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Conducted by  
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**Recently in an article on “Forgiveness” it was suggested that we can only forgive those who are repentant: and that God only forgives the repentant. Have we not the power and ability to forgive a wrong done to us by someone far from repentant: e.g., Jesus forgave those who crucified Him?**

I have, of course, read and studied both of the excellent articles on this subject in the April/May issues of the S.S. It is not my usual practice to comment on what others have written, but a specific question has been asked, and it has been suggested to me that I might like to comment, not, I hasten to add, because I can give a definitive answer on the subject, but in order to attempt to shed further light, if possible.

The questioner asks in the second part of the question, “Have we not the power and ability to forgive a wrong done to us by someone far from repentant”? It seems to me that in order to say something helpful we shall have to define what is meant by a ‘wrong’, and then we might possibly have to ask who is meant by ‘someone’, and then quite likely we shall have to differentiate between ‘the someone’ being either a fellow Christian or a so-called non-Christian. But first of all, it might help if we looked at what I call “the psychology of sin, law, and offence”; so let’s start with the One who started it all.

### **GOD**

In the first instance, God created two people, Adam and Eve. He gave them

instructions as to what was required of them. They disobeyed His instruction not, we might say, because of any inherent nature of sin, but because of the direct intervention of the embodiment of sin, Satan himself. The real tragedy as I see it, was in the responses made by Adam and Eve; a negative response to God, but a positive response to Satan. We shall return to response later, because I believe it to be extremely important.

Rom. 3 teaches us that **“there is none righteous, no, not one,”** and that **“all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”** Sin cannot be known as sin unless it is defined and acknowledged as such by someone who has authority to define it as such. That ‘someone’ is God, so far as the Bible is concerned. He has decided that the violation of His supreme authority as Creator and Sustainer of the universe — whether or not that authority and the boundaries of its violation have been made known to His Creation by instruction, decree, or command — constitutes what we know as sin. We define sin as ‘missing the mark’, consequently, when we transgress we ‘go aside from, and then overstep the mark.’ Inferential reasoning must suggest to us that ‘the mark’ is signified to us by some command or law; if there is no law then it is reasonable to assume that there can be no transgression of it, so consequently, Paul is able to teach **“for where no law is, there is no transgression.”** (Rom. 4:15).

A truism which hardly needs stating is that God is different to man. The Common Law of England, for example, was formulated from a base of custom and practice the law of God as we see it in His Word is given by divine fiat. That being so, the violation of the divine fiat must make the violator guilty before God, in fact, a sinner, if sin is the transgression of the law. The overt act of transgression, the sinful act, can be forgiven and forgotten (conditionally by God), but the **guilt** has to be removed, and so we come to the efficacy of the blood of Christ.

It was the law which gave the knowledge of sin because it defined the overt acts which constituted sin, hence Paul is able to say, **“for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.”** What the commandment did, according to Paul, was to make sin ‘exceeding sinful’ (Rom 7:13). Up to this point I have tried at some length to explain the nature of sin (it is nowhere defined in the Bible), the guilt which attaches to it, and how man’s responses to it are governed by his knowledge and understanding of it. We now need to see if, and under what circumstances, man can be forgiven, both by God and Others.

### SALVATION

The Word, as I have indicated, sets forth man in his sinful state, lost, without hope, out of communion with God, and guilty. If he is to be saved, then he must do something about it. Personally, he is helpless to work out his own salvation; he must respond to the divine initiative. On the Day of Pentecost, when the people realised the enormity of their crime in giving Jesus over to be crucified, they cried out, **“Men and brethren, what shall we do?”** They were told by Peter, **“Repent and be baptised every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”** (Acts 2:38). The word APHESIS (remission) means ‘forgiveness of sins’. We understand that God and His Christ are the only Ones who can forgive sins (see Matt. 9:1-8). I know there is a passage in John 20:23 which says **“Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained”** (this is Jesus speaking to the Apostles), but W.E. Vine explains that these words are to be understood in a ‘declarative’ sense, i.e., they have regard to the effects of their ministry of the Gospel. The forgiveness we have mentioned in Acts 2:38 is, of course, conditional. It seems that God had ‘overlooked’ sin on occasion. When Paul spoke about the sin of idolatry at Athens he said, **“the times of this ignorance God overlooked; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent”** (Acts 17). Obviously, revelation had come in Christ, and there was now no reason

for ignorance. We cannot plead ignorance when knowledge has come.

### FORGIVENESS — THE LUCAN VERSION

The Scripture in Luke 17:1,2 is not easy to explain. Mark 9:42 has Jesus saying, “**Whosoever shall offend one of these ‘little ones’ that believe in me**” (‘believe’ might imply adulthood). Matt. 18:6,7 has Jesus calling out a ‘little child’, using the child as an example of conversion, and humility, and then going on, “**But whosoever shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me . . . etc.**” Does He mean ‘little children’ as such, or, as He some times did, is He referring to disciples as His little ones? But Jesus **does** obviously see the unaffectedness of children as a mark of true discipleship.

In Luke 17:3, I believe we have to consider the **intent** of the brother who is providing the ‘stumbling block’ which will make someone ‘fall.’ In the article on “Forgiveness” in the May issue of the S.S. the writer introduces a new dimension to the subject (whether intentionally or unintentionally) when he says, quote, “One who feels that a brother’s transgression against him is **too great** to be **overlooked** . . . unquote. Are then transgressions, offences, wrongs — call them what you will — to be judged as a matter of degree? Can some be ‘overlooked’, and others have to go through the process as outlined in Matt. 18:15-17? Presumably, an offence is **always** an offence, but I think most people would agree that the offence can be either exacerbated or mitigated depending on how the offended one views it. What might be viewed by many people as a matter of little consequence could, in the mind of the offended one, assume almost manic proportions. Let me give a crude but simple example. While taking post-meeting refreshments, a brother spills a cup of tea onto a sister’s new frock or coat. The immediate reaction of the offender is to apologise profusely; the initial reaction of the offended one may be to give a tight smile, and to think inwardly, “you clumsy idiot.” The situation is made worse if the garment is ruined and no reparation is offered. But which of the two, on reflection, needs to repent **before God**. The spoken ‘sorry’, or the unspoken (but also unchristian) thought? I have used the phrase ‘before God’ because if the offence is between two Christians, then though it be a personal offence, it is nonetheless an offence against God, since both are ostensibly possessed of the Holy Spirit. God makes it clear what is in **His** mind; we on the other hand are often confused and confusing, and this is what makes the problem of forgiving and repenting between person and person so difficult: but I did warn you that I was going to look at this question from a psychological standpoint.

Perhaps our brother has inadvertently (or deliberately) pin-pointed the crux of the problem. Most ‘offences’ can be settled quite amicably by a warm handshake and a spoken, “Oh, that’s alright. Forget it.” I cannot see that repentance, as we understand it from the Word, is called into question, though it may be inherent. There are, however, offences wilfully and deliberately committed which tend to undermine the faith of individuals and even churches these **must** be dealt with in accordance with the Word. Having said that, I have never in my whole church experience seen the process as outlined in Matt. 18:15-17 actually carried out. That may indicate either our strengths or our weaknesses, I don’t know. I love the Word; I love the precision and clarity of the text. But the **letter** must never hide the spirit **behind** the letter. There may be times when I need the unrelenting scriptures of the text applied against me; there are other times when the Spirit of God through the Word challenges my soul; at such times I probably need help and compassion in my struggle upward, not unhelpful criticism and sledge-hammer textual blows applied with a seeming lack of compassion, and intended as necessary correctiveness. The value-judgements of fellow Christians, when motivated by true fellowship, will detect incipient behavioural problems and ‘nip them in the bud’ before they reach such proportions that the church has to handle

them.

There are one or two instances of what seem to be **unconditional** forgiveness. Ep. 4:32 **“And be ye kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another.”** Luke 7:41,42 records the words of Jesus regarding a creditor who had two debtors, **“And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both.”** In Cor. 12:13 we have **Paul** asking for forgiveness from the **church** at Corinth.

Yes I believe we can forgive unconditionally. If both are Christian then in the Spirit of Christ appropriate action should be taken with due relevance to the problem. If between a Christian and a non-Christian then that true Christian spirit should be exhibited so that people might be led to that greater repentance which will ultimately save them.

In conclusion, if what I have said in this answer should by any chance offend someone, please forgive me.

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