

CHAPTER 14

HOW TO FORGIVE PEOPLE IN PRACTICAL TERMS – SOME ADVICE ON WHAT TO DO AND HOW TO GO ABOUT IT

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.

Matthew 18:21-22 (NASB)

*Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath!
Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.*

Psalms 37:8 (RSV)

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

Romans 12:14 (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)

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 and He is very practical. 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 traumatized 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 sympathizes. 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. You can be sure that He will readily respond to it by changing you on the inside and by giving you the grace that 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 actually 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.

However, 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 possibly 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 person B. 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 emphasize 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. However, 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 recognized 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 apologize. 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 visualize 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 visualize 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.

- i) 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.
- ii) 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 and led 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. Indeed, they are almost the exact opposite, in virtually every respect.

A very bad experience I once had in trying to put Matthew 18:15-17 into practice

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 'Rick', 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 Rick 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 entire 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, Rick 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, Rick 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: "*Well, 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 Rick 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 (over 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 as a whole were not willing to risk any of that becoming known.

I was by no means the first to tackle Rick. 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 Rick. 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. However, 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 ever to have any concerns. So did all the others who had tried to tackle Rick before I did.

d) Stage Four

The leaders had already skipped stage three, and they completely avoided stage four as well. Rick himself 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, Rick himself spoke to two leaders of separate churches in the town. However, 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 robust or decisive, which might cause them to get their hands dirty. In particular they were not willing to confront Rick about any of his behaviour. All they wanted was to "*resolve matters amicably*".

However, what they really meant by that was 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, albeit in a weak and misguided sort of way. However, 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 Rick, their fellow 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, but they had all achieved even less than I did.

In the end it had a very sad ending. Rick 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, whom I will call 'Peter' 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 Peter himself 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 Peter 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. In particular, 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.

Sadly, 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 as a result of the leader's behaviour. I did so because it came to light that that leader's character was also seriously flawed. His conduct was controlling, manipulative and deceptive. However, this time, once I had 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 concern. Again, 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. As was the case when I tackled Rick, 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) Firstly, 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) Secondly, 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, not to mention ego and pride. 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 traumatized, and far more so than we realised at the time. Moreover, the sense of violation and trauma lasted for at least three years, and probably more. 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 Rick, the senior leader, and also 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. The other members of the church basically didn't seem to mind whether the leadership was corrupt or not, provided they could have a quiet life.

Of course, the problem was hugely compounded by the fact that we were operating outside of the church structure and leadership framework envisaged by Jesus when He gave the command set out 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 of all 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 extremely wary of other church leaders, even the better ones.

Sadly, that wariness was not solely based on our imaginations. Indeed, 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 most 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, barn or school, 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. Therefore they cannot even hope to 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 agreeing, if the dispute couldn't be resolved, 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 otherwise 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 genuinely born again, 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.

However, 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. Much of the time, the person with whom we are in dispute may not be 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 one of the reasons 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 emphasize 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. However, 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 to them 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 then 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, but 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, when those are possible and appropriate.

That said, there are times when it becomes one's duty to be much more frank. That could arise 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 from revealing the truth about that 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 also 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. However, 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 very willing listener. He will take such a prayer extremely 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 asking 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 an entitlement 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, falseness and lack of real remorse.

I was 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 called Rick, 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?*”

However, 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 human rights based thinking, and the growing attitude of entitlement, within Book Five in this series. Please refer to that for a fuller discussion of the significance of those errors, which have been adopted by very many churches.

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 Rick, 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. However, at the same time, I was also the Chairman of the Trustees of that church.

Therefore, given that role, I also had 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 necessarily 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. However, 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 apologize and also how to do so early and often, so as to prevent and/or minimize 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 thereafter 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.