

EGW Thoughts on Forgiveness in the Wider Setting of the Great Controversy

Compiled by Jonathan Gallagher

Forgiveness more than legal

But forgiveness has a broader meaning than many suppose. When God gives the promise that He “will abundantly pardon,” He adds, as if the meaning of that promise exceeded all that we could comprehend: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.” Isaiah 55:7-9. **God’s forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by which He sets us free from condemnation.** It is not only forgiveness *for* sin, but reclaiming *from* sin. It is the outflow of redeeming love that transforms the heart. David had the true conception of forgiveness when he prayed, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.” Psalm 51:10. *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 114. My emphasis.

Not technical, but experiential

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” Christ taught us to pray. But it is most difficult, even for those who claim to be followers of Jesus, to forgive as he forgave us. The true spirit of forgiveness is so little practiced, and so many interpretations are placed upon Christ’s requirement, that its force and beauty are lost sight of. We have very uncertain views of the great mercy and loving-kindness of God. He is full of compassion and forgiveness, and freely pardons when we truly repent and confess our sins. But when the message of God’s pardoning love comes from a heart that has an experimental knowledge of it, to those who have not experienced it for themselves it is like speaking in parables. We must bring into our characters the love and sympathy expressed in Christ’s life. *The Watchman*, October 13, 1908.

As you read the promises, remember they are the expression of unutterable love and pity. The great heart of Infinite Love is drawn toward the sinner with boundless compassion. “We have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.” Ephesians 1:7. Yes, only believe that God is your helper. He wants to restore His moral image in man. As you draw near to Him with confession and repentance, He will draw near to you with mercy and forgiveness. *Steps to Christ*, p.55.

We do not receive forgiveness *because* but *as* we forgive. The ground of all forgiveness is that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. *The Signs of the Times*, April 14, 1895. Emphasis in original.

We are not forgiven *because* we forgive, but *as* we forgive. The ground of all forgiveness is found in the unmerited love of God, but by our attitude toward others we show whether we have made that love our own. Wherefore Christ says, “With what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged.” *The Faith I Live By*, p.131.

Not a contractual relationship

God has freely forgiven our sins, not asking us to render any equivalent. The Lord has given us this example in order that men may see how they should treat their fellowmen. As God for Christ's sake has forgiven your sins, you should forgive your brethren who trespass against you. If you are an overcomer at last, it will not be because of your own righteousness, but because of the righteousness of Christ, because of the long forbearance, mercy, and forgiveness of God. But if you do not cherish kindness, love, and a forgiving spirit toward your brethren, you will not be of the number who will receive the forgiveness of God. The lesson that Jesus would impress upon his disciples is that those who profess his name should not cherish a revengeful spirit, or do an unkind action. The whole work of Christ had a tendency to counteract the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees, who encouraged revenge and retaliation. *The Signs of the Times*, April 14, 1895.

The Jewish precepts enjoined upon men the duty of forgiving five offenses, and Peter thought that in suggesting seven times he had reached the limit of human patience. But Jesus would have him understand that those who have the divine mind, and were imbued with the divine spirit, would exercise forgiveness without limit. The plan and ground of salvation, which is love, is the principle which must be carried out by [the] human family. Should Christ limit His mercy, compassion, and forgiveness by a certain number of sins, how few men would be saved! *The Upward Look*, p.43.

Pardon and justification are one and the same thing. **Through faith, the believer passes from the position of a rebel, a child of sin and Satan, to the position of a loyal subject of Christ Jesus**, not because of an inherent goodness, but because Christ receives him as His child by adoption. The sinner receives the forgiveness of his sins, because these sins are borne by his Substitute and Surety. *Faith and Works*, p. 103. My emphasis.

Forgiveness is instant

There is hope for the sinner. Christ uplifted upon the cross of Calvary furnishes that hope; for mercy has provided to the uttermost demand the victim that justice calls for, for man's transgression. Through the merits of Jesus Christ, God can forgive sin, and be the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus. Precious truth of inestimable value to every repenting soul! Shall we not individually seek to appreciate, as far as it is possible, the fact that God forgives sin, that he loves us if we believe in Jesus, though we are erring, ignorant, and sinful, even as he loves his Son? *The moment we ask for forgiveness in contrition and sincerity, God forgives.* Oh, what a glorious truth! Preach it, pray it, sing it. Lift up the "Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Say to the people, "Behold the man of Calvary!" God is waiting to forgive all who come unto him with sincere repentance. *The Signs of the Times*, September 4, 1903. Emphasis in original.

Mistaken Views of Repentance and Forgiveness

It is a mistake to think that you must come to repentance before you can come to Jesus. Come to Christ just as you are, and contemplate His love until your hard heart is broken.

“A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” We may say that except the sinner repents of his sin, he cannot be forgiven; but while this is true, let him not put off coming to Christ until he has wrought himself up to a certain pitch of excited feeling, until he thinks his sorrow is of sufficient depth to merit forgiveness. *Let the sinner come just as he is, and contemplate the love that has been bestowed upon him, all unworthy as he is; and the first thing he knows, he will realize that Christ’s love has broken every barrier down, and that he exercises repentance which is not to be repented of. The sinner must go to Christ in order that he may be enabled to repent. Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, September 3, 1901. Emphasis in original.*

There are many who have erroneous ideas in regard to the nature of repentance. They think that they cannot come to Christ unless they first repent, and that repentance prepares them for the forgiveness of their sins. It is true that repentance does precede the forgiveness of sins; for it is only the broken and contrite heart that will feel the need of a Saviour. But must the sinner wait until he has repented before he can come to Jesus? Is repentance to be made an obstacle between the sinner and the Saviour? Jesus has said, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.” Christ is constantly drawing men to himself, while Satan is as diligently seeking by every imaginable device, to draw men away from their Redeemer. Christ must be revealed to the sinner as the Saviour dying for the sins of the world; and as he beholds the Lamb of God on the cross of Calvary, the mysteries of redemption begin to unfold to his mind, and the goodness of God leads him to repentance. *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, April 1, 1890.*

It is not now the work of the sinner to make peace with God, but to accept Christ as his peace and righteousness. Thus man becomes one with Christ and one with God. There is no way by which the heart may be made holy, save through faith in Christ. Yet many think that repentance is a kind of preparation which men must originate themselves before they can come to Christ. They must take steps themselves in order to find Christ a mediator in their behalf. It is true that there must be repentance before there is pardon; but the sinner must come to Christ before he can find repentance. *The Youth’s Instructor, December 6, 1894.*

God’s repentance

God’s repentance is not like man’s repentance. “The Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for He is not a man, that He should repent.” Man’s repentance implies a change of mind. God’s repentance implies a change of circumstances and relations. Man may change his relation to God by complying with the conditions upon which he may be brought into the divine favor, or he may, by his own action, place himself outside the favoring condition; but the Lord is the same “yesterday, and today, and forever.” Hebrews 13:8. Saul’s disobedience changed his relation to God; but the conditions of acceptance with God were unaltered-- God’s requirements were still the same, for with Him there “is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” James 1:17. *Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 630.*

Forgiveness extended

Man can be saved only through the wonderful forbearance of God in the forgiveness of his many sins and transgressions. But those who are blessed by the mercy of God should exercise the same spirit of forbearance and forgiveness toward those who constitute the Lord's family.--Letter 30, Jan. 29, 1895, to "Brother Hardy," in *The Upward Look*, p.42.

We can receive forgiveness from God only as we forgive others. It is the love of God that draws us unto Him, and that love cannot touch our hearts without creating love for our brethren. *The Faith I Live By*, p.131.

It is peace that you need--Heaven's forgiveness and peace and love in the soul. Money cannot buy it, intellect cannot procure it, wisdom cannot attain to it; you can never hope, by your own efforts, to secure it. But God offers it to you as a gift, "without money and without price." Isa. 55:1. . . . *The Faith I Live By*, p.103.

The conditions of obtaining mercy of God are simple and just and reasonable. The Lord does not require us to do some grievous thing in order that we may have the forgiveness of sin. We need not make long and wearisome pilgrimages, or perform painful penances, to commend our souls to the God of heaven or to expiate our transgression; but he that confesseth and forsaketh his sin shall have mercy. *The Faith I Live By*, p.127.

Unforgiving

After completing the Lord's Prayer, Jesus added: "If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Matt. 6:14, 15. He who is unforgiving cuts off the very channel through which alone he can receive mercy from God. We should not think that unless those who have injured us confess the wrong we are justified in withholding from them our forgiveness. It is their part, no doubt, to humble their hearts by repentance and confession; but we are to have a spirit of compassion toward those who have trespassed against us, whether or not they confess their faults. *The Faith I Live By*, p.131.

Nothing can justify an unforgiving spirit. He who is unmerciful toward others shows that he himself is not a partaker of God's pardoning grace. In God's forgiveness the heart of the erring one is drawn close to the great heart of Infinite Love. The tide of divine compassion flows into the sinner's soul, and from him to the souls of others. . . . *The Faith I Live By*, p.131.

Forgiveness is simple

Many things that do not appear in a correct light will be made plain in the day of the Lord; but the question of forgiveness needs not to be interpreted. If a brother errs, forgive him if he asks you. If he is not humble enough to ask, forgive him in your heart, and express your forgiveness in words and actions. *The Watchman*, January 1, 1907.

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