

# Kington Baptist Church

## MESSAGE BOARD – 87

One thing we share together is the need to forgive and to be forgiven. Forgiveness is personal. From time to time we hear demands for corporations and governments to apologise; and apologies, when offered, may be accepted. In some sense an apology could be seen as a request to be forgiven. But in reality only individuals can forgive or be forgiven. Forgiveness is personal.

In a world pock-marked by atrocities and offences 'forgiveness' is a word we hear frequently. We hear of individuals who have been wronged in some way being asked if they have been able to *forgive* those who wronged them. Some have been able to forgive, others not. We hear also of those who offer forgiveness on behalf of others. This may be when wrongs were suffered long ago by an individual's forebears, or by the ancestors of a group of people or a race of people: for example, the wrongs suffered as part of the slave trade, or forced land clearances, or the holocaust. There may be ceremonies of forgiveness. In some cases reparation may be made in some form.

These instances of 'forgiveness' raise an important question: Is it possible to forgive someone who has not apologised and expressed remorse for the wrong they have done? That forces us to face other questions: What does forgiveness really mean? What is it for me to forgive, or for me to be forgiven? Who should I forgive? When should I forgive? These questions are unavoidable if I'm concerned to follow Jesus; if I'm concerned about being forgiven, for Jesus said I can expect to be forgiven only if I'm forgiving.

When I say 'I forgive', what do I mean – what should I mean?

We should remember, forgiveness is a Christian responsibility – it's my Christian duty to be forgiving. It's a non-negotiable obligation. It has nothing to do with my personal inclination, how I *feel* about something; nothing to do with whether I feel like forgiving someone or not. It's a duty and a necessity. When I'm faced with someone who has wronged me in some way, there shouldn't be the least uncertainty about my response. I have no right to ponder the question as to whether I should forgive this person or not, or on what terms I may forgive them, or if they deserve to be forgiven. The plain truth is that if I hope to be forgiven I *must* forgive.

But it goes deeper and further back than that. If I believe I've been forgiven, and if I have any idea of what I've been forgiven and what it cost for me to be forgiven, then I'll find no difficulty in forgiving whoever has wronged me or in whatever way they wronged me. I'll see that no offense done to me can begin to measure up to the weight of the sin God has freely, fully forgiven in me.

This is why there should never be in my mind the least uncertainty about forgiving someone who wronged me. For the Christian forgiving is a sort of natural reflex. Not that it's cheap or superficial. It simply means I've seen something of the weight and sinfulness of my sins; I have some sense of what it cost my Saviour to purchase my forgiveness. Let's be clear: the price Jesus paid, his death and descent into Hell, is what it took to secure my forgiveness. The New Testament is clear: we've been *redeemed*; a *ransom* price was paid; the wrath of God, the holiness of God, was *satisfied* – and to achieve this Jesus gave himself '*as a ransom for many*' (his words). When I see something of what it cost him, it is then that I begin to see the wonder of forgiveness. It's then that forgiving others becomes a joy. It's not that when I forgive someone I show how good and generous-spirited I am – but by forgiving others I'm reminded how sinful I am, how grateful I should be.

With forgiving there's also what we might call the psychological side-effect: if I forgive then I free myself from bitterness and resentment, the weight is lifted from my shoulders and conscience. This is quite separate from what forgiving may mean to the other person! But this 'side-effect' isn't the main motive in forgiving, nor should be. My motive to forgive the other person is that I've no reason not to forgive them! In whatever way they may have offended me it couldn't compare with how I offend my Lord day by day – and how day by day he forgives me. In the sight of my guilt and sin, it seems almost preposterous to talk of someone 'offending' me. Jesus calls me and says, 'Follow me'. He didn't mean, 'Follow me – except when it comes to this thing of forgiving others!' Remember, an unforgiving spirit is angry and vindictive – and we know what Jesus says about anger: *everyone who is angry with his brother will be in danger of being judged*. (Matthew 5.22) But we must also remember that forgiving the wrong someone has done does not mean that I condone their conduct, or in any way approve or ignore the wrong of which they are guilty.

What then does it mean for me to *forgive*? I'd approach the question like this: What does it mean for me that God has forgiven me? It means there's now no obstacle, no barrier between God and me. The obstacle that was there has been removed. The Bible talks of a 'thick cloud' removed. The effect of my sin is to put this barrier, this obstacle between God and me. Any wrong I do to another person puts a barrier, an obstacle between me and them – and inevitably between me and God. When I forgive someone I'm saying I want that barrier removed. The wrong they did to me put a barrier between us, and between them and God. By forgiving them I'm saying I want no barrier to be in the way of their finding all in God that's for their good. I want all God's goodness to flow unhindered and uninterrupted to them. That's what forgiveness does. I know this because that's what God's forgiving love does for us! God's forgiving us means that all God's goodness flows freely, uninterruptedly to us!

'...so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.' (Ephesians 3.19)