



“Forgiveness”

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-Readings-

Genesis 9:20-23

Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside.

Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness.¹

Matthew 12:1-8

“At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.

When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath.”

He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.”²

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² *Ibid.*

Emanuel Swedenborg, Arcana Coelestia §1088

“*Their faces were backwards, and they did not see their father's nakedness*” means that this is what ought to be done and that no notice ought to be taken of such things as errors and faults resulting from reasonings.

This is clear from the fact that this statement is a repetition, for this wording is almost the same as that immediately previous and the conclusion to it. For this parent Church, or therefore also serves as the conclusion to it. For this parent Church, or member of this Church, was such that it acted in this fashion not out of evil-mindedness but in simplicity, as becomes clear from what follows next where it is said that 'Noah awoke from his wine', that is, was better informed.

In regard to the subject under discussion, people with whom no charity is present think nothing else than evil of the neighbour and speak nothing but evil. If they say anything good it is for the sake of themselves or of one with whom they seek to curry favour under an outward show of friendship.

But people in whom charity is present think nothing else than good of the neighbour and speak nothing but good, and this not for their own sake or that of him with whom they seek to curry favour, but from the Lord thus at work within charity.

The former are like evil spirits, the latter like angels, residing with someone. Evil spirits never do anything else than stir up a person's evils and falsities and condemn him. Angels however stir up nothing but goods and truths; and things that are evil and false they excuse.

From these considerations it is clear that with those in whom no charity is present evil spirits have dominion, through whom man communicates with hell; and with those in whom charity is present angels have dominion, through whom man communicates with heaven.³

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. Translated by John Elliott. London: Swedenborg Society, 1983.

In every worship service, following our saying of the Lord's prayer, the minister says, "O Lord lead us to forgive men their trespasses that Thou may also forgive us," to which the congregation responds, "for if we forgive not their trespasses, neither wilt Thou forgive us our trespasses." Those should not be just idle words that we recite without thought and reflection. Consider that after teaching us how we should pray, our Lord placed extra emphasis on that part about forgiveness.

First, in the Lord's prayer, He says "forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors." And then following the prayer, our Lord puts added emphasis on the need for forgiving others by telling us that if we do not forgive the trespasses of others against us, neither will our Father in heaven, that is, the Lord forgive us.

The Lord gives additional emphasis and instruction on forgiveness when He responds to the disciple Peter's question, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" To which question the Lord replied, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." You get the point that the Lord was not meaning that we should literally keep count and once we forgive seventy times seven, or 490 times, it is now okay to condemn and punish. He was telling us that we should always be willing to forgive others.

The Lord then illustrated this point by telling us the parable of a king who was owed about twenty years wages by a servant and how that king forgave him all the debt, and how that servant, despite his being forgiven such a great debt, then threw a fellow servant, who owed him 100 days of wages, into prison until he should pay the debt. When his master heard what he had done, he said to him,

"Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."
(Matthew 18:32-35)

Now it is easy to say that we should just forgive and forget. And sometimes that may be the right course of action. For example, if someone is having a bad day, or difficult time in life, and we are aware of this, it may be relatively easy to forgive and just forget about the incident.

But there are other times, when deep injury may be done, and what is even more hurtful, is when we realize that what was done was intentional and planned, and was very unjust. How do we deal with that?

One possible recourse may be found in Matthew 18, where we are told that if we have something against another, that is, if someone has in some way offended or hurt us, we ought first to tell him his fault in private, and "if he hears you, you have gained your brother." But if he does not listen to you, then it is proper to confront him with one or two other people, "that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." If a person then refuses to heed them, then it is proper to "tell it to the church" so that the individual may hear from those representing the church. (Matthew 18:15-17) Thus the order outlined here would appear to be that when we have a problem with others that we should first communicate with that person, or those people, in an effort to solve the difficulty, and if this does not work, then to communicate with one or two others so that in this way the truth of the matter may come out and thus the problem would hopefully be solved, but if this fails, then it is proper to tell the problem to the church that the individual may hear from the people of the church. The goal here is to achieve some understanding leading to reconciliation and a fair and just solution that leads to genuine forgiveness.

But what about cases of such deep hurt that we have gut-wrenching difficulty talking about them or even recollecting them without coming into deep psychological and spiritual pain and distress? Cases of psychological, physical, sexual, and spousal abuse, as well as betrayal of trust, may be overwhelming for many of us to deal with. We may be able to forgive the hurt done to us on a certain level, but that does not necessarily take away the pain. For some of us there are just some things that we cannot dwell on without our emotions and spirit being carried away into thoughts and directions we do not want to go in – – and which may not even be healthy for us to go in. Sometimes, for some things, we need to find a place where we can feel safe. Remember the story about Elijah:

Elijah, fleeing from the wicked Queen Jezebel who was seeking to kill him, *"went into a cave, and spent the night in that place; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

So he said, *"I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life."*

Then He said, *"Go out, and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.*" (1 Kings 19:9-12)

For Elijah that cave was a place of safety. And there, in that place of safety, the Lord called to Elijah, and Elijah heard the still small voice of the Lord calling him to go forth to again serve the Lord with zeal. The lesson here is that there may be times in our life when we need to seek places of safety in order to hear the still small voice of the Lord calling us to go forward once again in His service. Sometimes, that may be the best thing we can do for the peace and care of our soul.

In the illustrations that the Lord gave on forgiveness, you may have noticed that those needing forgiveness asked first. The servant who owed 10,000 talents and the one who owed 100 denarii both said, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you all." The master of the one who owed 10,000 talents initially forgave him all that debt, while that same servant would not even forgive another servant 100 denarii. In both cases the request for more time to repay was the same. And this raises a question, when we confront others who have trespassed against us, should we forgive them only if they apologize and ask for some kind of forgiveness? In the case of the unjust servant, the master who first forgave all the debt that was owed to him, later reversed his decision when he learned that that same servant would not show similar compassion to a fellow servant. And also, in the case of a person who would not admit his error even when he was confronted by "those of the church," we are told that, "if he refuses to even hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector." (Matthew 18:17)

The Lord is always willing to forgive, but it He can only forgive those who ask for forgiveness, and who demonstrate their own willingness to forgive the trespasses of others. As the Lord said, *"If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."* (Matthew 6:15)

It is not that the Lord wishes to withhold his mercy and forgiveness from anyone. His mercy and forgiveness, that is, his love goes out equally to everyone, equally to the saint as well as to the sinner. But His mercy and forgiveness can only be received by those whose heart is open to their reception. It cannot be received by those who have hardened their heart.

The point is that we are all debtors before the Lord; in need of the Lord's love and forgiveness. As we, following the Lord's example, show forgiveness and love to others, He is also able to show His love and forgiveness to us. When we deny love to others, we deny ourselves of the miracle of the Lord's salvation and forgiveness. When we withhold forgiveness from anyone, we withhold it from ourselves. Amen.

-Prayer-

O Lord, lead us to bless those we are tempted to judge.

May we see them as you do.

*May we see beyond the veil of our anger,
focusing no more on the mistakes of others.*

*May we see instead in the light of innocence
that brings us heavenly peace.*

Amen.