

CHAPTER 5

FORGIVE OTHER PEOPLE AND SEEK TO GET RID OF ALL BITTERNESS.

¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour?

James 4:12 (ESV)

¹⁷ "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Leviticus 19:17-18 (ESV)

¹¹ 'Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Matthew 6:11-12 (NASB)

²¹ Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

Matthew 18:21-22 (NASB)

¹⁰ If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven--if there was anything to forgive--I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, ¹¹ in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

Corinthians 2:10-11 (NIV)

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath!

Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.

Psalm 37:8 (RSV)

Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

1 John 3:15 (RSV)

Do not say, "I will do to him as he has done to me;

I will pay the man back for what he has done."

Proverbs 24:29 (RSV)

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Romans 12:14 (RSV)

Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

Romans 12:17 (RSV)

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

1 Thessalonians 5:15 (RSV)

The duty to forgive people rather than judge them – first of all we have to realise that we are *not authorised to judge anybody*

We can see from the above passages that we are commanded *not to judge* other people. Instead, we are told to *forgive* them, and that very serious consequences will follow if we don't. In short, God will not forgive us unless we are willing to forgive others. That puts a heavy duty upon us in what can frequently be a difficult and painful area.

In particular, it also makes it essential that we know exactly what *forgiveness* is. Then we can make sure that what we do meets the biblical definition of forgiveness and that we are not missing the mark, either by doing too little, or trying to do too much.

Some people set the bar too low and therefore assume that they are being forgiving when, in fact, they aren't. Probably a larger number make the opposite error and set the bar too high. Then they assume that forgiveness is far too hard for them to achieve. In fact, they are trying to do more than merely 'forgiving' the other person and are going farther than the Bible actually requires of us.

Therefore, in this chapter, we will examine the vital link between *not judging* people and *forgiving* them. These two commands go together and need to be understood as a combined package. We will also look at exactly what forgiveness is, how it works, why it matters, and how to actually forgive people, and avoid bitterness, in practical terms.

We shall also look carefully at what forgiveness *isn't* and what it *doesn't* involve. We need to do this because forgiving others is such a badly misunderstood subject. It gets mixed up with, or mistaken for, many other things which are closely related to forgiveness, but are actually separate and distinct.

For many years, I personally found it hard to define forgiveness, i.e. to know exactly what was being required of me. I was not helped by any of the preaching I ever heard in any church. If anything, the few sermons that I did hear on forgiveness tended to add to the confusion. They also promoted a general feeling of failure and that forgiveness of others is too difficult for most of us to achieve.

When people come to the conclusion that forgiveness is too difficult, or even impossible, it is often because they are wrongly defining it. In particular, they are probably including within its definition some or all of these other things, such as mercy, grace, reconciliation and the resumption of trust and friendship. Admittedly, they are all linked to forgiveness, and often accompany it, but they *go beyond forgiveness* and are not part of its basic definition.

So, when a person says, "*I have tried to forgive, but it's impossible. I just can't do it*", the chances are that what they really mean, although they don't realise it, is that they can't be *reconciled* with the wrongdoer. Or, they may mean that they can no longer *trust* the wrongdoer, or that they still feel *violated* or *angry* or *hurt*. But the point is that a person can validly and genuinely forgive a wrongdoer and yet still continue to feel any or all of the following things:

- a) hurt and emotionally upset
- b) wounded, violated or traumatised
- c) anger (which must not be confused with holding a *grudge* or feeling *bitterness* or *rage* – see below)
- d) distrustful and wary
- e) unreconciled and unwilling even to attempt reconciliation, at least for the time being
- f) unable to relate to the wrongdoer or to have fellowship with them or work alongside them

g) unwilling to give them another chance, at least for now, for fear that they will do it again

Many people have been put under condemnation by preachers, or have made themselves feel condemned, for being unable or unwilling to *forgive*. Yet the real issue is often their inability or unwillingness to do *something else*, which is not actually a part of the definition of forgiveness at all. So, when people speak of forgiveness, or even when the Bible speaks of it, we always need to ask what the *context* is and work out exactly what is being referred to, or required of us.

Sometimes what is meant is just the *narrowest, most basic definition of forgiveness*. Then again, at other times, it may be that what is being spoken of is the same basic forgiveness *plus some other related concept(s) alongside it, or together with it*. We therefore need to be able to identify, at any given time, exactly what the Bible is referring to, or commanding us to do. Then we can be clear as to what we must do, so that we do not attempt to do more than is required of us in the circumstances we face.

The narrowest, most basic definition of forgiveness – to ‘*recuse yourself*’

If you want to buy a car, you are well aware that you can get them at varying levels of specification, even for the same model. You can have a car which is at the bottom of the manufacturer’s range and is not much more than a chassis with wheels and an engine. Or, you can have the same model, but at the top of the range, with various extras such as air conditioning, alloy wheels, satellite navigation, leather seats etc. They are both a car. Indeed, they may even be the same model of car, but one is basic and the other has a number of extra features.

It is a little bit like that when we speak of forgiveness. In one situation we might mean basic forgiveness, at its narrowest definition. On another occasion we might mean an enlarged or wider definition, with extra features included. Our starting place, therefore, is to ask what is the *narrowest or most basic* definition of forgiveness, without any added features?

I would say that at its lowest and simplest level, forgiveness essentially means that we ‘*step aside*’ and ‘*hand the person over to Jesus*’. That is we *leave their judgment to Him*, so that He can judge them, and possibly even punish them, instead of us seeking to do any of that to them ourselves, which we are neither qualified, nor authorized, to do.

When writing this chapter I asked God to help me to explain the connection between the command not to judge others and the command to forgive people. I also asked for help in explaining this process of ‘*stepping aside*’ and ‘*handing over*’ to Jesus the judgment of someone who has wronged us. Finally, I asked Him to give me an analogy, so as to make clear exactly how it all works and what is the minimum that we have to do in order to ‘forgive’. I believe He gave me one and that it may be helpful.

The analogy is to think of a judge who realises that he is not the right person to hear a particular case. It could be because, for example, the defendant is a personal friend or even an enemy. Or, he could be a neighbour or colleague or a relative of his. That judge therefore realises that he cannot give that defendant a fair trial, or that it would be unsafe, or even corrupt, for him to try to involve himself in that man’s case.

When a judge is in that situation he will contact the court office and ask one of the clerks to remove that defendant’s case from his own list and put it onto the list of some other judge instead. When a judge does that, so as to prevent himself from hearing a case that is unsuitable for him to hear, we say that he has ‘*recused himself*’.

That means he has ‘rejected himself’ as the judge, due to being unsuitable to handle that case, or you could say that he has ‘objected to himself’ being the judge. By taking that sensible precautionary step he makes sure that he himself is not the judge of that particular case and that it is transferred to someone else, who is more suitable to deal with it.

I would suggest to you that when we are commanded to ‘forgive’ others, the Bible is often speaking of forgiveness in its *narrowest* sense. If so, then what we are being commanded to do is effectively to ‘*recuse ourselves*’. That is to stop seeing ourselves as the right person to judge and punish whoever it is that has wronged us. Then we are required to hand their ‘case’ over to Jesus and let Him judge, and perhaps punish, the wrongdoer while we play no further part in any of it.

Most of the time, unless the context, or the precise words used, indicate a wider or larger meaning, then that is all that we are being required to do. It should be a comfort to us to realise that, because when it is defined very narrowly in this way, forgiveness is exclusively *a decision of the will* and thus much easier to achieve.

Indeed, basic forgiveness, without the involvement of any other added features, *is achievable by all of us, and on every occasion*. That is because it is a pure *decision*. It does not involve anything further or wider or deeper than simply *deciding to step aside and leaving the judgment of that person to Jesus*.

In particular, it need not involve our *emotions*, over which we have no direct control. That is why God never *commands* us what to *feel*, but only what to *do* or *say*. Our *speech* and our *actions* are always within our power to control and to alter, whereas our *emotions* and *feelings* aren’t. Realising that one simple fact might enable you to make a breakthrough and to discover that forgiveness, at least by its narrow definition, is possible after all. Indeed, it is *always* possible, no matter what the circumstances are.

That said, there are some times where we see characters in the Bible going further than the basic definition of forgiveness. We see them showing mercy and grace to the wrongdoer, being reconciled to him, working together with him and re-establishing trust and close personal friendship etc. But, where such things occur, *they are going beyond what we are ordinarily commanded to do*. That is because there may be circumstances where God would want us to go further than basic forgiveness.

But, if He does, we need to realise that we are doing something additional, which goes beyond the narrow definition of forgiveness. If we mistakenly think that the command to forgive *always* includes being able to do *all* of these other things, and to their *fullest extent*, then we are likely to become confused and also discouraged by the size and difficulty of the task.

Therefore, the reality is that we can obey the basic command to forgive without necessarily going so far as to do any of those additional things. When you realise that, it can be tremendously liberating. You suddenly discover that you *are* actually capable of forgiving people, even those who have wronged you very badly, and even those who are *continuing* to wrong you.

So, if you find that you are not presently able to go further than basic forgiveness, i.e. recusing yourself, it is *not necessarily* a sign that you have not genuinely forgiven the wrongdoer. It could be that, in your circumstances, all that God is asking of you, at least for the moment, is basic forgiveness, without any of those other things.

Of course, it could also be that you are *not* genuinely forgiving the person. But we are not entitled to arrive at that conclusion based solely on the fact that you do not currently feel able to go beyond basic forgiveness. We would need to know quite a lot more about the facts of the situation in order to say whether God is requiring you to go any further than that at present and, if so, what exactly you should do.

So, the starting point for real forgiveness, *as narrowly defined*, is realising that you are not the one who has been appointed to judge the world. That judicial appointment has already been made. The position has been given to Jesus Christ and He will, one day, fully perform that role. When you grasp that the judging, sentencing and punishing of other people is what *Jesus* alone is going to do, and that He *really will do it*, then you will also realise that *you don't need to* and, secondly, that you are *not authorized to do so*.

It's all going to be dealt with by Him, *and only by Him*. Nobody else is either worthy to do it, or capable of it, whereas He is. Moreover, you can be *fully confident that He will judge* every person, including the one who has wronged you. Grasping that last fact is vital, because it helps you to 'step aside' and let Jesus handle the wrongdoer's 'case'. You can be sure that the wrong done to you is not being forgotten about, or ignored, and that justice really will be done.

Furthermore, when Jesus judges people, nothing will be overlooked, mishandled or misunderstood, whereas they would be if you or I were the judge. There is therefore *no need* for you to bring forward the Day of Judgment for the wrongdoer by seeking to handle his case yourself now.

More importantly, it would be *wrong* for you to try to form a judgment of him, and to punish him now, before the appointed time. You are not capable of it and you have no right to attempt it. Only Jesus can properly judge the wrongdoer. We are therefore *commanded to leave it all to Him and not to interfere or usurp His position*:

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

Romans 12:19 (NASB)

There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour?

James 4:12 (ESV)

Let's look more closely at these final Judgments that are going to be conducted by Jesus. We know that He will judge the whole world, one at a time, and face to face. That includes the person who has wronged you. However, you need to realise that *it also includes you* because, so far as some other people are concerned, *you* are the wrongdoer. At least, you are *their wrongdoer*, so far as *they* can see. Therefore you are the one that they are commanded to forgive.

Holding that sobering fact in mind is very helpful. It provides us with a more balanced perspective on this whole subject of forgiveness, as we begin to turn our minds to the question of how and why we should forgive the man who has wronged us.

Remember that somewhere in your neighbourhood there are people who may be trying to come to terms with their duty to forgive *you*. The more you can keep that fact in mind, the easier this issue of forgiveness will become, and the more it will make sense.

At any rate, here are a few sample passages which deal with what Jesus will do when He judges us all, both Christians and non-Christians, i.e. the saved and the unsaved:

At the set time which I appoint

I will judge with equity.

Psalm 75:2 (RSV)

But thou, terrible art thou!

Who can stand before thee when once thy anger is roused?

Psalm 76:7 (RSV)

***Then the trees of the forest will sing for joy before the LORD;
For He is coming to judge the earth.
1 Chronicles 16:33 (NASB)***

***And He will judge the world in righteousness;
He will execute judgment for the peoples with equity.
Psalm 9:8 (NASB)***

***Before the LORD, for He is coming,
For He is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
And the peoples in His faithfulness.
Psalm 96:13 (NASB)***

***³¹because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."
Acts 17:31 (NASB)***

***¹⁶on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.
Romans 2:16 (NASB)***

So, Jesus is the only one in the whole universe who is authorised to judge human beings. The role of Judge has been assigned to Him, and only to Him. It is not for us to do it, either now or later. Realising that is the vital starting point in considering this whole subject of avoiding judging others and engaging instead in forgiveness, i.e. *basic* forgiveness. As we saw, that essentially amounts to *stepping aside*, or *recusing ourselves*, and leaving the judging to Jesus:

Given all of that, you might then ask why we have courts in this world in which people get judged here and now by human judges. Are they wrong to do that? The answer is no, because any person who is appointed by the State to be a judge is actually put there by God. A human judge, who has been officially and validly appointed, as opposed to illegitimately self-appointed, has been temporarily delegated a tiny portion of Jesus' authority to judge.

So, unless of course he is corrupt, which, sadly can be the case in some countries, a human judge in a court of law is not doing anything wrong. When he does his job he is not disobeying Jesus' command not to judge others. In fact, he is doing God's will by providing a legitimate foretaste of God's justice and punishment where it is needed. That is entirely different from each of us *illegitimately* judging our fellow men, when we have *not* been appointed by God to do so. Indeed, each of us are directly commanded *not* to judge others:

***¹⁰ But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall ¹give praise to God." ¹² So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. ¹³ Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.
Romans 14:10-13 (NASB)***

⁵ Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

1 Corinthians 4:5 (NASB)

We are commanded to forgive others – it isn't optional

We are *commanded not to judge* others. On top of that, we also have a positive duty to *forgive* them. Moreover, we are not merely *advised* to do so. We are *commanded to forgive*. It is stated very clearly and on many occasions, for example:

³⁷*"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned.*

Luke 6:37 (NASB)

³¹*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.*

Ephesians 4:31-32 (NASB)

²¹*"You have heard that the ancients were told, 'you shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' ²²"But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.*

Matthew 5:21-22 (NASB)

¹⁴*"For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵"But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.*

Matthew 6:14-15 (NASB)

Moreover, it is *assumed* by God that we will obey these commands to forgive others. In what has come to be known as "*the Lord's prayer*", which really ought to be called '*the disciples' prayer*', Jesus shows us the manner, style and attitude that we need to have when praying to God. We are not meant to say this prayer by rote, as most people seem to do, but to see it as a model or precedent.

At any rate, the point is that in praying for God to forgive us, *Jesus assumes that we have already forgiven others*, i.e. at least stepped aside and left their cases to be judged by Him. It is taken as a given. Or you could say that it is treated as a combined package of events. That is He links together our forgiveness of others with God's forgiveness of us.

In this instance, what Jesus is referring to goes beyond basic, narrowly defined forgiveness. It also includes a duty to *release others* from their debts to us, i.e. the guilt of their sins, in the same way that we want God to release us from our debts to Him, i.e. the guilt of our sins:

¹¹ *'Give us this day our daily bread.*

¹² *'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

Matthew 6:11-12 (NASB)

But Jesus goes further than just telling us to forgive others, or to release them from their guilt or debt to us. He also states that *unless we forgive others, God will not forgive us*. That is a very worrying statement, but it is clearly what He said:

²⁵*"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. ²⁶"But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions."*

Mark 11:25-26 (NASB)

So, that is clearly the command. We *have* to forgive others. That therefore makes it all the more essential that we know *what exactly we must do and how exactly we are meant to do it, in practical*

terms. We have to ask, what *is* real forgiveness and how can we be sure that we have achieved it in our own particular circumstances? We shall therefore examine forgiveness more closely in the pages below and try to answer these questions fully.

In particular, we shall need to look further at the definition (or definitions) of forgiveness and get very clear on what it does, *and doesn't*, include. How else can we know whether we have obeyed the command to forgive others unless we know exactly what forgiveness involves, and how far we have to go?

How many times are we supposed to forgive people?

The apostle Peter asked Jesus a question which must have occurred to most of us - *how many times* are we expected to forgive people? Is there a limit? What if they just carry on sinning against us, again and again? Jesus answered Peter by telling him a story:

²¹Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" ²²Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. ²³For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

²⁴When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.'

²⁷And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' ²⁹So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.'

³⁰But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. ³¹So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. ³²Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' ³⁴And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. ³⁵My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.'

Matthew 18:21-35 (NASB)

The above parable about waiving the debts (sins) of others, in the same way that we want God to forgive our sins, is alarming. I say that because Jesus concludes it by saying that God the Father will do the same with us as the King did to the man who failed to forgive. But the King in the story responded harshly. He did not merely re-impose the financial debt. He also handed the man over to be punished by "*the torturers*".

My understanding of that is as follows. We are commanded to forgive other people, at least in the narrow sense of stepping aside and leaving it to Jesus to judge them. Possibly, we may be required to go even further than that, *by releasing them from their debt or guilt towards us*. But, if we will not do these things, then God will respond by allowing demons greater and greater access to us. They will then create additional difficulties for us until, under all of that pressure, we eventually come to realise our duty to forgive others and release them from their debts or guilt, just as we want God to release us from ours.

That point about the ‘torturers’ actually matches our experience in practice. A person who is in a state of unforgiveness, i.e. one who still wants to judge the wrongdoer themselves, and will not release them, will have a very difficult time, especially if they are bitter and vengeful. All sorts of other things will begin to go wrong for them. That may seem unfair, given that they were wronged in the first place. Even so, it is what we have seen happen in our own lives, and in other people's lives, when there is unforgiveness and bitterness.

Part of the rationale behind all of this is that *we ourselves have been forgiven many things*. Indeed, God’s forgiveness of us is broadly defined and goes well beyond the narrow definition of forgiveness, which is the minimum that is required of us. Therefore, what right do we have to withhold even the narrowest form of forgiveness from *others*, and yet seek it ourselves, and in the widest possible sense, for *our own sins*? Quite apart from the unfairness of that, there is also the fact that we are not authorised to judge anybody in the first place.

'Forbearance' - the duty to tolerate each other and to put up with each other's sins, faults and irritating ways

Forbearance is another concept which is closely linked to forgiveness but is still separate and distinct. Sometimes we become alienated from others, or do not get on with them, not necessarily because they have *wronged us* or harmed us, but simply because we *do not like them*. We are all very different and our ways, habits, mannerisms etc can be very irritating.

If this is not dealt with promptly, and in the right way, it can produce relationship problems, the effects of which are not much less than if we had been wronged. Moreover, if people do not get on, or if they irritate each other, they can eventually get to the stage where they do start to do actual wrong to each other, such that they really would have a need to forgive and be forgiven.

Therefore, we also have a duty to show ‘*forbearance*’. This is an aspect of forgiveness, albeit usually not at the fullest level, because it also applies even where people have not wronged us. It means to be *patient* and to *put up with each other's sins, faults, weaknesses, annoying habits and minor acts of rudeness*. Forbearance involves being slow to anger and tolerating such things, rather than reacting carnally to them. That is how God wants each of us to be, if we claim to be Christians:

¹²Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, ¹³forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Colossians 3:12-15 (RSV)

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:1-3 (RSV)

Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand.

Philippians 4:5 (RSV)

If God was short-tempered, touchy, irritable, resentful, easily offended and prone to holding onto grudges, as we often tend to be, then none of us could relate to Him at all. He would be able to find far more to object to in us than we can legitimately object to in each other. Thankfully, that is not how He is. He is gracious and slow to anger. That involves Him being patient with us and putting up with our many faults, bad habits and selfish ways:

³ *If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?
Psalm 130:3 (ESV)*

⁸ *The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

⁹ *The LORD is good to all,
and his mercy is over all that he has made.
Psalm 145:8-9 (ESV)*

So, forbearance is a *part* of what forgiveness is about. It primarily concerns *the lesser things* which are at the ‘shallow end’ of what we are called upon to forgive. It basically means putting up with it when people behave selfishly, foolishly, rudely or thoughtlessly. Yet, forbearance is still very important because it is likely that more relationships are undermined or destroyed because of minor irritations and personality clashes than by major situations, where one person has been seriously wronged by another. The little pin pricks may be trivial in themselves, but they may mount up over time and their eventual consequences can be major, if we are not willing to practice the art of forbearance.

However, if we can develop forbearance and make the effort to put up with things and get along with people that we don't naturally like, then everybody will benefit. This has not been an area of strength for me. I find I am too easily irritated by others and so I need to work at this much harder. God wants us all to make a bigger effort to get along with other Christians, and to be slow to anger. We are to tolerate their faults, and also their habits and ways, even where they are not necessarily at fault, but are merely *different* from us:

*Behold, how good and pleasant
it is when brothers dwell in unity!
Psalm 133:1 (ESV)*

God also wants us to encourage those who fail and lift up those who fall, whether it is into sin or other problems or mishaps. We should be willing to do that for them, because that's what He does with us:

*The LORD upholds all who are falling
and raises up all who are bowed down.
Psalm 145:14 (ESV)*

When disagreements arise over questions of doctrine or practice we also need to be very selective about the issues over which we ought to take a stand. We should not get into a conflict situation over every difference of opinion. Otherwise we could end up contending with others unnecessarily, when no vital issue of principle is at stake:

But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile.

Titus 3:9 (RSV)

*Do not contend with a man for no reason,
when he has done you no harm.
Proverbs 3:30 (ESV)*

Try to see other people as God sees them

A good technique, when irritated by people, and where we want to avoid the problem escalating or continuing, is to *try to see people the way God sees them*. God isn't irritated by people's accents,

opinions or mannerisms or by their peculiar ways. He looks at people more deeply and sees the *value* and also the *potential* inside them. In particular, He is keenly aware that that person, whom we may find irritating, is someone for whom Jesus died and who could be saved if they would just repent and turn to Him.

Even between fellow Christians there can be, and frequently is, friction, and tension. This can spoil relationships, not only for the two people concerned, but for a whole church. Apostle Paul came across this in the church in Philippi. Two good women, both of whom were devout and hard working for the church, just did not get along with each other. Paul urged them to ‘*agree*’ with each other and he asked the rest of the church to help them to do so:

²I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. ³Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. ⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;
Philippians 4:2-5 (ESV)

We are never to take vengeance by or for ourselves - we are to leave that to God

Forgiving others, even at its narrowest definition, also means that we must not do anything to take *vengeance*. We must never seek to ‘*get even*’ with people, or to ‘*pay them back*’ for what they did to us. We are to “*leave room for the wrath of God*”. That is we are to leave it to Him to punish people, which He certainly will do:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly.

1 Peter 2:23 (RSV)

not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.

1 Peter 3:9 (NASB)

¹⁷Never pay back evil for evil to anyone Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. ¹⁹Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. ²⁰”but if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:17-21 (NASB)

When King David was a young man he spent a number of years on the run from King Saul, who was persecuting him unjustly and seeking to kill him. However, David refused to take matters into his own hands or to take vengeance. Instead he asked God to intervene and judge between himself and King Saul:

¹² May the Lord judge between me and you, may the Lord avenge me upon you; but my hand shall not be against you.

1 Samuel 24:12 (RSV)

Seeking vengeance would also amount to usurping Jesus' unique role as Judge. It would mean we were punishing people ourselves, instead of leaving them for Jesus to deal with. He wants us to leave it to Him to punish people, not to do it now, for ourselves:

Do not say, “I will repay evil”;

wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you.
Proverbs 20:22 (ESV)

since indeed God deems it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,
2 Thessalonians 1:6 (RSV)

So, although *we* are not authorised to take vengeance, Jesus *is* authorised to do so, *and He will*, i.e. with all those who do not repent and do not believe in Him. We can be very sure of that. Moreover, there are circumstances in which it may even be appropriate for us to *look forward with some sense of anticipation to the Day of Judgment*, when *Jesus* will take that vengeance on our behalf.

The taking of vengeance, so long as it is done only by Jesus, is a right and proper aspect of God's justice. Thus it is something good, for which we can give thanks, and even rejoice:

*¹⁰ The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance;
he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.
¹¹ Men will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
surely there is a God who judges on earth."
Psalm 58:10-11 (RSV)*

*⁸ Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together
⁹ before the LORD, for he comes
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.
Psalm 98:8-9 (RSV)*

For example, if a person's child has been murdered, then at the Day of Judgment, the murderer will be punished for it unless, of course, he has become a Christian in the meantime and been forgiven. But if he has *not repented* and been forgiven by God, then it would not necessarily be wrong for the relatives of that victim to *want* God's Judgment to come, and even to take satisfaction, and achieve a sense of closure, from that Judgment when it takes place.

That is a valid way to think in relation to an *unrepentant* person. It is not necessarily inconsistent with having forgiven the other person, at least at the most basic level, i.e. having stepped aside and left it to Jesus to judge them. However, the position is different in relation to a wrongdoer who has, like us, repented and been saved. Such a man is forgiven, just as we are, and will not be punished. We shall examine this issue in some detail below.

If appropriate, Jesus will punish those who have harmed us. It is not necessarily wrong for us to take comfort from that fact.

When we forgive a wrongdoer it does *not* mean that he will never be judged. It is simply that they won't be judged *by us*. Jesus will actually judge *unrepentant, unsaved* people with a severity which is far greater than anything we could do to them:

*³⁵ 'Vengeance is Mine, and retribution,
In due time their foot will slip;
For the day of their calamity is near,
And the impending things are hastening upon them.'
³⁶ "For the LORD will vindicate His people,
And will have compassion on His servants,
When He sees that their strength is gone,*

*And there is none remaining, bond or free.
Deuteronomy 32:35-36 (NASB)*

*Say to those with anxious heart,
“Take courage, fear not.
Behold, your God will come with vengeance;
The recompense of God will come,
But He will save you.”
Isaiah 35:4(NASB)*

⁵This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. ⁶For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, ⁸dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, ¹⁰when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marvelled at among all who have believed--for our testimony to you was believed.

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 (NASB)

It is not *necessarily* inappropriate for a wronged party to take comfort from, and even look forward to, the fact that Jesus' judgment will come upon the wrongdoer. In part, it is the very fact that we know that that is going to happen which can make it possible for us to step back and to leave the judgment, and even the taking of vengeance, for Him to deal with instead of us.

Therefore we need not necessarily feel guilty or hypocritical about the fact that we *want* Jesus' judgment to come upon a person who has done something wrong. It does not *necessarily* mean that we are being unforgiving. In itself it is consistent with 'stepping aside' and letting Jesus be the one who judges.

However, what if the wrongdoer *has* repented and been saved and forgiven by God? In those circumstances it would no longer be right to desire that they be punished. In such a case, everything has changed. The wrongdoer, *if he truly has been saved*, has now had all his sins washed away. That includes his sins(s) against you. Moreover, he now has all the righteousness of Jesus Christ, because it has been imputed or transferred to him, just as was done for you when you were saved and forgiven.

But then we might object that it would be unfair for that wrongdoer to be 'let off' by Jesus. We might see it as an injustice and feel aggrieved that he is no longer going to get what he deserves. In one sense that is an understandable emotion. However, we ought to think very carefully indeed before saying that we want everybody to get what they 'deserve'. If God did that, then He would also have to give *us* what *we* deserve, not just other people. But that would be a place in the Lake of Fire, not forgiveness and mercy.

The point is how can we say that God should forgive us for *our* sins, including what we did to harm person Y, but then demand that justice and vengeance be shown to person X for the harm *they* did to us? Surely it has to be either both, or neither, of us that can receive God's mercy? We can't say that it should be shown to us, but not to person X.

If we did claim to be entitled to insist on justice as against person X then what if person Y, whom we have wronged, was to demand, in like manner, that God punish us? That is the dilemma we face. If we want to *receive* forgiveness we must also be willing to *give* it. Likewise, if we are going to demand justice and retribution for others then we would have to accept that those things should be *dispensed to us as well*, which would not be a good idea. It certainly wouldn't get my vote.

If the wrongdoer meets God's conditions, as we did, and receives His forgiveness, we cannot any longer look for God to take vengeance upon him. We have to accept the whole package, i.e. *receiving* forgiveness ourselves and also *giving* it to others. Otherwise, we have not really understood the gospel.

Let us now attempt to define forgiveness more fully and enlarge upon some of these other related concepts that have been mentioned.

A closer look at what forgiveness consists of

To forgive another person, *in the narrowest sense* of the word, requires us to recognise and accept the following things:

- a) that a wrong has been done to you and, perhaps, that harm has been caused.
- b) that it has been done by person X (or group X)
- c) that all wrongdoing will be fully dealt with by Jesus, either at the Judgment Seat of Christ (for Christians) or the Great White Throne Judgment (for non-Christians).
- d) that only Jesus is legitimately qualified for the role of judging person X or group X.
- e) that for you to attempt to judge and/or punish that person or group now would be premature, illegitimate and unauthorised. It would involve usurping Jesus' role.
- f) that due to your inadequate knowledge and understanding, person X would never get a 'fair trial' from you. You would never be able to take fully into account the multitude of relevant facts, his various motives, and any other aggravating or mitigating factors. You just don't have enough wisdom or computing capacity for a job like that. It would be worse than if you had just wandered into the Old Bailey, sat in a Judge's chair and started to try a case. Doing that would be unthinkable. None of us would even dream of it. Yet that is the equivalent of what we would be doing if we refused to forgive others and tried to judge them ourselves.
- g) that we have to make a decision to *hand the case over* to Jesus. We can, and must, step aside and leave it all to Him. He will then deal with everything in His own time, either now, or later, or both.

These points summarise the main things we need to do if we are to forgive someone effectively. But the above list sounds quite different from most people's idea of what forgiveness involves. Forgiveness is not a well understood concept, even amongst Christians. There is a lot of confusion and misunderstanding about it, due to poor teaching, or no teaching at all.

It is also caused by demonic deception which obscures the biblical understanding of forgiveness and promotes various other garbled definitions instead. The Devil does not want forgiveness to be properly understood or practiced. He tries particularly hard, therefore, to distort our understanding of this subject.

Most people misunderstand what forgiveness is. They then reject it, or fail to achieve it, because their definition is wrong

Many of us have such an inaccurate understanding of forgiveness that we reject the very idea as being unrealistic. We can't accept the unbiblical concept that we mistakenly have in mind when the word

'forgiveness' is used. Therefore we don't even try to do it. Others do attempt it, even repeatedly, but because their definition of forgiveness is wrong, they don't succeed.

Therefore they become discouraged and give up. They may never realise that the things they were trying to do were not necessarily what God means by forgiveness. They could have succeeded, and still could succeed, if they only understood correctly what God actually wants them to do in their particular circumstances.

God is the most sensible, practical, reasonable and realistic person in the whole universe. Therefore, if the very idea of forgiveness seems to you to be absurdly idealistic, impractical, and even impossible, then that indicates that you have probably misunderstood what you are being commanded to do.

God would not command you to do something which is impossible. Neither would He say anything unrealistic or impractical. So, if we feel that He is being unrealistic, that should prompt us to look again at the definitions of the words we are dealing with.

Why is forgiveness preached on so rarely?

Probably the main reason why so few Christians understand forgiveness correctly is that there is so little teaching on it. It is either taught poorly by church leaders, who don't know what it really means, or it is not taught at all. The latter is the normal position. When did you ever hear a useful, practical and biblical sermon on *how* and *why* you should forgive others? I haven't heard one in the last 25 years at least. Indeed, I don't think I have ever heard one. But why is that?

Perhaps one reason is that forgiveness is difficult, even if correctly defined, and probably impossible if wrongly defined. Thus many preachers find, in their own personal experience, that forgiving others has not been a success. So, because few men want to discuss their own failures or difficulties, the whole subject is avoided.

Another probable reason is that the subject of forgiveness is a difficult one for church members to listen to. Thus, if a church leader is the kind of man who wants to be liked, as many are, then he will avoid teaching on any subject which is controversial, or makes people feel uncomfortable, or which has the potential to remind them of their grievances and get them stirred up.

However, perhaps the main reason that forgiveness is not preached on is that many leaders just don't understand it themselves. That is probably because they too have not been properly taught about it. There are very few good books on the subject of forgiveness and preachers themselves have not heard any good biblical sermons on it, which they can copy or download.

What forgiveness does *not* mean, and does *not* involve:

Contrary to what millions of people assume, forgiveness does *not* mean, or involve, any of the following:

- a) telling yourself that no real wrong was ever done to you by person X or that you are over-reacting, being over-sensitive or even imagining things
- b) saying that person X was right to do what he did to you
- c) excusing or covering up for person X
- d) sympathising with person X

- e) telling yourself that it was all your own fault, not the wrongdoer's fault
- f) being sappy and wet about what happened and making yourself into a 'doormat' to be walked on.
- g) resuming or continuing a close relationship with the wrongdoer, as if nothing had ever happened
- h) being able to make all the pain go away, such that you no longer feel upset or angry about it and have made yourself '*get over it*'
- i) *forgetting* the wrong done to you, how it made you feel, and the harm it did
- j) believing that the wrongdoer should not have to be punished and should not be required to repay what he has taken, or pay compensation for the damage or injury caused
- k) letting the wrongdoer 'get away with it', such that it would be considered wrong for you to go to the police or appoint a lawyer to sue them
- l) being *reconciled* with the wrongdoer, such that you are on friendly terms with them, and would be happy to have them round to your house, go out for a drink, or even just engage in 'small talk' with them. (In fact, forgiveness and reconciliation are *totally separate and different concepts*. The former does not require, or imply, the latter. Forgiveness is something you decide to do *on your own*. It does not require the wrongdoer's cooperation, apology or repentance or for him to reciprocate in any way. He need not necessarily even be aware that you have forgiven him. However, *reconciliation has to be mutual*. It can't happen unless the wrongdoer firstly acknowledges his fault, apologises, repents and, above all, *stops wronging you*.)
- m) feeling able to *trust* the wrongdoer. (Again, it is foolishness to think that forgiveness implies or requires that trust has to be resumed. Nevertheless, a lot of people do assume that, which is one reason why they wrongly conclude that it is impossible to forgive. Actually, the Bible never even tells us to trust people who *haven't wronged us*, let alone those who have. There is no requirement to trust the wrongdoer in order to prove to God, or to others, that we have genuinely forgiven him. A wrongdoer has to *earn* your trust, over a period of time, just as anybody else does, even if they aren't a wrongdoer. And it is perfectly reasonable that you wait two or three times longer to trust a wrongdoer than a stranger who has never yet wronged you. In short, they have no right to receive your trust, and you are not under any duty to trust them.)

Nevertheless, many people, even within the Church, assume that forgiveness *does* involve some or all of (a)-(m) above. But it doesn't, or at least it doesn't *necessarily* involve any of them. The word 'forgiveness' has had its meaning distorted, like the word 'gay'. We must therefore recapture and reinforce the correct meaning of the word, because if we don't, a great many people will continue to believe that forgiveness is impossible to achieve.

There are also other words which mean similar things as forgiveness. They may even include forgiveness as a component element within them. But they still have their own, separate and distinct definitions

As we saw, people often confuse words like *reconciliation* with forgiveness, as if they were the same thing. There are other words as well which have their own separate and distinct definitions and yet are frequently assumed to be the same as forgiveness, or at least to be required, or implied, by forgiveness. We shall look at a few more of these words and examine what they do actually mean and how they are different from forgiveness, even if they often go together with forgiveness.

a) *peace*

It is by no means always necessary, in order to forgive a person, that you must also be *at peace* with them. Sometimes forgiveness will lead to peace, *but sometimes it will not*. The two things do not necessarily have to go together in order for forgiveness to be valid. *Moreover, peace requires the voluntary cooperation of both parties*, not just the one doing the forgiving. We actually need to look more closely at the word ‘peace’ and distinguish between two of its definitions, because it has more than one:

i) *irene*

This is a Greek word, from which we get the girls’ name, and is the basis for what most of us think of, at least in the West, when we hear the word peace. It means *the absence of hostility or conflict*, such that we are not at war, or actively engaged in a dispute, or otherwise struggling, against some other person or group.

It is possible to have genuinely forgiven a person and yet *not be at peace* with them, in the sense of *irene* peace. You might still need to be a witness against them in a criminal trial, or give evidence against them in a workplace disciplinary hearing. Or you might feel it necessary to contact the local council to pursue a complaint against them because of their abusive behaviour, or for parking across your driveway, and so on. The list of possibilities is endless.

Yet, each of these things, which clearly show that we are *not* at peace (*irene* peace) are entirely consistent with us having truly forgiven the other person. There is no contradiction or inconsistency, because forgiveness does not necessarily require that we be at peace (*irene*) with the other person. It may lead to *irene* peace, or it may not. They, or you, might be unwilling or unable to be at *irene* peace. Nevertheless, you can still validly forgive them.

ii) *shalom*

This is a Hebrew word which is also translated as ‘peace’ in English. However, it does not mean the same as the Greek word ‘irene’. *Shalom* peace is much deeper and wider than the mere absence of hostilities or conflict. *Shalom* means a complete wholesomeness, integrity, prosperity and sense of well-being at the deepest level. So, if a person does not forgive another person, and is holding a grudge and feeling vengeful, they will not have *shalom* peace within themselves.

However, a person may have genuinely forgiven the wrongdoer but still not be experiencing *shalom* peace (or not yet) because they are still grieving or feeling wounded, violated or traumatised. They may even feel righteous indignation or anger. Such feelings may be felt, such that there is no *shalom* type peace, but it does not necessarily mean that the injured party is disobeying Jesus’ command to forgive.

He might well have obeyed that command, and handed the whole matter over to God and/or to the civil or criminal authorities, but he is still reeling from the shock of what happened, trying to come to terms with it, and gradually getting his emotions back under control.

That process of re-establishing your equilibrium may well take a fair amount of time, but it does not necessarily indicate that there is a lack of forgiveness. Of course, *it could be* that there is unforgiveness, but we cannot just assume it. The issue of whether we have recovered our *shalom*-type peace is an entirely separate question from the question of whether we have genuinely forgiven the wrongdoer.

I emphasise this because some people have felt guilt, or have been put under pressure, or falsely accused of being unforgiving, simply because they have not yet recovered their composure and their *shalom*-type peace. Such accusations come from one or more of the following sources:

- *other people* who don't understand the true definition of forgiveness and wrongly assume that it requires us to be fully at peace etc and that a person who has not yet calmed down and is "still going on about what happened to them" is a nuisance and is causing problems by being 'unforgiving'.
- *ourselves*, because we too misunderstand, or wrongly define, forgiveness and therefore feel convinced that we have not achieved it, or never can achieve it, because we still feel some emotional turmoil.
- *demons*, who whisper lies into our minds and tell us that we are being unforgiving and are disobeying what Jesus said. They don't say that in order to induce you to become obedient to God's Word, but only to increase your wretchedness and misery by making you feel guilt, shame and hopelessness. The truth is that you could actually achieve real forgiveness if you only knew its correct definition. Indeed, you may already have done so, but the demons have convinced you that you haven't.

b) mercy

The word *mercy* is obviously linked to forgiveness. However, it is not the same thing. Perhaps the simplest and best definition of mercy is that it is where person A (who is usually in a position of power, strength or authority) *chooses not to do, or give, to person B what they deserve*.

The point, for our present purposes, is that even when we genuinely obey Jesus' command to forgive, it does not *necessarily* mean that we must *also* show mercy. Mercy is a separate and additional step to take. It goes beyond forgiveness.

So, person A might truly forgive person B by handing the matter over to God and/or leave it to the civil/criminal authorities to deal with, and he may seek no vengeance or retribution for himself. Yet, he might also, at the same time, choose *not to show mercy*. For example, he could instruct the Police that he wants person B to be prosecuted.

Alternatively, person A might choose to say to the Police:

"Please don't press any charges against person B. I want to drop the matter and I don't want to see his life blighted by receiving a criminal record."

If person A said that, they would be showing mercy. Another word for that is *clemency*, although we mainly use that word in the context of a person who is in a position of authority and chooses not to exercise their power.

Yet another word which we use for showing mercy is '*magnanimity*'. This is the kind of mercy that is shown by the victor to the loser in a war, or indeed by the victor, or stronger party, in any kind of dispute. Therefore, at the end of World War Two, Churchill's advice to the Allies was that they should show magnanimity to the Germans, unlike what happened at the end of World War One, which culminated in what most felt was a punitive, vengeful and even oppressive treaty.

Magnanimity is what we can choose to show when we have been wronged, but now have the upper hand, and the wrongdoer lies prostrate at our feet. In those circumstances, to choose not to seek for justice, but instead to stay one's hand and demand less than one is entitled to, is magnanimous. Magnanimity goes beyond forgiveness. Therefore a person can truly forgive, at least in the basic, narrow sense, *without* also choosing to be magnanimous in the way that they handle their victory.

It may, or may not, be right to show mercy, in any of its various forms, but the point is that it is something different from, and additional to, forgiveness. In other words, person A may have genuinely forgiven person B for the assault or theft or whatever, but still feel that it is necessary and appropriate for justice to take its course. Therefore they choose to go to the police rather than show mercy by not going to them.

Remember the crucial point about what forgiveness is at its most basic level. It primarily means *handing the case over so that someone else can be the judge and carry out any sentence*. One can do that sincerely without also being under a duty to refrain from helping the prosecution, or civil action, or workplace disciplinary action, which then follows.

If forgiveness involves handing the case over, which it does, then how can anybody say that in order to truly forgive we must choose not even to hand it over, but rather that we should feel obligated to drop the matter entirely? That would be to extend the meaning of forgiveness illegitimately and to turn it into something much bigger and wider than what the Bible means by the word.

Therefore, if person A merely hands the case over to the Police (and/or to God) and seeks no personal vengeance, then he has fulfilled the basic meaning of forgiveness. God might, or might not, want person A to go even further and to show mercy *as well*. However, if that is what God wants, then God would be asking person A to *show mercy*, not to forgive, because he has already done that.

God does not get confused about the words He uses. Neither does He say one thing when He means another. Therefore, forgiveness means forgiveness. Mercy means mercy. Peace means peace and so on. They are all distinct words in their own right and are not inter-changeable synonyms.

c) *grace/graciousness*

We saw that mercy is “*not giving people what they do deserve*”. Grace is the other side of the same coin. It basically means “*giving people what they don’t deserve*”. Therefore, extending the points made above, we can imagine various factual situations where it would be right, and indeed essential, to forgive, but not necessarily appropriate to show grace.

So, if a person has wronged us, and we have genuinely forgiven them, God might, or might not, want us to go further and show grace to them. Or, God might want us to show grace in a particular way, *but not necessarily in some other way*. Or God might want us to show grace *up to a certain point*, but not beyond that point. Therefore, if we choose not to help a person who has wronged us, or choose not to give them a favour, or privilege or gift, it would not necessarily mean that we have not genuinely forgiven them.

Showing such grace towards them might, or might not, be wise or appropriate. That is it may, or may not, be God’s will in those circumstances. You cannot make a general rule. Even less can you equate forgiveness with grace and therefore accuse another person, or even yourself, of being unforgiving merely for choosing not to show grace to a particular person in a particular situation. It does not necessarily follow.

But, what if a person was so full of bitterness and the desire for vengeance that they were reveling in their decision to withhold grace from the wrongdoer and taking pleasure from withholding it? Then their heart-attitude would obviously be wrong. It might even indicate that they had not truly forgiven the wrongdoer. Nevertheless, the point is that the giving, or withholding, of grace is a completely separate, stand-alone issue. Like mercy, it goes beyond the duty to forgive and is distinct from it.

d) *forgetting*

By this I mean forgetting the wrong done to you, no longer feeling upset, and ceasing to think about the person who did the harm. ‘Forgetting’ is another much misunderstood word, which is frequently

confused with forgiving. Therefore, if person A can't, or can't yet, *forget* what was done to him by person B, or the feelings it produced, it does not necessarily mean that he has not genuinely forgiven person B.

The command to forgive others does not extend to also forgetting what they did or how it made you feel. If Jesus had wanted to command that we forget all about the offence as well, then He would have said so, but He did not.

One reason why God did not command us to forget all about the wrongs done to us, or to forget the way we felt as a result, is because He knows that we often *aren't capable* of doing that. *God* can choose to forget, but *we* can't necessarily manage to do that. At any rate, we can't do it purely as *an exercise of our will*.

We sometimes need time for our feelings to heal and become less raw. That is very significant, because God never gives us any command *to feel, or not feel, a particular emotion*. He only gives commands in connection with *the exercise of our will*. It is always expressed in terms of what we should say or do, not how we should feel in our emotions.

You might respond to that by saying that He commands us not to be angry. However, when He makes that command, what God means is that we are not to *speak* or *act*, or *react*, towards other people with *sinful, fleshly, unrighteous anger*. Those are all things we can control and decide to do or not to do. He is referring to circumstances where the expression of anger would be carnal, and thus sinful. He is not referring to *godly anger*, or *righteous indignation*, such as Jesus demonstrated when He expelled the money changers from the Temple.

At any rate, the point is that all of God's commandments have to do with what we say, do and even think, as an exercise of our *will*. We are accountable for what we choose to do or say, but not necessarily for how we *feel*. Accordingly, we are never commanded not to feel grief, sadness, hurt or shock or not to feel that we have been violated. There is no sin in feeling any of those things. Therefore our inability to forget the wrong done to us, or to alter our feelings, is not disobedience. It is not, *in itself*, even evidence, let alone proof, that we have not genuinely forgiven someone.

That said, what if the real reason why we are failing to forget a wrong done to us, or to stop feeling as we do, is because we are deliberately and repeatedly *choosing to remind ourselves of it*? We may even be reminding the wrongdoer of it, because we get pleasure from bringing it up in conversation and from making the other person feel guilty about it.

Then, that *would* be a sign that we have not genuinely forgiven the person. As with everything else, we have to approach this difficult subject with balance. We also need to have regard to our real motives, which may not necessarily be what we say they are.

e) *trusting the wrongdoer*

It may, or may not, be appropriate to *trust* a person who has previously wronged you. It depends entirely on the circumstances and on the role, responsibility or property which you are considering entrusting or re-entrusting to them. It could be very unwise, or even dangerous, to trust them again. It may also be impossible, or a breach of your professional duty to do so, because you have to bear in mind the needs of others who might be adversely affected if the wrongdoer was to act wrongly, or let you down, again.

The point is that whether it is right or wrong to *trust* the person again is an entirely separate issue from the duty to *forgive* him. It is perfectly valid to forgive and yet still not feel able to trust the person. Or, you might feel that it is possible, and appropriate, to do both. However, if that is the case, you are going beyond forgiving them and are adding a further dimension.

f) giving the wrongdoer another chance

This is linked to the issue of whether or not we feel able to trust the wrongdoer again. However, it is also a separate point in itself. It is possible to give a person another chance, even if we don't yet trust them, and even if we actually expect them to let us down again. The point is that the issue of whether or not to give them another chance goes beyond forgiveness.

So we can genuinely forgive a person and yet not feel that it would be wise or safe to give them another chance. It is a matter of individual judgment, such that another Christian might be willing to give them another chance, whereas you are not. Yet, you could both be right.

A classic example of this is the crisis that arose in the Book of Acts when John Mark (better known to us as Mark, the writer of the second gospel) deserted apostle Paul and let him down when under pressure. Later on, Mark evidently said that he had repented and wanted to rejoin the team, but that led to an argument. Paul's personal stance was that he was not willing to give Mark another chance.

However, Paul's partner, Barnabas, felt that Mark should be allowed to have another go and to work with them again. They could not agree on this, so Paul and Barnabas split up and went their separate ways. Barnabas therefore took Mark with him and Paul took Silas:

³⁶ And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the brethren in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." ³⁷ And Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphyl'ia, and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ And there arose a sharp contention, so that they separated from each other; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cili'cia, strengthening the churches.

Acts 15:36-41 (RSV)

That episode had a happy ending. Mark genuinely changed and turned into a mature, reliable worker. Indeed, in the end, God honoured him by allowing him to write the second gospel, for which he got the material from apostle Peter, with whom he became very close:

She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark.

1 Peter 5:13 (RSV)

More to the point, Mark was eventually accepted, trusted and welcomed back by Paul to work alongside him:

Aristar'chus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, receive him),

Colossians 4:10 (RSV)

Mark's dramatic and total rehabilitation is an encouragement to us all to believe that even where people fail badly, or behave badly, there is always the chance to repent and change and eventually become a success.

The question is who was right, Paul or Barnabas? The short answer is probably that they both were. At any rate, Paul did not act wrongly by refusing to let Mark rejoin the team. He clearly felt it would be unwise and even unsafe. In making that decision, Paul was not failing to forgive Mark, or acting in a way that was inconsistent with genuine forgiveness. It was up to Paul to decide what was best and whether or not it would be wise to go beyond forgiving Mark, by choosing to give him another chance.

Barnabas saw it differently and was willing to take the risk. That was his personal choice. Happily, it turned out to have been an inspired one. That said, it may well have had more to do with the simple fact that Mark was a cousin of Barnabas and therefore he possibly chose to give him more leeway than he would have given to a non-relative. The point is that in choosing not to go as far as Barnabas was willing to go, Paul was not sinning. In particular, he was not failing to forgive.

g) being *reconciled* with the wrongdoer and starting or resuming a friendship with him

You will see the pattern by now and realise that this is going even further than trusting the wrongdoer and/or giving him another chance. To be *reconciled* may mean that we are resuming a full personal relationship involving trust, friendship, closeness and even intimacy and the sharing of confidences. Clearly, that goes way beyond merely forgiving the person. Therefore, whether to be reconciled is an even bigger decision.

The point, for our purposes, is that we have absolutely *no duty to be reconciled* to every wrongdoer. Reconciliation is not required in order for us to be able to say that we have genuinely forgiven them. I emphasise that because this issue has caused a great deal of confusion and stress for people who are trying hard to forgive a wrongdoer.

They may mistakenly assume that unless they are willing to be fully reconciled, and feel comfortable about resuming a close personal relationship, then they have not genuinely forgiven the person and are even being disobedient to Jesus' command to forgive. That is plainly wrong and is a particularly unhelpful thing to say to a person who is struggling to deal with a wrong done to them.

Reconciliation may, or may not, be achieved at some point. It depends on a host of circumstances, in particular the *attitude and subsequent conduct* of the wrongdoer and whether he has genuinely *repented, apologized and changed*. If he hasn't done all of those things, then there would be no basis for reconciliation. It could even be foolish to attempt it. So, we need to see reconciliation as another separate, stand-alone issue, over and above forgiveness, which may or may not be appropriate, or possible, even in the long term.

An example illustrating basic forgiveness but then adding further elements on top of that

It may assist our understanding of how forgiveness works in its narrower and broader senses, to present a simple illustration. Imagine that you have loaned your lawnmower to your next door neighbor. However, you then discover that he has misused it, either carelessly or deliberately, and caused serious damage to it, rendering it useless. Perhaps it has cost you £200 and he is not sorry for what he did, or bothered about how you feel. Moreover, he is refusing to repay you for the lawnmower, even though he is well able to do so.

Let's examine that scenario and see how you might forgive that person and what else you might, or might not, *also do, over and above forgiving him*. I have deliberately kept the example mundane and homely because, for most of us, the things we have to forgive are not spectacular things like murders or armed robberies but smaller injuries, offences and rudenesses which occur in ordinary, day to day life.

To begin with, we can say for sure that you have a clear duty to forgive your neighbor *in the basic, narrow sense*. That is you would have to step aside, recuse yourself and leave it to Jesus to judge him for what he has done to your lawnmower and his subsequent refusal to repay you, or even to apologise. That is always your duty and you are commanded to do that. However, it might, or might not, be possible, or even appropriate, for you to go further than that and do any or all of the other things which we have looked at, each of which go beyond basic forgiveness.

So, it may be that God *also* wants you to do some or all of these things. Alternatively, He might not. What is more, even if He does want you to do them, it may be that He only wants you to do so *up to a certain point*, rather than to the fullest extent possible. Let's therefore look at each of these possible extra steps that you could take:

a) to be at *peace* with your neighbour in the sense of not being *angry* with him, or in terms of not going to see a *lawyer* and suing him for the damage he did. Alternatively, you could actually choose to sue him and yet still have genuinely forgiven him, in the narrow sense of handing the judgment over to Jesus and, in the meantime, to the civil courts which God has put in place. You can do that provided you are not seeking to exact any vengeance of your own, and are refusing to allow yourself to hold a grudge or nurse any bitterness or hatred towards him.

b) to *show mercy* towards him by *not* requiring him to get what he *deserves*, for example by choosing not to make him pay for the damage. You might, or might not, choose to show such mercy to him, depending on the circumstances. But if, conversely, you choose *not* to be merciful, and to insist, instead, on obtaining redress, that decision would not necessarily be inconsistent with forgiving him, in the narrow sense. In other words, if you choose to show mercy by letting him off, it would be something you were doing *in addition* to forgiving him, rather than being an integral part of the act of forgiveness in itself.

c) to *show grace* towards him by causing or permitting him to receive some benefit or privilege which he does *not deserve*. You might do that, for example, by allowing him to continue to borrow your new lawnmower, despite what he did to the previous one. You would be under *no duty to show such grace towards him*. It goes beyond basic forgiveness and it may, or may not, be wise.

It would depend on all sorts of other factors such as the attitude he shows, whether he later apologises, and what his circumstances are. It could even be that God wants you to give him an unusually large amount of leeway because He wants you to try to build a relationship with that man so that you can perhaps reach him, or his family, with the gospel. So, God might, or might not, want you to let him use your new lawnmower in future. But, either way, He will always want you to forgive him, i.e. in the narrow sense.

d) to *forget* the wrong done to you. Again, this is *not* required for genuine forgiveness, i.e. in the basic, narrow sense. It is a quite separate matter, which goes well beyond basic forgiveness. It may, or may not, be wise, or even possible, for you to forget what he did. There could be circumstances, for example if the damage was purely accidental, where you might feel it right, and feel able, to put the harm done to you entirely out of your mind, forget all about it, and treat your neighbor as if nothing had ever happened.

Or, the circumstances could be such that you would not feel that that was appropriate, or even possible. For example, he might have done the damage recklessly, or even spitefully, and he could be wholly unrepentant. He could even be mocking you and laughing about what he did. It entirely depends. So, not forgetting the wrong done to you does *not* mean that you have not genuinely forgiven him. Likewise, if you *do* manage to forget it, you have gone a long way beyond what is required of you for basic forgiveness.

e) to *trust him*, either with your tools, or in some other way. Forgiving your neighbor does not oblige you to trust him, either now or in the future. Indeed, it might be very unwise, or even downright foolish, to trust him. He could be entirely unworthy of any trust, either in that area, or any other. God would, very probably, *not* want you to trust him, because the Bible does not tell us to trust others. On the contrary, the usual default-setting is that we should be cautious. Even so, He still commands you to *forgive* him, at least in the basic sense, but the resumption of trust is *not* required in order for genuine forgiveness to occur.

f) to be *reconciled* with him, such that you are back on friendly terms and in a full relationship, as if nothing had ever happened. Again, this may or may not be either appropriate or possible. As we have seen above, it depends on all sorts of other factors. What we can say for sure is that the issue of whether you have, or have not, become reconciled has nothing to do with whether you have genuinely forgiven him in the basic, narrow sense of the word.

One reason why forgiveness is so badly misunderstood is that demons work hard to make sure that we misunderstand it. Their focus on this area shows how important it is.

As you consider the issue now, does it occur to you that it is odd that we are so prone to misunderstanding words like forgiveness, but understand other words very easily? For example, have you ever met anybody who does not understand words like ‘refrigerator’ or ‘temperature’ or even more complex words like ‘democracy’ or ‘unemployment’? In fact, I would go so far as to predict that if a survey was carried out, it would reveal that even *the offside rule* in football (soccer) is more widely and accurately understood than the meaning of the word ‘forgiveness’.

I would suggest that one explanation for this widespread lack of understanding is that the demons work hard to ensure that there is confusion about any word or concept which really matters, and which would cause problems for the Church if it was not understood correctly. The demons don’t mind at all if you accurately understand refrigerators and even democracy. So, they don’t bother to cause any sabotage in those areas.

However, the demons know the huge significance of forgiveness. It not only affects your relationships with other people, especially within the Church. It also has a major bearing on your effectiveness as a Christian, right across the board. It also affects the ability of the wider Church to function properly and to be a witness to the unsaved world around us. Most importantly of all, it even has a bearing on God’s willingness to forgive you. It would therefore be hard to think of many things which could be more important than forgiving other people.

The demons can’t stop you from reading the Bible or from seeing that the forgiving of others is required of you. However, what they can very easily do is to render your efforts to forgive others ineffective by getting you *to define forgiveness differently from how God defines it*. In particular, they want you to see it as being something *bigger, wider and more difficult than it really is*. If they can achieve that, then the chances are that you will:

- a) consider it impossible to forgive others
- b) therefore not even attempt it
- c) attempt it but fail, or at least believe you have failed, because you are trying to go further than God actually commands, and to do things which are over and above what He asks of us
- d) see forgiveness as something which has to be achieved at the level of your *feelings* when God sees it as taking place at the level of your *will*, i.e. a pure *decision, or choice*
- e) conclude that your attempts to forgive are not working and therefore give up on it and lapse back into unforgiveness, bitterness, and even hate
- f) avoid preaching to others on the subject of forgiveness, because you are discouraged and confused about it yourself, and find it hard to put into practice. That reluctance to teach others about the subject then compounds the problem of ignorance and confusion even further

As stated earlier, we don't seem to have any equivalent difficulty understanding other words that are in common usage, or even the less common words. We don't add extra layers of complexity to the meaning of those words, or mix them up with other things.

Therefore, the fact that forgiveness is so widely and seriously misunderstood, and that our efforts to implement it are so profoundly ineffectual, shows how much effort the demons are putting in to sabotaging our thinking. That in itself should help to persuade you that forgiveness is an exceptionally important issue and one which warrants a great deal of extra attention.

The demons consider the derailing of our attempts to forgive each other to be of vital strategic importance to their war aims. Therefore, understanding it correctly, and achieving it in practice, must be equally important to ours. Accordingly, we should make at least the same effort to define its meaning correctly as the demons make to obscure it.

Why does God make our forgiving others a pre-condition to Him forgiving us?

I believe that God has two main reasons for requiring us to forgive others, i.e. at least in the narrow, basic sense, before He will forgive us:

- a) For us to judge and punish people ourselves is to usurp the role of Jesus, which is presumptuous. If you think God is being overly sensitive about that, just imagine the reaction you would get from one of the judges at The Royal Courts of Justice on the Strand if you went into his court room and sat down in his chair. Would you accuse him of being over-sensitive if he sent for the ushers and had you thrown out?
- b) If we won't forgive others and insist instead on judging them, and even punishing and taking vengeance against them, ourselves, then it shows that we haven't properly grasped the fact that we too are sinful. We are each guilty of the same, or similar, things as that wrongdoer whom we are refusing to forgive. If we won't, or can't, see that then it may mean that our own repentance is insincere or inadequate. How can we, in our own sinful state as wrongdoers, cry out to God for mercy and forgiveness if we haven't understood that the person who has wronged us is in an identical situation to our own?

At the very least, an unwillingness to forgive others may be evidence that you have not genuinely grasped the extent of your own sinfulness and your own need for repentance. Conversely, a genuine willingness to forgive others is powerful evidence that you have. Therefore, the fact that you have an ongoing attitude of unforgiveness and bitterness towards others calls into question the adequacy, and even the genuineness, of your own faith and repentance.

God is looking for truth and sincerity. Therefore it follows that this test of our genuineness, i.e. the question of whether we are willing to forgive others, will be very significant to Him. Therefore, let's make sure we pass this test. Let's forgive others, at least in the basic, narrow sense. Ideally let's try to go further than that. Then, without any hypocrisy, we can ask God to do the same for us.

The harm that unforgiveness and bitterness do

There are many harmful consequences that follow if we will not forgive others. One major problem is the ongoing emotional effect that it has on us. If the many wrongs done to us are not forgiven and handed over to Jesus to judge (and punish if need be) then they won't go away. Instead, they will fester within us and grow into a 'tumour' of bitterness.

That build-up of unresolved grievances will have a very damaging effect on us. We know that from our own experience. There is a nasty chemical reaction within us when we feel pent up anger which is not properly dealt with and has no outlet.

When that reservoir of accumulated grievances isn't dealt with it turns into bitterness. That then flares up into fresh anger (i.e. of the carnal variety, not righteous anger) every time we remember what was done to us. Usually we remind ourselves of the grievance by 'nursing' it and forming a grudge. We get the sense of grievance out, from time to time, to dwell on it and think about it again and again. Every time we do that we cause another dose of damaging chemicals and hormones to be produced within ourselves. These then linger in our system, doing physical harm as well as emotional and spiritual damage.

In fact, these chemical responses are the cause of many literal cancers. I was speaking to a throat and mouth cancer specialist some time ago. She sees a regular pattern among her patients. Many of them are heavy-drinking men who are also embittered and angry, and have been so for years. Cancer appears to be one of the end results of all that.

I recall a very unfortunate woman whose son was brutally murdered in the 1960s by the 'Moors Murderers', Ian Brady and Myra Hindley. For decades the mother held on to all of her bitterness and campaigned for the murderers never to be released from prison. She would often appear on TV saying "*I will never forgive them for what they did*".

One really can understand her reaction and sympathise deeply with her. Who wouldn't? Her 12 year old son had been tortured and killed by two sadistic people who had done it all purely for 'fun' and showed no remorse. Yet, despite the appalling injustice of it all, the undeniable fact is that she caused severe additional damage to herself by holding on to all the bitterness, instead of handing it all over to Jesus.

One could see in her face, and hear in her voice, what her unforgiveness was doing to her. She eventually died, never having managed to forgive the killers, and never having got free of her own bitterness. The final 40 years of her life were blighted by it.

By contrast, another man had a daughter who was killed by an IRA bomb at Enniskillen. He decided, to forgive the men who did it. He was a mature Christian and had an accurate understanding of what forgiveness really is. His life from then on was totally different to that of the mother of the Moors murderers' victim. He still had to bear all his grief, *but he was capable of carrying on living his life*.

So, he still suffered all the sadness and loss, but the point is that those things *did not destroy him*, because he refused to let them do so. The same effect is seen, in either direction, in our own lives. We can choose to allow the bitterness to remain. If so, we will be harmed by it. Or, we can let it go, hand it over to Jesus (i.e. forgive the person in the narrow, basic sense) and have peace of mind.

Bitterness, rage and hate will also create major obstacles to your own progress, i.e. spiritually and otherwise. You will not be able to grow as a Christian, or serve God as you should, if you are harbouring such feelings. They prevent us from being of any use to God and create boundaries, beyond which we cannot go until we deal with them. But that can only be done by forgiving. There is no other way. There is no form of counselling or psychological technique or medication which can achieve what real forgiveness achieves.

If we refuse to forgive the wrongdoer, the initial wrong done to us can end up having an exponentially increased impact upon the whole of the rest of our lives, even in eternity. It seems unfair, in a sense, but that is the way it is and we have no alternative but to face that fact.

A wise person will therefore do whatever is needed to remove from his life anything which hinders his own spiritual progress, regardless of whether it seems 'fair' to him. In particular, we need to prevent any 'root of bitterness' from developing:

See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" spring up and cause trouble, and by it the many become defiled;

Hebrews 12:15 (RSV)

Unforgiveness makes us hard and sour. It also causes us to lose our sense of proportion and perspective. If so, we may become unjust to others, as the indirect, but foreseeable, result of the original wrong done to us. We are not to blame for that original wrong, but *we are answerable for our reactions to it.*

Thus a wrong can be endlessly multiplied in its effect, i.e. in the harm it causes, if we fail to forgive. Conversely, forgiveness, especially if it is done early, puts a stop to that chain of causation. It prevents the escalation of harm that would otherwise have resulted.

What is the difference between 'anger' and 'rage'?

We have seen above how so many important biblical words and concepts are seriously misunderstood. We shall now look at two more, i.e. 'anger' and 'rage'. The first, anger, is not necessarily sinful. Indeed, it can be entirely justified and even righteous, depending on the circumstances and *the way in which* the anger is handled and expressed:

²⁶Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not give the devil an opportunity.

Ephesians 4:26-27 (NASB)

The classic example in the Scriptures of righteous anger, or righteous indignation, is the occasion when Jesus drove the corrupt and irreverent money changers out of the Temple:

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; ¹⁶and he would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷And he taught, and said to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." ¹⁸And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching.

Mark 11:15-18 (RSV)

What Jesus did on that occasion was obviously not sinful. That has to be the case, because He never sinned in any way at all. The anger He showed was righteous. Those men were dishonouring God. Moreover, they were doing so in the Temple, of which Jesus was the rightful Lord. So, *He had every right to throw them out* and He was not over-stepping the mark or exceeding His proper authority.

Moreover, the *way in which He manifested His anger* was equally righteous. That is He never lost His *self-control*. Everything He did to the money changers was what He *intended* to do. That is He did not "lose His temper" or "go too far" or "lash out" or say things which he later regretted.

That is the essential difference between anger and rage. Anger is an emotion which is potentially righteous. It is capable of being felt by our 'new man' or 'spirit' or 'new nature'. (See Book Seven for a fuller explanation of these terms.) Our new man or human spirit, which is what we are meant to operate in, and through, is capable of feeling anger and of expressing it and acting upon it.

So, whilst ever we continue to operate solely in or through our new man/spirit we will do all of this in a righteous, godly, sinless manner. That's because our new man, i.e. our human spirit which is brought back to life when we are born again, is capable of feeling anger, but is *incapable of sin*.

However, if we are, instead, operating in, or through, our 'old man' or 'flesh' or 'sinful nature' or 'Adamic nature' (see Book Seven) then we will act sinfully and express or manifest our anger in a sinful or 'carnal' way. A person who is acting in that way will do the following kinds of things:

- a) raise their voice, or even shout
- b) lose their temper, i.e. lose their self-control
- c) lash out in words, or even physically
- d) say hurtful, wounding, insulting things which they may well regret later
- e) seek to get even with, or hit back at, the other person, i.e. as opposed to dealing firmly, but calmly, with the situation and simply doing what is appropriate and necessary, but no more

Perhaps it will assist if we look at some practical examples from my own past experience. If you are a police officer, as I was, and are dealing with an offender who has done something very wrong, you might feel a sense of anger at their conduct and its consequences. However, you must never allow that to affect the way you do your job. You must remain calm, measured and professional and not allow your interrogation of that prisoner to become intemperate. Neither can you ever let your judgment become clouded by your feelings.

Likewise, if you are a manager or proprietor dealing with a particularly nasty episode of misconduct, bullying or theft on the part of an employee, you could feel anger (in your spirit) but you must conduct the investigation and/or disciplinary hearing(s) *with complete self-control at all times*. I am not discussing hypothetical or theoretical situations here. I have had to do both of the above things on many occasions.

I am not saying that I always achieved it, but what I was aiming for was to do my job, get to the truth, and then take whatever action was justified by the facts. That could include prosecuting an offender, or sacking an employee, or perhaps giving a lesser sanction such as a warning, or suspending the person pending further enquiries etc.

In such situations it is absolutely essential that you maintain complete self-control throughout. I actually found that it helped if I deliberately lowered my voice and spoke more quietly and slowly than I would usually do. Then, if you decide to charge the person and recommend prosecution, or if you decide to sack them, you are making those decisions *while acting in, or through, your spirit, with the help of the Holy Spirit, rather than through your old man or flesh*.

The same considerations apply in all sorts of other situations, not just the ones described above. So, for example, you might need to take a faulty item back to a shop, or speak to a motorist who parks across your driveway, blocking your access. If so, your duty is to handle that situation with self-control, in and through your spirit, not your flesh. And you must avoid any intemperate speech or conduct.

Accordingly, we can, and sometimes must, handle situations which require us to make decisions about another person, or to confront them about their behaviour, but at the same time we can and must also:

- a) forgive them, in the narrow sense of not purporting to take Jesus' proper place as their ultimate Judge

- b) where appropriate, show mercy and grace to them, to the *extent* that it is right to do so
- c) possibly even go further than that and seek to make peace with them, be reconciled, resume trust and friendship etc, where those things are feasible and appropriate
- d) conduct ourselves temperately and with self-control, recognizing our own feelings, and even feeling anger where that is legitimate, but without any form of rage, railing or lashing out

Illegitimately judging other people brings God's judgment upon ourselves.

There is another good reason to forgive others. It is that when we judge other people (in the wrong sense of that word) we bring God's judgment upon ourselves. Moreover, He has said that He will use the same standards, or criteria, to judge us as we have used to judge others. So, if we are merciful and forgiving with others, then God will be merciful and forgiving with us. But if we are harsh, strict and unyielding, then He will be like that with us:

1"Do not judge so that you will not be judged. 2"For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.

Matthew 7:1-2 (NASB)

***"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
Matthew 5:7 (RSV)***

What if the wrongdoer is unrepentant and unconcerned?

For many of us, this is the hardest thing to bear - seeing the wrongdoer walking around, carefree and not even showing any concern, let alone repentance, for what He has done. He may even taunt us about it and laugh about the harm he did to us. That is much harder to handle than when the wrongdoer recognises the wrong he did and is sorry for it. In addition to the original wrong done to you, there is the fresh insult every day of seeing the wrongdoer's brazen face, knowing that he feels no remorse and that he seems to have got away with it, i.e. that there is no justice, or at least not at present.

Perhaps the police are refusing to deal with it. Or, the people around you, even in the church, may seem not to care about the wrong done to you. They may even be more sympathetic towards the wrongdoer than they are to you, as the victim. That is often the case. In these circumstance it is as if a fresh wound is created, or at least opened up, every day.

So, in addition to forgiving the original wrong, we also have to keep forgiving each fresh violation, day by day. That is very hard, but it is still possible, because what you are being commanded to do is actually quite narrow and is *entirely a matter of your will*, which is always under your control. It is not about your feelings or emotions, which you are not necessarily able to control.

Remember that what we are commanded to do is *basic* forgiveness, i.e. *narrowly defined*. Therefore it does not necessarily involve going any further than simply stepping aside, 'recusing yourself', and leaving everything, including any new offences caused by the wrongdoer's lack of remorse, to be judged by Jesus. It does not necessarily mean doing anything beyond that, or at least not to begin with. More could be required of us later.

So, whatever state our emotions might currently be in, we can always choose, purely as an exercise of our will, to step aside and leave the judging for Jesus to deal with. That basic act of forgiveness is all we are being required to do, until or unless God asks us to go further than that. Moreover, we are *always* capable of it. We just don't always choose to do it.

Dealing practically with the fresh violation you feel when you see that the wrongdoer is brass-faced and feels no shame

The same principles apply as with the original wrongdoing. So, along with the difficulties that come from the original wrong, you have the extra ordeal of facing the wrongdoer and seeing him, large as life. Perhaps he is even attending the same church as you, despite showing no apparent repentance. It may be that nobody thinks it matters, or is willing to confront him about it on your behalf.

Jesus is still the one who will judge these additional, ongoing offences. It is all going to be dealt with by Him, just as the original wrong will be. We can still step aside and leave each new violation to Him, in just the same way. We can hand it over to Jesus each day, tell Him how we feel, ask Him to deal with it and then go on to forgive the wrongdoer as a decision of our will. If need be, we can do this over and over again, as many times as it takes, *'even seventy times seven'*, as Jesus said.

That said, we also need to be realistic. So, if the wrongdoer's brass-faced attitude is offending you, why not consider altering your daily routines, or travel times, or the place where you sit, so as to avoid coming into any further contact with him, or at least minimising the contact? There is no reason why you shouldn't do that. It is not inconsistent with genuinely forgiving, and it may well be a big help.

But, if the avoidance of further contact isn't possible, for practical reasons, we just need to keep on forgiving. We should also ask God to help us to do so, and also to help us at an emotional level to deal with our feelings, even though those are not directly involved in the decision to forgive. They may not be what forgiveness is about, but they still matter to us, and they also matter to God. He created us with emotions and it is possible for us to have feelings, even very strong ones, without degenerating into unforgiveness, or into any other form of sin, as a result.

Forgiveness is not done for the benefit of the wrongdoer. Therefore, it does not require their repentance before we can forgive them (though it does help a lot)

We must remember this crucial point, which may help some people who are struggling to forgive. It is that we do not forgive people for *their* sake, so that they can benefit. It is done, primarily, for *our own* benefit. So, it is not something we are doing to help the wrongdoer. Furthermore, it does not require his repentance as a precondition. It is done to help ourselves and also, above all, to obey God.

The wrongdoer may also benefit indirectly from our forgiveness, provided he repents and is willing to receive forgiveness from you and from God. But, other than that, he will not usually benefit and he is not to be seen as the focal point of the situation, either from your perspective or God's. *It is not about the wrongdoer* and it is not being done for his sake.

On the contrary, his indifference to our forgiveness, and to any mercy or grace that we show to him, will probably only make his own eventual judgment a stricter one. So, when we struggle to forgive, we need to keep reminding ourselves that it is something we are trying to do *for our own benefit*. It is for the sake of our own health, both emotional and physical, and also to protect ourselves spiritually. Above all, though, it is *an issue of obedience*.

Don't allow the wrongdoer to harm you even further by preventing you from forgiving

Given all these factors, and there are some more that we shall look at below, we must not allow the wrongdoer's unrepentant attitude to prevent us from achieving forgiveness. That would be to allow the wrongdoer to compound the original wrong which he did. So, do not allow anybody to have so much influence over you that they can determine whether, or when, you forgive them.

It is not up to them. It is up to you, because your forgiveness of them is primarily being done for your benefit, not theirs. And, of course, it is being done in order to obey God's command. Therefore you must not allow anybody else to be in control of whether or not you obey God. So, be in sole control of your own life. Don't allow the wrongdoer to retain any ongoing power or influence over you, either in this area, or in any other. Of course, this is much easier said than done, but it still remains the right thing to aim for.

How to actually forgive, in practical terms

Where forgiveness is proving to be difficult, you would always be well advised to begin with prayer. You might find that although basic forgiveness is a decision made by your will, you somehow feel unable to achieve forgiveness on your own, solely by willpower. The very fact that it can be difficult is what makes it essential to seek God's help. Without Him we may not always be able to bring ourselves to do it. Moreover, we may not be able to overcome the feelings of bitterness, or even rage, that we might be experiencing.

So, begin by telling God exactly how you feel, without any pretence and without hiding anything, because He knows anyway. The reason for telling Him is not so that He can be better informed. It is so that *you* can recognise the reality of your position and begin to seek His help.

God knows all about your feelings anyway, but it will help you if you express it all to Him, preferably out loud. It will also help you to be real and to identify exactly what the wrong is, or at least what you believe it to be. It may also help to spell out to yourself exactly what it is that you are seeking to achieve. For example, are you still trying to get to the stage of even basic forgiveness, where you 'recuse yourself' and hand the case over to Jesus?

It could be that you are struggling to get rid of intense feelings of bitterness, which are overwhelming you? Or it could be that you have got beyond that stage and are now seeking for the grace to go further and become capable of being reconciled with the wrongdoer, or of working alongside him again.

If you spell all of this out, purely for your own sake, it will help you to define your current position and your objectives more clearly. It will also help you to avoid confusing yourself about what your duty is and what exactly it is that you are struggling to achieve. It could be that setting this out, in plain words will cause you to realise that you are trying to go too far too fast and that you are actually going beyond what Jesus has commanded you to do.

Ideally, write it all down on a piece of paper, so that you can see your own thinking and force any error or confusion to come to the surface. It will probably be staring up at you from the page. Then, you will be better placed to ask God to give you the ability to forgive the wrong, at least in basic terms, or even to go further than that, if that seems appropriate.

It may be that you feel so low, and so damaged by the actions or words of the wrongdoer, that you do not even feel capable of praying for the ability to forgive them. If so, go back a stage. Ask God to help you even to be "*willing to be willing*". God is totally realistic about us. He knows that we are frail, weak and sinful.

He also knows our difficulties in the area of forgiveness, because He is our Creator and He made our emotions as a valid and essential part of us. He created us with emotions because we need them, but also because He has emotions Himself and we are made in His image and likeness. So, the point is that God really does understand that we *feel* things, as well as merely *thinking or deciding* and He knows that we find those feelings hard to handle at times.

In addition to that, Jesus was, and still is, a man. Therefore He knows exactly how you feel from first-hand experience. He felt very similar feelings Himself. The difference is that when He felt violated or traumatised He reacted in a totally *sinless* way, whereas we usually don't. So, for all those reasons, He really does understand you, and He also sympathises. He will therefore honour an honest prayer, perhaps along the following lines:

"The truth is I'm not yet willing to forgive, even in the narrow, basic sense of the word. However, I want to be obedient so I want to get to a place where I could become willing to do so. Therefore, please help me to change my heart attitude, so as to become willing to forgive person X".

God strongly desires to answer a sincere and unpretentious prayer like that and He will readily respond to it by changing you on the inside and by giving you the grace you need to take difficult decisions and steps. Therefore pray like that, and *continue doing so*, for as long as it takes.

Pray directly for the wrongdoer himself. In doing so, you are showing grace towards them and you will therefore receive God's grace in return. Plus it will soften your own heart.

Another very helpful approach, which can help to get you to the place where you become capable of forgiving, or even to be *willing to be willing* to do so, is just to begin to pray in general terms for the overall benefit of the person who has wronged you. It is possible to do this *as a sheer exercise of your will*, before you have managed to forgive them at all, even in the narrow sense. It is something which you can *make yourself do*, even while your emotions are very raw.

For example, pray for God to bless the wrongdoer, and their family and to bring him to a place of repentance and salvation. Also you could ask *God* to forgive the wrongdoer, even if *you* do not yet feel able to forgive him yourself. There is nothing hypocritical about that. It is good preliminary ground-work and will help to make your own forgiveness of the wrongdoer achievable.

The point is you cannot control how you *feel*, but you can control what you *say and do*. Thus you can pray like this for the general benefit of the person who has harmed you, even if you are still unable to forgive them and/or if you keep falling back into unforgiveness and bitterness. If you pray for the person who has wronged you, or is still wronging you, then it has the following beneficial results:

- a) *It changes you on the inside*. It also gradually alters your attitude to the wrongdoer.
- b) It also brings *emotional healing* such that, eventually, it will bring you up to a place where you can manage to forgive.
- c) *It changes the way God deals with you*. When God sees you praying for the wrongdoer and showing such mercy and grace towards him, then God will show equivalent mercy and grace towards you, as we saw above.

God is also particularly pleased when He sees us doing something from sheer obedience, as an exercise of our will, even when we do not feel like doing it. He knows how we feel inside. Therefore, that sacrifice on our part makes our obedience all the more precious to God.

Accordingly, one can see that praying for one's enemies and persecutors is not idealistic, unrealistic or silly. It is hard-headed common sense and it is entirely in your own interests to do it. In short, if you show grace towards others, you will receive God's grace towards you in return. That is a certainty. Part of that grace will be that He will give you the ability to forgive others in circumstances where you are currently struggling to do it.

Forgiveness is primarily something we *do* rather than something we *feel*

Many people struggle and get confused because they don't realise, or they keep forgetting, that forgiveness is primarily something we *do*, not something we *feel*. To a very large extent, feelings follow actions. Thus, merely by the physical act of *speaking the words* of forgiveness and doing tangible things such as praying for the wrongdoer, *your feelings will eventually come into line with what you are saying and doing*.

It is important to remember this when you feel you just can't bring yourself to forgive someone, or where the bitterness won't go away. If you, nonetheless, force yourself to *speak out the words of forgiveness* and to *pray for the wrongdoer*, you will find that your feelings towards him will gradually alter. What was initially unthinkable will start to become thinkable. After that, it will become possible and, eventually, it will be achieved.

If you don't realise that forgiveness is sometimes only possible if it is done in *stages*, and that it is primarily a *decision, not a feeling*, you could waste years of your life just waiting forlornly for your feelings to change. But they won't. If anything, the bitterness usually gets more intense as time goes by.

So, it is a major error to imagine that you must *feel* like forgiving before you can actually forgive. That is not true. The truth is that most of us won't ever *feel like* forgiving. Why would we? It doesn't work that way.

We are sinners, with a flesh nature, to which forgiving others does not come naturally. Moreover, we are still living in this sinful world, surrounded by other sinners who don't believe in forgiveness either. We are not yet glorified, or even fully sanctified, so why should we expect forgiveness to be easy or to be something that we would ever 'want' to do. It's not a question of *wanting* to forgive, but of *choosing* to do so. That choice need not have anything to do with our feelings.

Ask God to help you to *see your own faults too*, and even how you may have *contributed to the wrong that was done to you*

Another very helpful thing to do is to ask God to *reveal to us what our own faults and sins are*. All of us tend to under-estimate our own sinfulness. We don't realise the degree to which, and the ways in which, we have, ourselves, wronged God and wronged others. Sometimes (not always) the truth is that we were, in some way or another, at least partly to blame for the wrong that was done to us. We may even have provoked it in some way that we did not realise or have forgotten about.

We can therefore be greatly helped if we ask God to bring our own faults to the surface and to expose them. That revelation will help us to be able to forgive the wrongdoer, because we will realise, all the more clearly, how we are also a wrongdoer. We may even see that we have partly caused, or contributed to, the wrong that was done to us. Or we might discover that we have wronged others in similar ways.

Regrettably, the truth is that most of us are largely blind to our own faults. We either don't see them properly or we don't see them at all. Sometimes, (not always) we may be operating hypocritically, wrestling with our inability to forgive person X whilst being oblivious to the damage *we* have done to him and/or to someone else, perhaps person Y or Z. If we could see the incident that hurt us from the perspectives of any or all of those others, then our own grievance may suddenly appear different and less one-sided.

This is not always true, but it often is. I can think of one situation I know of where Person A was speaking of the way they had been mistreated by Person B. Those who heard this account, and who

knew the background facts, were well aware that Person A was seriously deluded. They were convinced that they had "*done nothing wrong*", but we all knew that they had.

It possibly wasn't our place to say so, but if Person A had asked God, He would have revealed the fuller picture to them. That would have enabled them to see how, in fact, the mess they were in was partly caused by *their own* selfishness, pride, stubbornness etc. What's more, if Person A had really wanted to know the truth, they could have asked any of us and said:

"Tell me the truth - did I contribute to the problem in any way with wrong behaviour or wrong attitudes of my own?"

Had Person A done that, we could have explained things to them gently. That would have made it so much easier for them to forgive the wrong (a real one) which had been done to them by the other person. They would have seen the whole episode more clearly and fairly and in its proper context.

When and how does God judge and punish?

One day Jesus will judge all of us, either at the Judgment Seat of Christ or at the Great White Throne. However, He will also judge wrongdoers in various other preliminary ways, long before those final Judgments occur. God uses human governments to judge wrongdoers here and now. He also uses the police, lawyers, judges, magistrates, prisons, civil courts, local councils etc etc. All of these bodies, are used by God to punish wrongdoers, albeit only to a limited extent. God puts them in place for that very purpose, to maintain order, restrain crime and punish the wicked, pending the final Day of Judgment.

These organisations are all God's agents. That's why we are commanded to pray for them, and all the more so in countries where those institutions are inefficient or even corrupt. They are doing God's work, or at least they are meant to be, even if they don't realise it. Therefore, where they exist, we can allow God to use institutions like the police or civil courts to deal with the person who has wronged us, even ahead of the final Judgment. That is not inconsistent with our forgiving them.

So, we could go to the police about a crime, or even sue someone, but still genuinely forgive them. There is not necessarily a contradiction in any of that. Sometimes it's the very fact that we can hand it all over to the police, or to a court, that makes it possible for us to forgive the wrongdoer. It brings justice forward, at least in part, so that we don't always have to wait to the very end of this age in order to be vindicated or to see justice done.

I emphasise this because some people think that if they do go to the police or take part in a civil case, as the Claimant or as a witness, then that must mean they are not properly forgiving the other person. That could be true, in some situations, but it is not necessarily so in all cases. On the contrary, forgiveness involves handing things over to God to deal with. Therefore that can, sometimes, also include handing it over to God to deal with *right now* by making use of the very institutions which He has set up to punish people on His behalf.

Those courts or prisons etc are a part of Jesus' role as Judge of the world. They are a small foretaste of what the final Judgments are going to be like. He will conduct those final hearings Himself, in person. But for now, Jesus chooses to operate, in part, through various human agencies. So a Christian need not feel precluded from using those. Jesus gave those institutions to us for our benefit, and *we are meant to use them*, where it is appropriate.

Admittedly, it is not always right to go to the police or to lawyers. Much will depend on your real motives and heart attitude. But it may well be right to go to those people for help. Doing so is not necessarily inconsistent with the idea of forgiving the wrongdoer and does not necessarily mean that you are disobeying God or being vindictive.

One important question to ask yourself is whether you are motivated by vindictiveness or by a genuine wish to seek for justice. It may not always be easy for you to tell what your own motives are. You may need the guidance of others to help you decide whether or not to take a matter to the police, or to pursue a civil claim, or just to let the matter drop. There is no obviously right answer, which is always appropriate. It depends on all sorts of factors and circumstances.

Handing things over to be judged by God because there are no human courts or institutions which we can go to

Sometimes there is no human court that we can go to. The wrong done to us may not even be a crime. Thus it may be something that the police cannot help us with. If so, we may need to just hand the situation over to God and *ask Him to decide who is right* and to deal with any wrong done to us. David adopted that approach in his dealings with King Saul who was persecuting him maliciously:

May the LORD therefore be judge, and give sentence between me and you, and see to it, and plead my cause, and deliver me from your hand."

1 Samuel 24:15 (RSV)

David could not appeal to the King for help or justice, because the man persecuting him *was the King himself*. So he trusted in God to judge who was right and to do justice in their dispute. However, even while doing that, David refused to hit back at King Saul for himself, or to kill him. Saul recognised that fact and knew that it made David a better man than he was:

¹⁷He said to David, "You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. ¹⁸And you have declared this day how you have dealt well with me, in that you did not kill me when the LORD put me into your hands. ¹⁹For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him go away safe? So may the LORD reward you with good for what you have done to me this day. ²⁰And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. ²¹Swear to me therefore by the LORD that you will not cut off my descendants after me, and that you will not destroy my name out of my father's house." ²²And David swore this to Saul. Then Saul went home; but David and his men went up to the stronghold.

1 Samuel 24:17-22 (RSV)

What about disputes with fellow Christians?

What we have been looking at has mainly been about disputes with *unbelievers*. But what if the wrongdoer is a *Christian* or claims to be? Apostle Paul tells us not to bring law suits against fellow Christians but, instead, to seek to resolve matters *via the local church*. Let's look firstly at what Paul says:

¹Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbour, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints? ²Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? ³Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more matters of this life? ⁴So if you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? ⁵I say this to your shame Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, ⁶but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers? ⁷Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?

1 Corinthians 6:1-7 (NASB)

Apostle Paul is referring to situations *within* the very carnal church at Corinth. Some church members at Corinth were taking each other to the world's courts to deal with grievances, rather than resolving them internally within the local church. Paul disapproves of this and urges them not to engage in litigation with fellow Christians. Such disputes should be resolved *within the church*. That is the biblical way. It would be good for us if Christians did handle disputes that way.

However, the problem is that what we have come to know as church is very different from what used to happen in the first century. See Book Eight for more detail on what a real biblical church is meant to be like. It differed from what most churches do today in just about every conceivable way.

If we are to resolve disputes within a church, rather than via secular courts, it would require us firstly to have a *proper, biblically structured church*. Then it would be well placed to do all of the things it is meant to do. Sadly, we have very few biblical churches, i.e. *of the type that existed in the book of Acts* and for the first three centuries afterwards.

Regrettably, the man-made, traditional, hierarchical, clergy-orientated church structure which is in operation in most churches today prevents us even attempting to do things in the correct, biblical way. The structure itself makes it all impossible. Thus, whereas apostle Paul (and Jesus) envisaged such disputes being resolved *within the local church*, there are very few churches today which are set up in such a way as to make any of that possible, or which would even have the courage to attempt it.

For most Christians today, the idea of taking a dispute to the local church for it to be resolved there is wholly unrealistic. It would probably not be dealt with at all and, if it was even attempted, it would only be fudged or swept under the carpet. In 99% of churches that I know of the leaders would be horrified if anybody did what Paul instructed us to do. Most leaders would do anything they could to avoid tackling such disputes and they would not permit you to bring a matter to the whole church.

Nevertheless, let's look at what Jesus says about how we are *meant* to resolve conflict in the church:

¹⁵"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶"But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. ¹⁷"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Matthew 18:15-17 (NASB)

The Matthew chapter 18 procedure

This is Jesus speaking of how a dispute *should* be dealt with, as between two *genuine* Christians, not between two unbelievers, or even a Christian and an unbeliever. So, the first problem, before we even get to examining the problems caused by unbiblical church structure, is that it would be futile to expect this procedure to work *unless all the parties are real Christians*. If even one party is just a worldly, lukewarm, unrepentant 'churchgoer', it almost certainly wouldn't work.

Jesus speaks of dispute resolution as a progression, taking place in stages. Let's therefore look at the four stages that are involved in handling a dispute biblically. Then we can be aware of what we all ought to be doing, even if current church structures and practices make it virtually impossible to operate in that way. There may yet be a day when biblical church structure will be reintroduced. If so, the Matthew 18 approach to resolving conflict would become possible again. Until then, I don't think it is. Even so, here is what we are *supposed* to do:

- a) The offended/wronged Christian goes to see the Christian whom he believes is the wrongdoer. It is to be handled *privately, one to one*, and face to face. The innocent party then explains what the

sin is. Hopefully, the one who has done wrong will listen, repent and apologise. If so, the matter is resolved quickly and privately.

- b) If the wrongdoer will not listen, or will not respond constructively, then the wronged Christian should go back to see the wrongdoer again. But this time he is to *take some witnesses with him*. Then he is to try again to discuss the offence, hopefully with more success. The witnesses can listen to both parties and may also be able to help to mediate between them. If that doesn't work, then the witnesses can at least try to decide what the real position is. They can also attempt to get one, or both, parties to see what they did wrong.
- c) If that, in turn, fails, then the Christian who believes he has been wronged is to take the matter before the *whole local church*. This further escalation means that the dispute is now being openly discussed between *all the members of the local church*. However, if we want to see this correctly, as it was in Paul's day, we must not visualise a church of hundreds of people meeting in a big, formal building. That isn't biblical. Picture instead a small group of 20-70 people, meeting in a house or barn or school hall, all of whom know each other intimately. That is the correct biblical context in which this "Matthew 18 procedure" for resolving disputes is to be conducted. More to the point, it is the only context in which it is likely to be *effective*.
- d) If even that fails, then the local church should no longer consider the wrongdoer to be a part of them. In short, the wrongdoer is to be *expelled*. This is difficult for us to understand today unless we correctly visualise the kind of church structure Jesus was speaking of. Indeed, expelling a person from a church, at least in Great Britain, is technically and legally difficult. That is because churches which wish to be registered as charities, and thus receive tax relief and other advantages, must make their services "*open to the public*". Therefore, so far as the law is concerned, nobody can actually be prevented from attending public worship meetings.

That would not be the case if our churches today met in homes or barns or farm outbuildings, as they did in the first century. Then the provisions of Matthew 18 would be workable. The point is that what the New Testament means by a church is very different from what most of us now think of as a church. When most of us think of a church we tend to see, in our mind's eye, something which:

- i) is big in numbers and meets in a large and formal building. Therefore it is very far from being a suitable setting in which to discuss a *private dispute* between two individuals.
- ii) has at least one paid senior leader and perhaps several assistant paid leaders. Each of these has a *church-based career*, which would be put at risk if they were to upset people. Thus they frequently have too many *vested interests* at stake to be able to operate fearlessly and honestly.
- iii) is full of cautious, fearful, self-centered people, such that disputes are *not faced up to* and addressed. Instead disputes are generally swept under the carpet and dodged.
- iv) As we have seen, is a registered charity, for tax purposes, and therefore that church *can't prevent a person from attending* its public services, even if it wanted to, which it probably wouldn't.

Accordingly, given the unbiblical way in which most churches are structured today, the procedures commanded by Jesus are *not possible to implement*. It is pretty much as simple as that. The context and setting that we have today are not what Jesus was referring to.

A wronged believer might seek to carry out Jesus' commands, but he will not get very far. The structure of most churches *will not allow him* to do what Jesus said. Even if he tried it, he would be thwarted by the system itself and by the leaders.

I speak from personal experience of this. Some years ago I went to see the leader of the church I was then part of. I was actually the Chairman of the Trustees of that church and he was the main full time,

paid leader. I had become increasingly concerned about the way he was operating. He was getting a well-deserved reputation within the town for being worldly, carnal and dishonest.

However, I got absolutely nowhere in trying to raise these issues. The system obstructed me instead of helping me. My own experience on that occasion of attempting each of the stages of Matthew 18 was as follows:

a) Stage One

When I spoke to the leader privately, one to one, he rejected what I had to say to him, even though it was all true and fully documented. Instead of facing the real issues, he attacked me for raising them. He then set about telling lies about me within the church to prevent me from being able to take matters any further.

He deliberately '*got in first*' to stop me being listened to or believed by other people. He did it all very craftily, partly because he was so dishonest, but also because he had had a lot of practice at handling such complaints and challenges. He had already had substantial previous experience at doing this with others who had tried to complain before.

b) Stage Two

I saw the leader him again, this time with two witnesses present. But he lied brazenly, in front of them, about what was happening. Amazingly, when the two witnesses left, he then openly admitted to me that he had been lying to them about it. When I asked *why* he had lied to them, he just shrugged his shoulders and said: "*I had to defend myself*".

Unfortunately, the two witnesses were of no use at all. They were concerned only with trying to smooth things over and were not sufficiently robust or vigorous. Indeed, they weren't robust at all, as the leader knew very well. If they had been, he would never have allowed them to get involved. So, they did not actually *want* to tackle anything, for fear that it would create some unpleasantness or controversy for themselves. Thus they may as well not have been there at all.

c) Stage Three

I wasn't even permitted to implement stage three and bring it to the whole church (about 200 people). The leadership team didn't want me to, despite it being commanded in Matthew 18. I now know why. Some of them were behaving very carnally and dishonestly themselves. They didn't, therefore, want any of these facts about the leader, or themselves, to come out.

Had such information been allowed to come out to the membership, a lot of people, who already had growing concerns of their own, would have been able to see the wider picture. They would have 'joined the dots together' and realised that there was a consistent pattern of behaviour and of covering things up. The leaders were not willing to risk any of that becoming known.

I was by no means the first to tackle that leader. There had been several people beforehand with similar concerns. Many had already left the church quietly in the past, without any of the other members getting to know why they had left or the matters which they had raised before leaving. Instead, on each occasion, false explanations for these departures were given out by the leader. They always seemed to make sense. He found a way, every time, to put the blame on those who had left and the members always believed him.

Moreover, the leaders also used to make earnest sounding pleas to the remaining members not to '*gossip*' or not to '*believe anything said about an elder*' etc. It was all said very insincerely, just to stop people asking questions, and it worked. These deliberate lies and tactics prevented the wider membership from believing, or even speaking to, those who had expressed concerns. I didn't realise

any of this till later. Then, when my turn came, I thought I was the first, and only, one to have any concerns. So did all the others who had tried to tackle the leader before I did.

d) Stage Four

The leaders had already skipped stage three, and they completely avoided stage four as well. The senior leader remained a member of the church and he even continued as the leader. Nothing was done to confront him or to expose him. Instead of the elders discussing his misconduct with the whole membership of the church, the leader himself spoke to two leaders of separate churches in the town. They were both his friends. He then arranged for them to see me to discuss my concerns or, more accurately, to pacify me and get me to be quiet.

Just like the two people from within the church who had acted as witnesses/mediators, these two external leaders had *no real wish to deal with anything*. They were not willing to do anything which might cause them to get their hands dirty or to have to confront the leader about any of his behaviour. All they wanted was to "*resolve matters*".

However, by that they just meant to *sweep it all under the carpet* and stop it from being spoken about any longer. There was not just a lack of appetite to tackle the real issues. They were absolutely determined not to tackle any of it, and to prevent me from doing so either.

In their own way, these two external leaders were kindly people. To a certain extent they meant well, in a weak and misguided sort of way. But they were never going to be willing to grasp any nettles or tackle anything head on. Their only aim was to calm things down.

Above all, they wanted to protect the interests, and the career, of the leader, no matter what he may have done. It was more like trade unionism, where a couple of shop stewards are protecting a fellow shop steward, regardless of whether he is right or wrong.

I actually put that point to one of the external leaders, i.e. that they were acting like a trade union for leaders, rather than as a church. He smiled nervously and agreed with me, but then shrugged, as if to say "*What else can we do? We've got to stick together*". I had put my finger right on the truth and he couldn't deny it.

I was so naive at that time that all of this deceit, evasion and scheming was shocking to me. I could hardly bring myself to believe that leaders in our own church, and other churches, could act so wrongly, and without any apparent concern about what Jesus thought of them. They seemed to have no fear of God and no wish to do what Jesus said in Matthew 18.

Neither did they want to cooperate with me to enable me to do what Jesus said. Had I not been such an assertive and professionally qualified person, I would never have even got past stage one. It was exceptional to have got that far. Nobody before me had ever done so.

Many others had tried to tackle this leader before me and they had achieved even less than I did. In the end it had a very sad ending. The leader wasn't able to keep up appearances much longer after his clash with me. Within a year or so he had totally given up church leadership, left his wife, and found another woman. Also one of the other members of the senior leadership team left his wife as well. He was the main one who had opposed me and who had so stridently obstructed my questions about the leader.

It also came out later that he too had been having an affair, for a long time, even while he was on the senior leadership team. It then made sense as to why that man had shouted me down when I had raised the issue of the senior leader's carnal lifestyle. It was all too close to home for him and he didn't want to allow this Matthew 18 process to lead to any questions being asked about himself.

So, all the attempts that various church leaders had made over many years, to cover things up achieved nothing good. It just caused more damage and even more people got hurt. It would be good if I could say that my experience was exceptional and that this kind of thing doesn't happen elsewhere, or to anybody else. But I can't say that. It is actually close to being the norm. I have since come to learn, from many other people, that they have had very similar experiences all over the country. It is by no means a merely local problem.

In fact, several years later, I left another church. I did so because it came to light that that leader's character was also seriously flawed. His behaviour was controlling, manipulative and deceptive. This time, once I realised what was going on, I did not even attempt to implement the Matthew 18 procedure. I took no steps to do anything about it, other than to telephone the deputy leader of the church to say that we were leaving. I also wrote a private letter to the leader, and his deputy, explaining my concerns, but it got me absolutely nowhere.

The leader just sent back a brazen and evasive reply ignoring all my points. The deputy leader of that church did nothing to assist either. He just got annoyed with me for being "*unhelpful*" and for writing a "*critical letter*", even though it was private and was sent only to the leader and to him. Again, they both saw *the person who was raising the concerns as being the problem*, not the person about whom those concerns were being expressed. That is a very typical response.

On this second occasion I largely kept out of it, having learned my lesson the previous time. However, three other families who were members of that second church made a valiant attempt to deal with the issues. It lead, curiously, to two leaders from another local church being invited in, supposedly to "mediate". It was all remarkably similar to what had happened in my own case, some years earlier.

In the same way as before, all that these two external "*mediators*" wanted to achieve was to *smooth things over and to get people to be quiet*. Again, there was no attempt to genuinely address any of the character issues, or behavioural problems, in the life of that leader. This second episode happened years later, in a different church, and in a different town. Yet, the techniques, used and the attitudes and approach adopted were all startlingly familiar.

I have set out the brief facts of those two separate church disputes for two reasons:

- a) to enable me to explain the issues of forgiveness which arose out of it, i.e. my own need to forgive the leaders who had wronged me, plus the other leaders. Their half-hearted intervention had served only to cover things up. They obstructed the proper Matthew 18 process, rather than helping to implement it.
- b) to consider why it is so difficult even to discuss, let alone resolve, disputes within a church. If it isn't operating in a biblical way then genuine, meaningful attempts to deal with disputes between Christians are usually impossible. The unbiblical structure, and the worldly and carnal model of leadership, which has now become the norm, will not permit it. Moreover, that obstruction is generally deliberate, not accidental. Allowing such things to be openly discussed and dealt with within a church is too dangerous in their view. Far too much is at stake for them personally, in terms of careers, salaries, houses and pensions. Therefore they simply don't let it happen.

My experiences of reaching a place of being able to forgive abusive and dishonest church leaders

After the futile experience of trying to address issues within the first church, both my wife and I were traumatised, and far more so than we realised at the time. This emotional reaction came from several factors which we experienced:

- a) other church members avoiding us and disapproving of us, without ever asking us any questions, or checking anything with us. They simply believed everything that the leaders told them, as I had previously done myself, when other people had left the church.
- b) being undermined and lied about by the elders, so as to harm our reputation and prevent people listening to us.
- c) being deliberately obstructed by other leaders within our own church, so as to prevent the Matthew 18 procedure from being used effectively.
- d) being betrayed and abused by the senior leader and other leaders within that church.
- e) being let down by the external leaders from other churches in the town. They had supposedly been brought in to investigate matters, but never had any genuine intention of actually doing so. Their real aim was only to smooth things over, not to grasp any nettle or confront any person or issue. They saw me and my wife as dispensable and viewed our departure as preferable to allowing a scandal to come to light. Therefore they did nothing at all to defend us. They sought only to defend the leader's career, and to preserve only his reputation, not ours.
- f) being effectively driven out of our own church, where we had been for seven years, and had many genuine friendships, simply for having tried to address our (valid) concerns in a biblical way.
- g) being lied about by the senior leader

It was all very painful and we took far longer to get over it than I ever expected. Our initial reaction was to want to speak at length to anybody who would listen and to show how justified we were and how we had been wronged. But it did no good. It was a futile waste of time and energy.

People just weren't interested. At any rate, they didn't want to get involved or to rock the boat, especially after seeing what had happened to us for speaking out. They basically didn't seem to mind whether the leadership was corrupt or not, provided they could have a quiet life. Of course, the real problem was that we were operating outside of the framework Jesus laid down in Matthew 18. So, all of our speaking about it was unproductive. It achieved nothing other than us letting off steam.

That said, it may actually have created more trauma for us when we realised that the people to whom we thought we could turn weren't interested. They had no wish to help us. What I found most hurtful was the willingness of so many people to believe any lie told about us. They never questioned any of it, or checked any of it with us. I suppose that was partly because the lies were coming directly from the mouth of the leader. They assumed that what he was saying must, therefore, be true. Even so, it wounded us badly and we felt violated.

It took us about three years for our emotions to calm down. That isn't unusual. I have noticed from speaking to others that that's how long such things usually seem to take, especially when there is no proper biblical structure in place. What made it worse was that once we left the first church, which we'd been in for seven years, we found it impossible to find any other good church to go to. That was partly because our own eyes had been opened. We therefore went from one extreme to the other. Having been absurdly naive and trusting, we then became very wary of other church leaders, even the better ones.

Sadly, that wariness was not solely based on our imaginations. On the whole, it was actually well-founded. Once God had opened our eyes to this problem within the churches, we saw falseness, ambition, pride, domination, control and manipulation almost everywhere we went. It seems that such features are now widespread among much of the leadership of churches in Great Britain.

That is partly due to the carnal condition of the churches and their leaders, but also the institutional and hierarchical nature of church structure. For many men, church leadership has become a career rather than a ministry. That is why so many of them are *hirelings* rather than shepherds.

All in all, it meant we couldn't settle in any local church for some years, until we had calmed down from the emotional trauma of the experience. When the second crisis came and we left another church for similar reasons, we suffered much less hurt. But that was only because while we were in that church we had remained at a distance, due to our wariness. We didn't allow the leaders of that second church to get close enough to us to do much harm. As it turned out, that was a wise and fully justified policy.

Three other couples we knew did get badly hurt, as we had been earlier, because they made a futile, and very naïve, attempt to tackle the issues. But we avoided it the second time. We just left quietly, without trying to deal with any of it. We knew that those three couples would be unsuccessful, and that the leader would not listen to them, or feel any remorse. Sadly, that proved to be the case.

As for dealing with the need for forgiveness from both these episodes, we just had to work it all out by ourselves. Time gradually helped to deal with the wounds. We also learned how to hand the whole dispute over to God for Him to deal with it all. Thus, we no longer felt the need to talk about it or to prove our innocence to everybody.

We also learned how to pray *for* all the leaders concerned. We genuinely prayed for God to bless, restore and rebuild the ministries of the leaders who had lied about us. We also asked Him to forgive them, rather than judge them, and *to hold nothing against them on our account*. It helped us to pray in those ways and it may, perhaps, have helped them too.

Should a Christian ever sue a fellow believer in a civil court or tribunal?

As we saw earlier, apostle Paul made a powerful statement about this in his first letter to the Corinthians. On the face of it, what he says seems quite clear and conclusive:

¹ When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? ² Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³ Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! ⁴ So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? ⁵ I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, ⁶ but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? ⁷ To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? ⁸ But you yourselves wrong and defraud--even your own brothers!

1 Corinthians 6:1-8 (ESV)

Paul is effectively saying that if two genuine Christians, both of whom are “*brothers*”, are in a genuine, biblical church, then they should not sue each other. Instead, they should follow the Matthew Chapter 18 procedure which was laid down by Jesus, as set out above. The point is that if a church is led in a biblical way, by proper elders, who take their responsibilities seriously, then this approach can succeed, because real and meaningful *discipline* will result for the wrongdoer.

Moreover, there will be scope for real *vindication*, and perhaps even genuine *redress*, for the wronged party. The dispute will be tackled on an increasingly open basis, until eventually it is heard by the whole local church. Then, if the wrongdoer will not repent and put things right, he may be expelled from the church. *To a real believer, in a biblical church, that sanction would matter*. It would create a real and meaningful incentive to operate honestly and properly.

When Paul tells us not to sue fellow believers, I believe he means when *both are real Christians* and members of a *biblical church*, which is *capable* of resolving disputes. The problem today is that virtually none of the conditions which apostle Paul assumed to exist are actually applicable in our churches. Most or all of the necessary features are missing or inapplicable:

- a) There are many non-Christians who are long standing members of churches, despite the fact that they are not genuinely ‘regenerate’. They may not necessarily be repentant and may not even genuinely believe. Many are just ‘churchgoers’, i.e ‘religious’ people. They like the liturgy, tradition or culture of church, but they aren’t real Christians and they aren’t born again.
- b) The churches as a whole are not biblical (see Book Eight). Most are led by one man, who is paid, and views himself as belonging to a special class called ‘clergy’, rather than being led by a group of unpaid ‘elders’.
- c) They are not small groups meeting in a house with 20-70 people, who know each other intimately. Most churches meet in specially designed buildings with perhaps hundreds of people, who don’t know each other well, or even at all. Many people who attend churches, even those who go regularly, do not even know the names of many of the others there, let alone know them intimately, so that they can accurately assess the true nature of their characters.
- d) Instead of existing to preach the authentic gospel and make genuine disciples, most churches today (in the West) exist for other purposes. Church leadership is seen as a career by many leaders. If so, their main aim is to keep the church going, remain firmly in control, avoid controversy, and preserve their own salary and pension. That may sound cynical, but it is true far too much of the time, even for many of those men who began their ministries with high ideals.

The net effect of all this is that what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 and what Jesus said in Matthew 18: 15-17 cannot effectively operate in the churches that most of us attend today in the West. Can you imagine going to the leader of any church you know, whether he be a priest, vicar, or pastor, and telling him that one of the people in the church has wronged or defrauded you? He would be most unlikely to want to get involved.

But even if, somehow, he did, can you imagine him, if the dispute couldn’t be resolved, agreeing to take it in the end to the ‘whole church’? When and how could that ever be done? The members as a whole would not be willing or able to tackle it. More importantly, the leader(s) would not be willing to let them try in any event. That said, you wouldn’t even want it yourself, because you know it would be a shambles and that nothing useful would be achieved by it.

What would actually happen, 99% of the time, is that issues would be dodged, fudged, or somehow glossed over, so as to avoid confrontation or the need for any decision to be made. That has always been my experience when I have tried it, and I have heard the same from many others.

Accordingly, the idea of not suing a fellow Christian, even if you can be sure he really is one, is not realistic. Paul was speaking of a context and setting which he knew, and regularly experienced, in all the churches he founded or taught at. But that is something which we do not have in most churches today, at least in the West.

Therefore we have to operate according to the facts as they really are and the context which we are actually in. We may not be dealing with a genuine Christian. Moreover, we are probably not in a genuine biblical church, which meets in homes, where everyone is known, and which is led by biblical elders. Therefore the prohibition Paul spoke of would not apply, at least not in my view. That may be a revelation to some people. It may even set some people free, who have been harmed by others but wrongly believe they are forbidden by the Bible to do anything to seek redress.

I remember a problem I dealt with some years ago where a man in the church, who was a school teacher and worship leader, had loaned money to a young Christian woman who was getting married.

It was to help her to cover the costs of her wedding and was a significant sum to this man. Let's call him Samuel and the young woman Sybil.

Samuel came to me long after the wedding because Sybil and her new husband were doing nothing to repay him. He felt frustrated and betrayed, but he also felt trapped by apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6. He believed that that passage prevented him from doing anything to force Sybil, or her husband, to repay him. He asked for my advice, as both a Solicitor and a Christian. I advised him that we could, and should, take a firm line.

Therefore I wrote a strong letter to Sybil and her husband and said that if they did not repay him then I would take on Samuel's case and sue them myself, free of charge. It worked. They paid up immediately, which proved that their non-payment up to that point was not due to any inability to pay. They just didn't *want* to pay and they had actually relied on Samuel's sincerity in taking 1 Corinthians so seriously, and therefore not being willing to force them to repay.

They knew what the Bible said on this point and were making capital from it for themselves. They thought apostle Paul's letter put them in the clear, such that they would never have to pay up. I thought it was an absolutely appalling attitude, and a clear sign of apostasy. However, they miscalculated on that particular occasion.

What about reporting a fellow believer to the police or giving evidence against them in a criminal case?

The thing which Paul prohibited in 1 Corinthians 6 was *civil litigation* against fellow Christians. He wasn't speaking about how we should deal with *criminal offences* i.e. where a Christian has committed a *crime* and another Christian is a witness or the injured party. This is an entirely different type of situation. There is no reason, in principle, why a Christian should not report such a crime to the police or offer to be a witness. It is not what 1 Corinthians 6 is referring to.

The first point to make is that a *crime* is entirely different from a *civil dispute*. In the eyes of the law, in the United Kingdom, all crime is committed against the Queen. It is against the State in other jurisdictions. So, even the direct victim of a crime is technically only a witness. It is the Crown, or the State, which is actually pursuing the offender and which decides whether to prosecute. Realising that fact changes everything.

The prosecuting authorities, whoever they may be, have all been put there by God so as to keep order and punish wrongdoing. That is what God wants them to do, whether they, or those accused of crimes, are believers or not. If that is so, then it must follow that for a Christian to cooperate with the State in bringing a prosecution, is effectively to help God to pursue His objectives. That is the reason why He appointed rulers and authorities in every nation:

¹ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience

Romans 13: 1-5 (ESV)

I emphasise all that this because I once heard of a situation where a family were put under pressure by a church leader not to go to the police when one of their own children was sexually molested by a 17 year old boy from another family in the church. They were told that it would not be right to involve

the police in a “*church matter*”. Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians 6 were then quoted in support of that argument.

But the church leader was wrong. He had no right to counsel the parents of the victim in that way. They were free to go to the police. Indeed, arguably, they even had a duty to go, so as to protect other people’s children. At any rate, it was solely their decision, not the Pastor’s, as to whether or not to involve the police. It was a matter of conscience and depended on all the facts of the case and on the circumstances and personalities of the people concerned.

I once had to give evidence in a criminal prosecution against a fellow member of a church. The story began when I gave a job to a woman who went to a church of which I used to be a member. The job didn’t last long because she turned out to be lazy, dishonest and manipulative. So I got rid of her after only one month. She did not get through her probationary trial period.

To my surprise, some years later, I was contacted by the Benefits Agency. They questioned me about this lady and it turned out that she had been claiming unemployment benefits while working for me. In fact she denied that she had ever worked for me at all. She did the same with several other employers too. Therefore a number of managers from different companies were called as witnesses, together with me, to give evidence against her in a criminal trial.

Though I found it all very sad, I had no hesitation in signing a witness statement to testify against her. I also went to the trial, though she pleaded guilty at the last minute. Therefore I did not, in the end, need to give my evidence verbally. I believe it was my civic duty to give evidence for the prosecution. It would have been entirely wrong for me to fail to do so merely because she was a Christian, or claimed to be.

One important point to note is that I was not giving evidence for my own sake. If I had, then it would have been my own decision as to whether to do so. However, it was not my case at all. This was a prosecution by the state-appointed authorities, whom God had put in place to do justice. Christians are just as subject to their authority as anybody else is. Thus, we are all under the same duty to assist a prosecution by providing evidence, whether the accused is a Christian or not.

At any rate, we are *free* to do so. That said, one is not always *obliged* to go to the police to *report* every crime or offence that you believe may have been committed by a fellow believer. That would be to define the duty much too highly. It is a matter of conscience and requires wisdom, based on all the facts, to know whether to report a crime or not. The point is simply that one is not *prevented* from doing so by what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6.

By the way, I am speaking of the situation in a country, the United Kingdom, which has honest judges and a largely honest police force. I recognise that that is not the case in every country and that some people will need to bear in mind the quality and level of integrity of the police and legal system when deciding whether, and if so, to what extent, to go to them and/or cooperate with them. It may be futile, or even dangerous, to try to use any of those institutions.

What if you are in a position of authority yourself, but in a work context, rather than a church?

Let’s change the subject now and consider how you should act if you are, yourself, in a position of authority as a manager, or as the proprietor of a business. What if you have staff who have done wrong and need to be disciplined or even dismissed? How can that be handled, vigorously and effectively, whilst at the same time maintaining an attitude of forgiveness, and even mercy and grace, rather than one of seeking personal vengeance?

If you are in such a position of authority, then you are going to have to do what is necessary to fulfil your managerial duties. Sometimes that has to mean punishing or dismissing the person. Even so, you still need to do it with the *right attitude*.

On many occasions I have had to dismiss members of staff for various types of misconduct. Sadly, some of those were Christians, or claimed to be. When that occurs there can be a temptation to abuse one's position and to try to '*teach the person a lesson*' or to '*get even*'. That desire for revenge, if it arises, has to be firmly resisted. We must do what is needed, but we must *take no pleasure in it*. This is a difficulty which most of us never have to encounter, but it is a real problem for those who do have to face such issues.

Most managers make the opposite mistake of dodging the confrontation and doing nothing about the misconduct. A minority may go the other way and tackle wrongdoers, but in a vengeful, abusive way, such that they can become part of the problem themselves due to their carnal response. To achieve a balance, whereby you act decisively and firmly, and yet without being vengeful or abusing your own position, is surprisingly hard. Therefore it's rare for managers even to attempt it, let alone succeed in it

Another problem that one encounters in management is the giving of references for former staff. If you have had to discipline, or even dismiss, an employee and then they get offered a job elsewhere, even years later, you will find that the prospective employer writes to you seeking a detailed reference. These reference requests present a difficulty in terms of the issue of forgiveness. One needs to:

- a) tell no lies and avoid misleading the new employer and yet also
- b) avoid the temptation to take revenge on the ex-member of staff by giving an unfairly harsh reference, or even an accurate one, but where one's real underlying motive is to hit back at them by revealing the truth in a vengeful way

This problem arose for me some time ago. An ex-member of staff, whom we will call Josephine, had claimed to be a Christian. She worked for me several years ago and had been a major disappointment. She was lazy, had a poor attendance record and was two-faced. In the end I saw through her and was very glad when she left voluntarily. Her departure prevented me from having to sack her.

Then, some years later, I got a letter asking for a reference and sending a detailed questionnaire. If I filled it in truthfully she wouldn't get the job, because I would have had to be very critical. I couldn't lie about her but, at the same time, I didn't want to harm her. So I just didn't reply.

The new employer chased again so I said I didn't want to fill in their form, without explaining why. Then Josephine contacted us herself, pleading for a reference. She said she had split up with her partner (not her husband) and was wanting to move area and start again. She made no mention of her past misconduct, and gave no apology. Even so, I decided to write a very brief reference letter, just giving the most basic details of salary and start/end dates, etc. I was telling no lies, but trying to avoid doing her any harm, if I could avoid it.

My aim at such moments is to do what is right, and yet to make sure that I do nothing to hit back or take revenge. One's aim must be to remain professional and honest, yet with forgiveness, and even mercy and grace. That said, there are times when it becomes one's duty to be much more frank, i.e. where the ex-employee was so bad that one is obliged to feel concerned for the welfare of the prospective employers and/or their staff. Even so, one still needs to take no pleasure in revealing the truth about a person. We must limit ourselves solely to doing our duty, and not indulge in the taking of any kind of vengeance.

Continue to pray for those who have done you harm, even long afterwards

We are commanded to pray for the people who do us harm and abuse us:

***¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.
Romans 12:14 (NASB)***

There have been many people who have done me harm over the years. To the best of my knowledge, I believe that I do not feel any bitterness towards them. For many of them I have continued, over the years, to pray for their salvation. If you have been wronged and yet you freely choose to forgive them and even to become an intercessor for that person, it gives you a special standing with God. He is more inclined to hear such a prayer and to answer it, precisely because it is unselfish.

The very motivation for it, and the ability to do it, has obviously come from the Holy Spirit, not from yourself. You therefore have a special status when you pray for the people who have done you harm. It will cause your prayer to be heard. Such a prayer could be said to be the ‘*prayer of a righteous man*’:

***.... the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective
James 5:16(b) (NIV)***

To understand why God would give such weight to the prayer of a wronged person who is pleading with Him for mercy for the wrongdoer, consider a legal illustration. Imagine that a Judge, at the end of a criminal trial, is hearing pleas in mitigation on behalf of the wrongdoer. The Judge would hear a speech from the wrongdoer’s own defence lawyer and perhaps read reports from his social worker, probation officer, doctor, psychiatrist etc. The Judge would listen carefully to all of them.

However, it is fair to say that he would be likely to be rather guarded about placing too much weight on what any of them might say. He would be keenly aware that it is their job to speak up for the Defendant. So the Judge would probably filter their words carefully and be slow to accept their recommendations. But, what if the victim himself was to stand up in court and ask to say a few words on the Defendant’s behalf? What if the injured party said:

“I know that this young man did wrong when he robbed me, but I personally would prefer him not to go to prison but to a drug rehabilitation unit and to resume his education as well. Would you please consider allowing that to be the sentence, instead of sending him to prison?”

One can easily imagine a Judge, on hearing the *injured party* speak in that way, listening very attentively and placing a great deal of weight on their plea for mercy. Likewise, when we pray for someone who has wronged us, and ask God to forgive them, bless them, and not to judge them for what they did to us, we will find that God is a willing listener. He will take such a prayer very seriously.

An example of a prayer of this kind is found in Paul’s second letter to Timothy. He refers to certain fellow believers who let him down by failing to stand by him when he was put on trial. They deserted him because they feared for themselves. But even as he writes about it to Timothy, Paul suddenly breaks off to utter a short prayer within the letter. He asks that God will not hold those people responsible for what they failed to do for Paul, i.e. that God will *not charge them with it* at the Judgment Seat of Christ:

***At my first defense no one took my part; all deserted me. May it not be charged against them!
2 Timothy 4:16 (RSV)***

Consider what a great opportunity that therefore gives you to do good by praying for God to forgive, save and generally show mercy and grace, to those who have done you harm. You may well see men

and women in Heaven who only had their eyes opened to understand the gospel due to your unselfish prayers on their behalf. How wonderful would that be?

Nobody has the *right* to demand forgiveness from us. It is simply that we have a *duty* to forgive them.

We sometimes come across people who do wrong to us, and are caught, but then speak and act as if they have a *right* to be forgiven. Such a person may even begin to see themselves as being wronged if they are not forgiven, or rather excused. Therefore they may get angry and say something like: “*I’ve said I’m sorry. Why don’t you get over it?*”

I once heard of a person who had been badly treated by a Christian and that the wrongdoer then told them that it was their *duty* to forgive him. That is technically true, *but it was not his place to say it*. The fact that he did say it was compelling evidence of his own impertinence and lack of real remorse.

I also told of another situation where a church leader misbehaved sexually and then announced that people were *obliged to forgive him*. What he actually meant by that was that was that he wanted to be ‘*let off*’ and *spared from the consequences of his actions*. That is not the same thing as forgiveness and, again, it was not his place to say what the duty of those people was, given that he himself was the wrongdoer.

Or a person may feel aggrieved because you are continuing to investigate, or complain about, something they have done. I spoke earlier in this chapter of a church leader whom I had to tackle some years ago, when I was the chairman of the trustees of a certain church and of how I tried, forlornly, to implement the Mathew 18 procedure.

I had met the leader in the presence of witnesses, during which he blatantly lied to them. Then he said to me after they had left: “*Can’t you just let me off the hook?*” He also added later: “*Why don’t we draw a line under all of this?*”

But there was no repentance on his part. He simply wanted to avoid being held accountable for his actions. For him, ‘drawing a line under all of this’ was not something that one does *after having dealt with* all the issues. It is what one does *instead of* dealing with things.

He said these things as requests, but also as complaints. He saw my continued questioning of him, and my unwillingness to drop the matter, or to be fobbed off, as if that was a wrong on my part. Like the other leader above, who was guilty of sexual sin, he felt *aggrieved at being held accountable for his actions* and wanted to be “*let off*”. He spoke as if he had some kind of *entitlement* to be forgiven. But he hadn’t.

None of us actually have any *right to be forgiven*, or indeed any inherent, God-given right to anything whatsoever. The correct way to put it is that other people have a *duty* to forgive us. But that is done in order to obey God. It does not create any corresponding right on our part to be forgiven, least of all to *demand* to be forgiven.

This is not mere theological hair-splitting. It has a major bearing on how we operate, which is why I give a fair amount of attention to the error of rights-based thinking, or the attitude of entitlement, within Book Five in this series. Please refer to that for a fuller and wider discussion of the significance of this error.

Moreover, any person who is assertively demanding to be forgiven or asserting a right to be “*let off*” is demonstrating by that attitude that they have not adequately or genuinely repented. If they had, their principal concern would be about the welfare and feelings of their victim, not about obtaining forgiveness for themselves. So, the more demanding they are, the more unrepentant they must be.

Nevertheless, the wrongdoer's bad attitude does not take away your duty to obey God by forgiving them. However, it is a factor which you can validly bear in mind in assessing the genuineness or otherwise of their repentance/apology and whether it would be appropriate to be reconciled and resume relations with them or to avoid them.

In the story I referred to above, about my dealings with the carnal and dishonest church leader, the position was more complicated than is usually the case. I was a private individual who had been wronged by him and I therefore had a duty to forgive him. But, at the same time, I was also the Chairman of the Trustees of that church, with a duty to investigate and deal with his misconduct, or at least to attempt to do so, because I never actually succeeded. Usually you will only have one or the other of those roles, not both. Nevertheless, it serves to illustrate the problems that arise when a wrongdoer has a misguided sense of entitlement to be forgiven.

We do not need to become able or willing to *trust* a person whom we have forgiven

We alluded to this earlier, but it is worth elaborating on. We are not under *any* duty to trust the person whom we have forgiven. To be *wary* of that person, or even to directly *expect* them to wrong you again, or to lie to you, or to take advantage of you, is not an indication that you have not properly forgiven them. The Bible never tells you to trust those whom you have forgiven.

Indeed, far from telling us to trust wrongdoers, the Bible never actually tells us to trust *anybody at all*. On the contrary, we are to be cautious with all of the people that we do not know. That means anybody who has not yet *proved*, by their consistent faithfulness and reliability, that they are *worthy of trust*. Trust has to be *earned*, and over a sufficiently long period of time to be sure that it is warranted.

That applies to the people we meet outside in the world, but also to those who *claim to be Christians*, and even to those who *really are Christians*, unless and until they have proved their trustworthiness over a period of time. Even then, any trust that we do show, even to those people, is neither absolute nor unconditional. We are only to trust them *up to a point*, the precise level of which will depend on all the circumstances. To do otherwise, or to go further than that, would be evidence of your *naivety*, not the genuineness of your forgiveness.

How then can it be that some people think that a willingness to trust the wrongdoer is essential in order to prove that one's forgiveness of him was genuine? The Bible never says that, or even implies it. Indeed, it tells us to do the direct opposite, even with those who have *never wronged us*, let alone those who already have.

Therefore, if you have been wronged and now feel wary of that person and don't trust them enough to take any chances with them, or perhaps even to have any dealings with them at all, please do not allow yourself to be told that that, *in itself*, proves that you are being 'unforgiving'. At least, do not allow that accusation to be made on that basis alone. The likelihood is that you are simply showing common sense by being wary. If so, you should continue to be so, until it is proved that you don't need to be.

What if the wrongdoer is your parent?

Some people struggle with bitterness towards a parent who has wronged them, perhaps long ago. The wounds from that can be especially deep, because a parent has a unique position, from which they can do terrible harm. Thankfully, I have no personal experience of any mistreatment by my parents. So, I have nothing to forgive.

However, those who have had bad experiences and choose to harbour bitterness towards a parent rather than forgive them, do great additional harm to themselves. The bitterness causes serious problems in itself, which is bad enough. However it also prevents the person from honouring their father and mother, as God commands us all to do in the fifth commandment:

¹²"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you.

Exodus 20:12 (NASB)

There are specific blessings that come from honouring our parents, *even if we feel they have harmed us*. That being so, there are all the more reasons to forgive our parents and to seek to be reconciled with them, *where possible*, while they are still alive. However, even if the parent is dead, you can still make a decision to forgive them and to honour them.

Their death does not take away the need to forgive them, or the ability to do so. Indeed, that is true of any person who has died. You can still tell God that you forgive that person, and release them to Him, and you should do so. You will benefit from it.

Forgiveness within marriage

Possibly one of the stupidest lines ever spoken in a film was in 'Love Story' where one character says "Love is never needing to say you're sorry". On the contrary, love means *regularly* having to say you're sorry. But the reverse side of the coin is that love also means endlessly needing to *accept* such apologies and being willing to grant forgiveness to one's spouse. If not, then marriage cannot survive.

Perhaps the main reason why so many marriages today end in divorce is because of a chronic, ongoing failure to forgive. It eventually creates a vast reservoir of bitterness, which has been made from a multitude of small incidents of rudeness or thoughtfulness, each of which could, and should, have been *dealt with at the time*.

The two relationships in which one gets to know another person's sins and weaknesses in the closest detail are those of husband and wife and employer and employee. In both you get to see the other person as they really are. That is mainly by virtue of spending so much time with them, but also because you get to see them at times of great stress and pressure.

If we want our marriage to work we have to learn how to repent and apologise and also how to do so early and often, so as to prevent and/or minimise the harm that is caused by unforgiveness and bitterness. However, it is equally important to learn how to *receive apologies* and be a good 'forgiver' and a 'non grudge-holder'. It is grievous to see how many married couples there are where one, or both, of them is holding onto a catalogue of complaints and will not accept apologies or let go of past grievances.

They may have a long list of grudges, resentments and bitterness, some of which relate to events or words from years, or even decades earlier. We would gain enormously from making a conscious decision to let those long lists of grievances go now, *however belatedly*. We should write them off and then ask God to help us not to take them back.

Our forgiveness of somebody else can be the key which opens the door for them to come to faith

One of the greatest benefits of our forgiveness of another person is that it can open the door for that person to become a Christian. Not only can forgiveness influence others and even soften their hearts. It also has the effect of prompting God to intervene and to open their eyes.

Consider the experience of Saul of Tarsus, who became the apostle Paul. He hated Christianity at first and did all he could to oppose it. Then, one day he came across Stephen, who became the first Christian martyr. Saul of Tarsus was holding the coats of those who stoned Stephen to death for speaking about Jesus. He saw Stephen die. He also saw and heard *the manner* in which he died, in particular the way *he prayed for God to forgive those who were stoning him*:

⁵⁸When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" ⁶⁰Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

Acts 7:58-60 (NASB)

There is good reason to believe that one of the ways that God answered Stephen's prayer was by forgiving and saving Saul of Tarsus. Instead of punishing him, God then used Saul as a mighty instrument to do more for the sake of the gospel than Stephen could ever have done. It did not happen immediately. Saul continued to attack the church for a while longer, but it is quite likely that, even as he was doing so, he was coming under God's conviction. Indeed, it is probably because of that very conviction, that Saul tried so hard to resist the gospel. But God eventually broke down his resistance and made him into the great man that we know as Paul:

¹Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ²Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. ³But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

Acts 8:1-3 (NASB)

¹Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, ²and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; ⁴and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" ⁵And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ⁶but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." ⁷The men who travelled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.

Acts 9:1-7 (NASB)

¹⁰Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name."

¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

Acts 9:10-15 (NASB)

Imagine how you will feel one day, on getting to Heaven, and discovering that some of your decisions to forgive people had, like Stephen's, opened the door for others to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. That alone would make it all worthwhile.