

DOES THE LORD FORGIVE?



Bird's Eye View of Lesson

The Lord's covenant with the children of Israel was simple: if they obeyed Him they would prosper and if they disobeyed, they would be punished. Their covenant with Jehovah was eternal. He continued to love them even though they did not always follow Him. In the New Testament Jesus tells us that we become the Lord's chosen not through natural birth, but becoming spiritually reborn—by choosing to believe, receive and follow Him. We read that the Lord loves everyone, whether good or evil, and that we should too. Like Jesus, we ought to forgive the faults of other people. The Heavenly Doctrine teaches us that the Lord forgives completely. His Divine mercy is “unceasing towards every person, and is never withdrawn from anyone” (*Heaven and Hell* 522). We are saved when we stop doing what is wrong and live by the Lord's Word. “Forgiving is regarding someone not from the point of evil but good” (*Arcana Coelestia* 7697).

READINGS FROM THE WORD

As you read these passages from the Word, think about how they help you answer the question: Does the Lord forgive?

The Ten Commandments

The Lord liberated the Children of Israel after 400 years of slavery in Egypt. At the start of their journey to the promised land, the Lord guided them to Mount Sinai. He called Moses to the top of the mountain, giving him the Ten Commandments. The first table of stone tells us how to love the Lord. Notice what the Lord says about how He will treat people who obey His commandments and people who sin.

And God spoke all these words, saying: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain” (Exodus 20:1-7).



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Notice that the Lord does not “hold people guiltless” when they sin. Also that He will visit the “iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate [Him.]” The message here and in other places in the Old Testament appears to be that an entire family will be punished when one family member sins.

The Sermon on the Mount

Soon after the Lord started His ministry on earth, He again spoke to many people from a mountain. His beautiful words are known as the Sermon on the Mount. In the sermon He recites many passages from the Old Testament. Look at how He takes these words and uses them to deliver a new message of forgiveness.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away. You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:38-45).

The New Testament picture of the Lord’s love is that He loves *all* people—good *and* evil. We are His children not by natural birth—but through spiritual rebirth—by believing and following Him. But even though the Lord gives us the beautiful gift of His love, we can fail to achieve His blessings (heaven) and be cast into hell. In several places in the New Testament the Lord tells us that unrepentant evildoers will be punished or suffer for their sins (see Luke 12:5; Matthew 13:42, 47; 25:41ff).

What the Heavenly Doctrine Says About Forgiveness and Mercy

The Heavenly Doctrine brings us the message of the Lord’s complete forgiveness. The following readings give us a picture of what we need to do if we want to *receive* the Lord’s forgiveness.

The Lord forgives everyone his sins, because He is mercy itself. Nevertheless they are not forgiven by this unless the person performs serious repentance, and desists from evils, and afterward lives a life of faith and charity, and this even to the end of his life. When this is done, the person receives from the Lord spiritual life, which is called new life (*Arcana Coelestia* 9014).

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Since the Lord is mercy itself, He forgives all people their sins, nor does He impute a single sin to anyone, for He says, "They know not what they do." Nevertheless, the sins are not taken away by that; for to Peter asking how often he should forgive his brother's trespasses, whether he should do so seven times, the Lord said: "I say not to you, until seven times, but until seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21-22). What, then, will not the Lord do? (*True Christian Religion* 539).

OPTIONAL READING

"The Divine mercy is pure mercy towards the whole human race, to save it. It is also unceasing towards every person, and is never withdrawn from anyone; so that everyone is saved who can be saved. And yet no one can be saved except by Divine means, which means have been revealed by the Lord, in the Word.

The Divine means are what are called Divine truths, which teach how people must live in order to be saved. By these truths the Lord leads people to heaven, and by them He implants in people the life of heaven. This the Lord does with all. But the life of heaven can be implanted in no one unless he abstains from evil, for evil obstructs.

So far, therefore, as a person abstains from evil, the Lord leads him out of pure mercy by His Divine means, and this from infancy to the end of his life in the world and afterwards to eternity. This is what is meant by the Divine mercy. Hence it is clear that the mercy of the Lord is pure mercy, but not immediate, that is, it does not look to saving all out of mere good pleasure, however they may have lived" (*Heaven and Hell* 522).



FOCUS POINTS

The Lord gives us freedom to choose how we will respond both to other people and to Him. In giving us this freedom, we are also given responsibility for the words and actions we use. When we choose to follow the Lord, He can give us His greatest blessings. But what about the times when we make choices that go against the Lord's will?

1. How do the Ten Commandments describe what the Lord's response will be if we choose not to obey them?
2. What does the Lord mean when He says He will "[visit] the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me" (Exodus 20:5)? (Think about how one choice we make has a long chain of consequences—*e.g.* telling a lie.)

The Lord's covenant with the children of Israel was simple—obey the Lord and you will do well; disobey the Lord, and you will be punished. Jehovah continued to love them even though they repeatedly turned away and came back to Him.

3. What picture do we get of the Lord's mercy and forgiveness from learning about the children of Israel and their relationship with Him?
4. Matthew 5 gives a new Christian message of forgiveness. Does the Lord literally want us to "turn the other cheek?"
5. The Heavenly Doctrine tells us *how* our sins are forgiven so that we can receive the Lord's love to eternity. Give three examples of what we can do to be forgiven.
6. Should we forgive someone who has hurt us? Why or why not. Does it matter if they have "sinned against us?"

Activity 1

FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES



Variation for Groups: You may want to use a board or large pad of paper for brainstorming.

Think of as many words as you can about anger. Write them in this box:

Think of as many words as you can about forgiveness. Write them in this box:

Now match words of equal intensity about anger and forgiveness, *e.g.* hate/love, hurt/remorse.

Discussion

- How does it feel when a friend forgives you for something you feel terrible about saying or doing?
- How does it feel when you forgive a friend for something terrible they have said or done to you?
- Is it more difficult to forgive someone for doing something slightly bad, or for doing something very bad? Explain your answer.



THE PRODIGAL SON

Activity 2

The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) is a parable about a father and his two sons. It is adapted here as a play for five people. Read the play using simple actions and then discuss the deeper spiritual meaning using the guide. Note: The word “prodigal” means wasteful or recklessly extravagant.

Younger Son: Father, give me my inheritance.

Narrator: So the father divided his possessions and gave his son his inheritance. Soon afterwards the younger son took his things and went to a far country. While he was there he wasted his inheritance with prodigal living. When he had nothing left a severe famine came and he began to be hungry. He went to work feeding pigs. He was so hungry that he would gladly have eaten the pods that the swine ate. No one gave him anything. When he came to himself, he said:

Younger Son: How many of my father’s hired servants have food enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”

Narrator: And he came to his father. But when he was still far away, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.

Younger Son: Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.

Father: Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

Narrator: Now his older son was in the field. And as he came to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what was happening.

Servant: Your brother has come, and because he is safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.

Narrator: The older brother was angry and would not go in. So his father came out and pleaded with him.

Older Son: All these years I have been serving you; I never disobeyed you and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has wasted your money you killed the fatted calf for him.

Father: Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.



Discuss the Deeper Meaning

Apocalypse Explained 279:6 points the way to the spiritual message in this parable.

By “the prodigal son” are meant people who are prodigal of spiritual riches, which are the knowledges of truth and good. “Returning to his father, and his confession that he was not worthy to be called his son” means penitence of heart and humiliation. “The first robe with which he was clothed” means truths that are most important and most commonly recognized. “The ring on the hand” means the joining of truth and good in the internal or spiritual person. “The shoes on the feet” means the same in the external or natural person, and both mean regeneration. “The fatted calf” means the good of love and charity. “To eat and be glad” means consociation [friendly association] and heavenly joy.

1. Can you think of a time in your life when you knew the Lord’s truth, but used it wastefully, or perhaps wasted an opportunity to use it? (For example, going ahead and doing something dishonest, even though you knew it wasn’t really the right thing to do.) This and other examples are what is meant by spiritual “prodigal living.”
2. In the story the younger son realizes his mistake, comes to his father, and says he is “not worthy to be called [his father’s] son.” Using this story as a model, what should we do if we become aware of a “prodigal” behavior pattern in our own lives? How can we approach our Father?
3. The prodigal son is forgiven, and not only that, he is welcomed back with special clothing, a ring, and a feast held in his honor. Using the ideas in *Apocalypse Explained* 279, list the spiritual steps that a person needs to take once they ask to be forgiven.
4. Is it important for us to forgive someone that we feel has wronged us? What are the benefits of forgiving (for us)? What consequences continue in our lives if we are not able to forgive someone? (e.g. a drunk driver who has killed someone we love.)
5. Is there a time when you have responded with hurt and anger, like the older brother? Are his resentful feelings justified?
6. Whose behavior is worse, the older brother’s or the younger brother’s?



WHO IS FORGIVEN?

Activity 3

Many stories in the Old and New Testament give examples of people who have treated others badly or made poor choices and later found forgiveness.

Use a copy of the Word and look up the following stories to find out who is being forgiven.

Variation for Groups: Divide the students into 3 smaller groups for this activity. Have each group research one story, and then present their answers to the larger group.

Bible Reference	Who is forgiving?	Why?	Who is forgiven?
Genesis 37:3,23; 45:4-8			
Luke 15:11-31			
Luke 22:63-65; 32-34			



Here are a variety of activities that can help you bring this lesson into your life.

For Reflection

- ◆ Think back to a time when you were forgiven by a friend or one of your parents. Or think about a time when you have forgiven someone else. Reflect on the presence of the Lord the during events that happened. Think about people in your life that you may wish to forgive today and make a plan of action.

Ideas for Journal Entries *(choose one)*

Use one of these journal ideas to help you think about the Lord's forgiveness.

- ◆ **Write a Prayer** Focus on one mistake you have made or an action you regret. Write a prayer asking the Lord for His forgiveness. Then look for an opportunity to change your behavior if a similar situation comes up this week.
- ◆ **Identifying with One of the Brothers** Take the part of one of the brothers in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and write about what the father did for that brother and how this might compare to what the Lord will do for you.

Prayer Card

Consider using this prayer as a way to ask for the Lord's help in being loving, merciful, and forgiving with those around us.

Help Us to Love One Another

Heavenly Father, help us to love one another as You love us,
 To be merciful to one another as You are merciful,
 And to forgive one another as You forgive us,
 So that we may follow You all the days of our lives. Amen.

Further Reading

FORGIVENESS

by the Rev. B. David Holm

One day, when the Lord was living on earth, He spoke of people doing wrong things against each other. Then Peter, one of the Lord's disciples, asked Him how many times should he forgive another person. He said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" You see, Peter thought that to forgive someone who had done wrong against you seven times was more than enough. But the Lord gave an answer to Peter that may seem strange to you at first. He said, "I say not unto you, Until seven times, but until seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21,22). Seventy times seven is four hundred and ninety—but by this the Lord did not mean that we should forgive another just that many times, but that we should be willing to forgive him always and forever.

This may seem a very hard thing—to always forgive someone who does wrong to you. But that is just what the Lord asks. You see, He wants us to be forgiving people—people with a kind heart and not hard-hearted. There is a very important reason why the Lord wants us to be forgiving and not hold grudges. The reason is this—we cannot *receive* the Lord's forgiveness for the wrong we do unless we are willing to forgive the people who do wrong to us. The reason we do not receive the Lord's forgiveness is because we close our minds off from the Lord when we hold grudges. In fact, we turn our minds upside down when we hold hatred in our hearts against others.

Our minds are like cups. They are meant to be cups that are right side up—open to the Lord. When we do wrong, and all of us do, then the Lord immediately forgives us. His forgiveness is like an endless fountain. If our minds are right-side up, we receive His forgiveness. But if we hold hatred, grudges, and lack of forgiveness in our minds, we turn the cup of our mind upside down. Then it cannot be filled with the Lord's forgiveness any more than a cup held upside down can be filled at a fountain. The forgiveness is there, but we don't receive it.

Now it is not easy to forgive someone who has wronged us. The first thing we want to do is to do something wrong back to them—to pay them back. This isn't right. Two wrongs don't make a right. The Lord wants us to forgive the wrongs that are done to us, and to forgive not just once or twice, but always. We should know that this does not mean that we aren't supposed to defend ourselves against wrongdoing. We have every right to defend ourselves. Indeed, it would be wrong not to defend ourselves—for that would be just giving in to evil. The important thing to keep in mind is that while we are defending ourselves we are not to *hate* or try to *get even* with the person who has wronged us. We need to be forgiving and try to love them even when we might have to see that they get

punished for the wrong they have done. It would be wrong to be happy that they are being punished. We should only want them to learn their lesson and not do that wrong thing again. The Lord asks us to want good for them—not evil—and be willing to be friends with them again when they have learned to do what is right.

As we have said, this is not always an easy thing to do—still it is the Lord’s command that we forgive others so that we can receive the Lord’s forgiveness when we do wrong. In another place in the New Testament, the Lord said, “if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23, 24). By this is meant that if we have done wrong to someone—even if it is just in our heart by being angry against him or hating him, we cannot really worship the Lord. Only a forgiving heart can worship the Lord.

This is what we mean when we pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors.” We are then saying that we know that the Lord can only forgive us the many wrong things we do if we are willing to forgive others the wrong they do to us.

Let each one of us promise the Lord and promise ourselves, that we will try to be truly forgiving people. Let us really try to wish well to our neighbor and be willing to forgive him “until seventy times Seven”—forgive him always. *Amen.*

Lessons: Matthew 18:15-22; *True Christian Religion* 407