructions regarding how we are to pray, and the attitude we are to have when we pray.

The most important point in this matter of forgiving others is this:

**WHENEVER WE FORGIVE OR DON'T FORGIVE OTHERS, WE ARE IN FACT PASSING A JUDGMENT ON OURSELVES!**

That's Jesus Christ's message to us in Matthew 7:2.

"For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." (Matthew 7:2)

Are we willing to do for others what God has done for us? We are very thankful that Jesus Christ was willing to die for us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). So what about us? Are we willing to forgive other people WHILE THEY ARE YET SINNERS? That's what God was willing to do for us ... INITIATE THE PROCESS that LATER enabled us to be granted forgiveness when we then came to repentance. So in extending our forgiveness to other people we (in some cases) have the opportunity TO INITIATE THE PROCESS, while they are yet sinners, that may LATER lead to them being granted forgiveness (i.e. when they come to a real repentance).

If we are not willing to do THAT for other people, it is hard to see how we ourselves could possibly be eligible for the identical treatment from God!

### **SEEING THE GREATER PICTURE**

Does anyone doubt that God's sense of justice is **absolutely perfect**?! It doesn't require any altering or "tweaking" to make it better. It is PERFECT!

So concerning the guilt of people who have wronged us:

Do we think that somehow God is not capable of reaching a perfect judgment without some input from us? Before deciding that someone who has wronged us is now deserving of forgiveness does God REALLY require OUR input? Would God without our input somehow have reached a less just decision in this situation, when compared to the decision God will reach after we have given our input? Do we think that without our input God might forgive someone when that person doesn't yet deserve forgiveness, or that without our input God might judge someone too harshly because God doesn't realize that the person involved is now really repentant?

### **GET REAL!**

God never ever needs input from us to tell Him that someone is guilty! Never! Not now and not in the future! It is SATAN who tries that approach, trying to convince God that we human beings are all sinful, untrustworthy and undeserving of salvation! And once Satan has been bound for good, there will never again be any individual who will try to convince God of somebody else's guilt!

The attitude of trying to influence the Judge of all to pass a judgment of "Guilty!" on someone else will never again exist after Satan's permanent banishment.

There is only one kind of input that God, the Judge of all, wants and expects from us! And God does not want that one kind of input from us in order to "reach a better and more just judgment"! The only reason God wants this one kind of input from us is for the effect providing that input will have on OUR minds, not on God's mind! God's mind is already fully in tune with that one kind of input, because that one kind of input expresses one trait of God's character, of the way God is already!

**THE ONLY KIND OF INPUT GOD WANTS AND EXPECTS FROM US IS AN APPEAL FOR MERCY AND COMPASSION AND FORGIVENESS FOR THOSE WHO HAVE FALLEN SHORT!**

Whether or not God will consent to such appeals for mercy and forgiveness will always, always remain God's own decision. If God decides to not grant forgiveness, because the individuals involved are still totally unrepentant, then that is always His decision.

Our responsibility is not to find others guilty, but to plead for mercy and forgiveness for them. That's the job of a priest, to intercede for those who are guilty. So if we are going to be "kings AND PRIESTS" (Revelation 5:10), then we better start practicing interceding for those who are guilty! It is never the priest's job to go to God and say: "Lord, please don't forgive them because they are not yet repentant". That is not the kind of priest God is looking for!

Moses interceded before God for Israel WHILE THEY WERE STILL SINNING! And God expects us to forgive those who have offended us while they are still sinning! God Himself will decide whether He will forgive their guilt or not. But God doesn't need our input to make that decision. Our only input is to appeal to God for mercy and forgiveness. That attitude must become our mindset!

That attitude is expressed in the statement "**MERCY REJOICES AGAINST JUDGMENT**"! Here is James 2:13.

"For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment." (James 2:13)

Our responsibility before God is not to appeal for "justice" and "fairness" and "don't forgive them until they really repent". Our responsibility is to appeal for mercy and forgiveness, even for those who are still sinning. That's the attitude Jesus Christ displayed in Luke 23:34 when He was dying.

"Then said Jesus, **Father, forgive them**; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots." (Luke 23:34)

That's the same attitude Stephen exhibited while he was being stoned to death.

"And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, **Lord, lay not this sin to their charge**. And when he had said this, he fell asleep." (Acts 7:60)

Our input is never needed to help God reach a judgment of "guilty"! When that judgment is needed, then God will reach that judgment without judgmental input from anyone else. After Satan has been bound

there will never be "a devil's advocate" in the presence of God.

It is imperative that we understand that the only input regarding other people that God wants from us is appeals for mercy and forgiveness and compassion, even as we ourselves are also the obvious recipients of God's mercy and forgiveness.

So in conclusion, here is the main difference between God forgiving us, and us forgiving other people.

1) When God forgives us, then our guilt is removed from us. The consequences of our guilt may also be removed, or they may still remain with us. Such consequences of our guilt are not really the primary focus of God's forgiveness. The primary focus is always the removal of guilt.

2) When we forgive other people, their guilt is unaffected by our forgiveness. Our attitude towards forgiving those who have wronged us is in actual fact primarily the passing of a judgment on ourselves before God. It is a judgment which God will use in dealing with us.

Of course it is hard to forgive people who may have deliberately harmed us. Nobody said it was supposed to be easy! What makes us think that it is "easy" for God to forgive our sins which required the sacrifice of Jesus Christ? Consider God's response to man's sinful ways in Genesis 6:6-7, where God said: "it repents Me that I have made them". "Easy" is never a criterion in God's dealings with mankind.

We need to understand that GOD will always do the judging concerning whose guilt will be forgiven and whose guilt will be retained. Our forgiving people their trespasses against us NEVER interferes with God's perfect sense of justice. While God may respond positively to our requests on behalf of other people, such responses will NEVER violate God's sense of justice. And God's sense of justice is absolutely perfect! No amount of us forgiving people their trespasses against us will ever result in unfair forgiveness of other people's guilt! As with us ourselves, so also for them, the removal of their guilt depends entirely on their meeting God's conditions for forgiveness.

Our "forgiveness" can never remove guilt from any guilty party. We need to FREELY extend forgiveness to anyone who may have hurt or offended us. Our willingness to freely extend such forgiveness is one of the major means for seeking God's forgiveness for ourselves.

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