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# ACQUIRING THE SPIRITUAL SKILL OF FORGIVING

“..JUST AS GOD IN MESSIAH ALSO  
HAS FORGIVEN YOU.”

EPHESIANS 4:32



TIM HEGG

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## Forgiving Others as I have been Forgiven

Learning to forgive someone who has hurt or offended us is an essential ingredient of maintaining relationships, and guarding our hearts against bitterness. Bitterness is to the soul what metal shavings are to an engine. If they are allowed to remain, failure is inevitable. But one does not overcome the ill effects of bitterness simply by trying hard not to be bitter. Bitterness is the fruit of an unforgiving heart. Conversely, learning to exercise forgiveness is the sure antidote to bitterness.

In fact, coming to understand the terrible effect of bitterness upon the soul is one good motivation to learn forgiveness. Bitterness and hatred are companions—the one gives birth to the other. Understanding how detrimental bitterness and hatred are to one's own emotional and spiritual health is important. It is like a cancer that eats away at the soul. Solomon wrote: "Better is a dish of vegetables where love is than a fattened ox served with hatred" (Prov. 15:17). Where bitterness and hatred reside, even life's finest things cannot be enjoyed.

Moreover, bitterness and hatred inevitably give way to slander. One cannot harbor ill feelings against someone else without eventually sharing these with others. Bitterness eventually outgrows the capacity of the soul to contain it. "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions" (Prov. 10:12); "He who conceals hatred has lying lips, and he who spreads slander is a fool" (Prov. 10:18).

Furthermore, bitterness and hatred, when they eventually consume the soul, change the very makeup of a person. I have personally known people who, unwilling to deal with their deep-seated bitterness against someone who hurt them, have changed to the extent that they suffered from all kinds of maladies, and even suffered emotional and mental breakdowns. Unwilling to deal with their bitterness, they ended upon spoiling the lives of others as well: "See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled" (Heb. 12:15).

One more thing about bitterness: if it is allowed to remain, it grows (often in almost imperceptible ways), until it rules one's life. In fact, bitterness is a gateway for the enemy of our souls to gain a foothold in our lives. Paul links the two in Eph 4:26-27, "Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity." Allowing the "sun to go

down on your wrath” means allowing bitterness and hatred to linger from day to day. As far as Paul is concerned, this gives the devil an opportunity. He loves bitterness because it is antithetical to God’s grace. Yeshua taught us that if we have experienced forgiveness, we will also be ready to forgive others. When we refuse to forgive others, we are living as though we have not been forgiven ourselves, and our enemy likes that. Remember that in the Disciples’ Prayer, Yeshua teaches us that God forgives our transgressions in the same manner that we forgive others. So exercising forgiveness is a very important thing!

As I have said, the antidote to bitterness and hatred is learning to forgive those who have hurt or offended us. Forgiving one another must be something that we are able and ready to do, meaning we must understand forgiveness and practice it regularly.

All of this pertains to relationships in general, and thus to marriage in particular. One might think that focusing on the act of forgiveness is to take a negative approach to marriage. Shouldn’t we begin with the positive expectation that a husband and wife will treat each other with such love, that there will never be a need to forgive each other? Hardly! That would be like hoping the new car you buy really doesn’t need oil because it is so well engineered. The reality of things is that we are all sinners saved by God’s grace, and we all still wage war against the sinful nature. We are not perfect, and we are all growing and maturing in our faith—none of us have arrived yet! That also means that inevitably we will, at times, act selfishly, arrogantly, and without love. And that means we all will have opportunities to exercise forgiveness. This will be just as true in our marriages as it is in our work place, and our relationships with extended family members and friends.

A key biblical text dealing with forgiveness is Eph 4:31-32—

Greek	NASB
<p>31 πᾶσα πικρία καὶ θυμὸς καὶ ὄργη καὶ κραυγὴ καὶ βλασφημία ἀρθήτω ἀφ’ ὑμῶν σὺν πάσῃ κακίᾳ 32 γίνεσθε δὲ εἰς ἀλλήλους χρηστοί, εὖσπλαγχοι, χαριζόμενοι, ἑαυτοῖς, καθὼς καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἐν Χριστῷ ἐχαρίσατο ὑμῖν.</p>	<p>31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Messiah also has forgiven you.</p>

As noted above, just prior to these verses, Paul has admonished us not to let the sun go down on our anger and thus to give opportunity to the devil. Here, he summarizes the bitter, unforgiving spirit with a list of terms (v. 31) and gives the command to be kind, and thus to forgive (v. 32). It can readily be seen that those things listed in v. 31 stand in opposition to kindness and the exercise of forgiveness. Thus, learning to forgive first involves recognizing and “putting away” those things that impede forgiveness. Let’s look at each of the terms given in v. 31:

- Bitterness** (πικρία, *pikria*) Involves the use of the tongue. This is insulting speech, belittling someone, making light of someone, either to his face or behind his back.
- Wrath** (θυμός, *thumos*) An outburst of anger; quick flare-up; loss of temper; immediate retaliation
- Anger** (ὀργή, *orge*) This is usually thought of as the “slow burn,” the silent treatment. The word tends to convey a contemplative revenge.
- Clamor** (κραυγή, *krauge*) Arguing, “a lot of noise,” never letting the issue die; always bringing the matter up to the person’s attention; needing to have the last word.
- Slander** (βλασφημία, *blasphemia*) Literally, “blasphemy,” degrading the character of someone; *lashon hara*
- Malice** (κακία, *kakia*) Literally “bad things,” and in this context, therefore, “bad feelings,” “wrong motives.” Every other kind of selfish or bad relational behavior.

The first important step in “putting away” these sinful behaviors is to recognize that they are, in fact, sin. We cannot excuse these things as just the function of our personalities or temperaments.

While each of us will struggle with some of these more than others, we all must admit that they are contrary to what God wants of us, and we must therefore commit ourselves to put them away from our lives. These descriptions of sinful behavior simply cannot characterize us.

Then the Apostle gives us the positive exhortation to kindness and forgiveness in v. 32. And in so doing, he gives us the supreme example to follow, that is, the manner in which God forgave us in Messiah Yeshua. In fact, the language he uses is instructive: "...forgiving each other, just as (*ὡς, hos*) God in Messiah has forgiven you." Our forgiveness is to be patterned after God's forgiveness. The way He forgives is the way we are to forgive. It will be instructive, then, to study briefly the character and method of God's forgiveness in Yeshua.

1. God forgave us totally of His grace, not for self gain

God did not enrich Himself through forgiving us. On the contrary, forgiving us was very costly to Him. "For you know the grace of our Lord Yeshua Messiah, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich" (2Cor. 8:9). This is the very essence of love—a willingness to give without receiving. Selfish motives for extending forgiveness, or seeking it, betray a false forgiveness. Such feigned forgiveness is short-lived, and often breeds more strife.

2. God forgave us completely

It is tempting to forgive in part and yet hold back a measure of the offense as a kind of advantage over the other person: "you still owe me because of what you did back then!" God doesn't remember our sins against us—He forgives them completely.

Col. 2:13 When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven

us all our transgressions,

Is. 55:7 Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.

3. God forgave us before we asked for forgiveness

He forgave us when we did not deserve to be forgiven, even while we were still committing offenses against Him!

Rom. 5:8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Messiah died for us.

4. God forgave us on the basis of Messiah's death

God did not forego His justice in order to forgive us. In other words, He didn't "sweep our sins under the carpet." Rather, He dealt with our sins by paying the penalty due to His justice. In this we learn that forgiveness is not antithetical to justice, but actually is the result of seeing justice served. Justice and forgiveness are two sides of the same coin.

"For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Rom 5:10).

5. God's forgiveness is continual

In 1John 1:9 we read: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The Greek text gives us a little more insight into the Apostle's teaching. The opening verb, "confess," (*ὁμολογῶμεν, homologomen*) is a present tense verb. We might translate it this way: "Whenever we confess our sins ...." That means that there is no

limit to the number of times that we can come to God and ask for His forgiveness. And the verse goes on to say that whenever we confess our sins, God is faithful and righteous to forgive us. He is faithful, meaning He is always ready to forgive.

Peter asked Yeshua a very interesting question about forgiveness in Matt 18:21–22: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Yeshua said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” We should understand Yeshua’s answer, not as a concrete arithmetic number, as though when we have forgiven 490 times, that’s enough! No, seventy times seven was a way of saying “forgive as often as you are asked.” This is exactly the way that God forgives us. Whenever we seek forgiveness, He is faithful *and* righteous to give us forgiveness.

So we may summarize God’s way of forgiving us in Messiah as:

- on the basis of His grace
- completely
- before we asked for forgiveness
- with justice
- continually

Now, since in Eph 4:32 Paul admonishes us to forgive in the same way that we are forgiven, we may take these characteristics of God’s forgiveness as the model we are to follow.

### *Forgiving as a matter of grace*

When someone sins against us, or offends us with unkind deeds, we must resist the tendency to offer forgiveness as a “down payment” for future actions. In other words, we should not forgive someone with the idea that when we do, that person is obligated toward us in ways that they otherwise would not be. Often, if such a motive is behind our “forgiveness,” we hold out for a while, and really make the person squirm. We want them to know how much they have hurt us, and that when we finally do forgive them, they

should understand that we're doing so as a big favor to them, and that we expect special favor on their part once we do give them our forgiveness. Or to put it another way: we should not use forgiveness as leverage to control the person we're forgiving. We don't forgive someone because they deserve to be forgiven. We forgive someone because we desire to obey God—because it is the right thing to do. God forgave us, not because we deserved to be forgiven, but because He is, by His very nature, a forgiving God.

There's another aspect to this: sometimes "forgiving" someone is to our advantage. We might feign forgiveness to someone who has something we want, or who has power to make things better for us. For instance, we may find it easier to let an offense go, when the one who has offended us holds a promotion in his power, or has something we want. But this is not true forgiveness—it's selfishness.

Yeshua teaches us that we are to forgive in the same way that we have been forgiven: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt 6:12). In fact, it is when we have experienced the forgiveness of God that we are motivated to forgive others. Yeshua also teaches us this in His words about the woman who anointed His feet with perfume, and washed them with her tears. When the others were concerned about her actions, Yeshua responded: "For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." A better translation would be: "...her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, and *the proof of this is* she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." In other words, when we come to appreciate the abundant, gracious forgiveness given to us by God in Messiah, we are compelled to forgive others in the same, gracious way.

### *Forgiving Completely*

It is our natural tendency to withhold forgiveness as a way of controlling the situation, and especially as a way to protect ourselves. When someone hurts us by sinning against us, our natural response is to find a way not to be hurt by that person again, and often this is done by withholding full forgiveness. We can always tell when partial forgiveness exists, by the fact that we continue to bring up the offense. Complete forgiveness means that we no lon-

ger hold the offense as a weapon against the other person. We don't keep bringing up the past offense whenever we want to be in control. This does not mean that we forget the offense—that is often impossible. The Scriptures never command us to “forgive and forget,” only to forgive. But when we do forgive someone, we discipline ourselves to put that offense away, and to reckon it as something that has been put in God's hands. We resist the temptation of harboring an offense once it has been forgiven.

Once again, God's way of forgiveness is the model we are to follow. Consider Ps 103:12 – “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us,” and Col 2:13–14: “When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” God does not keep lists so that He can remind us of our sins. When He forgives us, He tears up the list and discards it. Paul describes love in this same way: 1Cor 13:5 “[Love] is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs” (NIV).

### *Forgiving before being asked to forgive*

As we saw, God forgave us while we were still His enemy—before we ever asked His forgiveness. This becomes yet another aspect of how we are to forgive those who offend us.

It is natural to think that when someone offends us, it becomes our duty to “teach them a lesson” so they won't do it again. Logically, we think that if we extend forgiveness too quickly, the person will not take their sin against us seriously. Even more, we naturally think that withholding forgiveness will be a strong motivation for the person who has offended us to see the error of his or her ways. In this way, we make our forgiveness a reward for their repentance.

But this is just opposite of how things really work. We love God, not because we earned His forgiveness by our own sorrow over sin. We love God because we came to realize that He forgave us before we ever asked. In other words, we came to love Him because we understood that He had already loved us. Forgiving a person changes them—not withholding forgiveness. Withholding forgive-

ness only deepens the rift between the one offended and the offender, and opens the door for bitterness in the hearts of both.

This highlights an important fact about the nature of forgiveness itself: forgiveness is a change of attitude on the part of the one offended, not necessarily a restoration of relationship. Surely forgiveness smooths the way for a restored relationship, but it precedes restoration and is not dependent upon it. In other words, you can forgive someone whether or not your relationship to that person is ever fully restored. Forgiveness, then, is fundamentally a change of heart toward both the offense itself and the offender.

What is this change of attitude? First, we must confess the foundational truth that God is sovereign and in control of all things (Rom 8:28). We are not able to understand how the evil acts of people figure into the all-controlling sovereignty of God, but we know that somehow, in His infinite sovereignty, He is able to use even the sinful acts of men for His ultimate glory. This means that even when someone sins against us, we must trust that God can turn this for our good and His glory as we respond to the offense in righteous ways. So the first step in practicing forgiveness is to trust that God is in control, even in the situation that has caused us pain.

Secondly, we affirm the truth of God's word that He is the One who disciplines or punishes the sinner. Rom 12:19 "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord." Thus, when someone sins against me, it is not my place to see to it that he is punished or corrected. That is God's place. If I think that withholding forgiveness will punish the person by making them feel bad, I've usurped God's place as the avenger. So the second thing I must practice is giving the whole matter to God, and letting Him deal with it in His way and in His time. That means I give up any notion I might have, that teaching the offender a lesson is my responsibility. My ability to change the person for the good will come by expressing genuine forgiveness.

After affirming that God is the One who repays the sinner, Paul goes on in Rom 12:20-21 to write: "On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." The meaning of "heap burning coals upon his head" (cf. Prov 25:22) is difficult to understand. Obviously, Paul is not suggesting that the greatest revenge comes by being kind to those who have sinned against us! If

our motivation for kindness is revenge, then the previous verse loses its entire force. Rather, the idea of “burning coals” has the final judgment in view. In other words, if one is kind to one’s enemies, and this does not change them but they continue to act as an enemy, then one’s kindness will stand as yet another witness against them in the final day. Ultimately, Paul’s point here is that revenge is to be left in the hands of God, even if such revenge will not be meted out until the judgment day.

Thirdly, forgiveness, as a change of attitude toward the offense and the offender, allows one to view the whole situation from an entirely different perspective. Once we have reckoned with the fact that God is in control, even of this situation, and that He is the One Who is responsible to correct and teach the offender, we are able to analyze the offense from a different angle. More often than not, when a person sins against us, it reveals a deeper need in their lives. For instance, a person often engages in *lashon hara* because they feel inferior or marginalized. They think that by bringing others down through gossip, they will elevate themselves. Once we have given the situation to God, we are able to view the offense as an indication of the offender’s needs, and are therefore in a better position genuinely to love that person by seeking to meet his or her needs. This is especially true in the marriage relationship. Unkind words, disrespect, anger, dishonesty—all of these are warning signs of much deeper needs. Once we are able to change our attitude through applying forgiveness, we can stop to ask the more important question: “what does this tell me about the real needs of my spouse?” That is a love question! When we are able to stop concerning ourselves with protecting ourselves, or getting revenge, or teaching the offender a lesson, we are able to seek ways to help heal the wounds that caused the offense in the first place.

### *Forgiving within the sphere of justice*

We noted that God forgives us, not by sweeping our sins under the carpet, but by dealing with them in terms of satisfying His own, infinite justice. He did this by giving His Son, Yeshua, as payment for our sins. Thus, the forgiveness that He extends to us cost Him plenty!

We need to remember that forgiving someone does not mean pretending the offense didn’t occur, or simply saying we won’t talk about it any more—that is, leaving it unresolved and hoping that it

will just go away. This is not forgiveness, and it will never solve the problem. Like a sliver that is left under the skin, an unresolved offense will just continue to fester. Yeshua teaches us that when offenses occur, we are to be active in resolving the conflict: Matt. 5:23–24, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” Here, “be reconciled” does not mean “have your relationship restored.” It means that you do all in your power to right the wrong, whether or not the person you have sinned against acknowledges it. At the minimum, this means you ask for his or her forgiveness. It means that you engage in restoration of whatever material things may have been the cause of the offense. From the side of the one offended, it means that you willingly forgive, and that you accomplish what needs to be done in order to rectify the wrong.

So forgiveness is not devoid of justice: it depends upon it. Only when wrongs have been righted, can there be any hope of restoring the relationship. But it is important to realize that when you have done all you can do (asked forgiveness, restored whatever you are able), you have fulfilled your obligation. If the person refuses to say he or she forgives you, that is their problem, not yours. You may return to the “altar” and “offer your gift.”

There is one other aspect of this characteristic of forgiveness, as it pertains to extending forgiveness to a fellow believer. We should remember that God has already forgiven the person of his or her sin through the sacrifice of Yeshua. He has declared that person righteous. If God has forgiven all of our sins in Yeshua, who are we to withhold forgiveness? Are we more righteous than God Himself?! So a further motivation in forgiving someone who has sinned against us, is to remember that God has already forgiven him or her. Moreover, since the death of Yeshua is the final and ultimate basis for forgiveness of sins, we may forgive those who sin against us on the same grounds. If Yeshua died to pay the penalty of the very sin enacted against us by someone, then what right do we have to hold the offense as though it still needs to be paid?

### *Forgiving Continually*

One of the hardest things to do is to continue to forgive someone when they repeatedly sin against us. We begin to think that in

forgiving the person, we are simply enabling them to continue in their sin. We're "letting them off the hook," when we should be holding their feet to the fire by telling them "this is the last time I'm forgiving you for this. If it happens again, forget it!" But, as I've noted above, it is not our place to bring justice upon the head of the one who has sinned against us. That is God's responsibility. Moreover, withholding forgiveness does not change the person who has sinned against us, it only hardens them. But most importantly, withholding forgiveness opens the way in our own hearts for bitterness.

Once again, however, I want to make it clear that forgiveness does not dismiss justice. Let me relate a story to try to illustrate this. A family I know went through a terrible tragedy. A prowler broke into the home of their daughter, and in the course of the theft, was startled by the daughter walking into the room, and subsequently shot and killed her. The sorrow, anger, and dismay that the whole family felt was understandable. A great injustice had been committed, and there was no way to rectify the wrong that had been done. The parents asked me, in the course of time, how they could deal with the bitterness and hatred they felt for the criminal. They admitted that, while they were dealing with the sorrow of the loss of their daughter, the bitterness against her assailant was eating them up inside. As difficult as it was, I began to tell them about their need to forgive him. At first, that sounded strange to me as well. How could anyone forgive such a person who had brought so great a sorrow upon this family? But then I explained that forgiving him meant putting him into the hands of God, and letting God deal with how justice would be served. In time, they understood this and were able to let go of the bitterness by exercising forgiveness. But then the trial took place, and they asked me how they should feel toward the criminal they had forgiven. Should they pray that he might be given a light sentence, or that he might even be acquitted of the crime? Here I reminded them that God, Who is fully merciful while at the same time just, had already decreed that a murderer deserved the death penalty. Their willingness to forgive the criminal did not negate that he should pay for his crime in accordance with God's justice. In the midst of having forgiven him, meaning they had removed themselves from the need to take revenge, they could still trust God to administer justice in accordance with His own righteousness.

How does this principle apply in our everyday lives and rela-

tionships? It means that while we commit ourselves to an unending practice of forgiveness, we do not negate the need to see justice is met. A wife whose husband is unfaithful, should commit herself to forgive him. But even after engaging in genuine forgiveness, she still has the right, in accordance with God's justice, to seek a divorce from him. The two things are not mutually exclusive. This highlights the fact that forgiveness and restoration of a broken relationship are not necessarily the same. Forgiveness may lead to restoration, and that, of course, is the best outcome. But forgiveness is fundamentally a change of heart in the one who has been offended. Restoration is the willingness and the ability to rebuild what has been broken through sin, and this involves both parties.

### *Roadblocks to Forgiveness, or Attitudes of an Unforgiving Heart*

Let's face it: forgiving someone who has hurt us is one of the hardest things we do. That is because forgiveness is contrary to our sinful nature. If we allow our sinful nature to lead the way, we will always find very good reasons why we should withhold forgiveness. Moreover, the enemy of our souls hates forgiveness. Since our battle is not against people, but against the evil powers (Eph 6:12), when we commit ourselves to obey God, we are engaged in a spiritual battle as well. This is all the more true in the area of forgiveness. The enemy knows that his primary foothold in the lives of people is bitterness, and he also knows that exercising the spiritual duty of forgiveness dispels bitterness. So given the opportunity, he will set all manner of roadblocks in the path of anyone who is committed to extending forgiveness.

1. "I'm trying to forgive, but I just can't forget what he has done to me!"

As I noted above, there is no Scriptural requirement to forget in order to forgive. One does not forget what has taken place; one changes their attitude toward the one who has caused the offense.

Yeshua teaches this when He gave the parable to His disciples, following Peter's question about how often we should forgive someone who has sinned against us (Matt 18:23ff). In this parable, a king is settling accounts with his servants. He brings before him one man who owed ten thousand talents and demands that he pay

his debt. Unable to come up with that amount of money, the master demands that he, his wife, and children be sold into slavery to pay the debt. With nothing left to do but beg for the master's mercies, the servant falls to his knees and pleads his cause. The story goes to tell that the master felt pity upon the man, and *forgave* his debt and let him go free. Now free from his burden, the servant went out and found someone who owed him money, and demanded payment. When the man could not repay the debt, the servant demanded that he be thrown in prison. This turn of events was reported back to the king, who immediately summoned the unworthy servant, reprimanded him, and reinstated his debt. He sent the unworthy servant to prison and torment until such time as the debt was fully paid.

Here, in the parable, we see that the king forgave the debt initially, but he did not forget it! When the servant acted unworthily, the debt was easily reinstated.

The same is true of the New Covenant text in Jer 31:31-34. Here, God says regarding the sins of Israel, "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." But in this context, the word "remember" is used in a covenant sense, meaning "I will forgive their sins and no longer credit them to their account." Obviously, the all-knowing God cannot "forget" anything! The point of forgiveness, from a divine perspective, is that the sins are no longer credited or charged to the account of the sinner.

So remembering the offense should not be a roadblock to forgiving it. Rather, forgiveness exists in the willingness to consider the debt (offense) paid in full. It is a change of attitude toward the offense and the offender.

2. "He needs to learn a lesson! He hurt me, and I'm not about to forgive him until he understands how much pain he caused."

Revenge is probably at the heart of an unforgiving attitude. But as we have seen, revenge belongs to God, not to us. When our hearts lean toward harboring unforgiveness because we want to "even the scales" with the one who has hurt us, we must remember that in doing so, we are usurping God's rightful place as the Judge of all the earth.

Furthermore, revenge is a single way of describing those things listed in Eph 4:31, the very things that we are commanded to "put

away” in order to exercise forgiveness. Revenge is the opposite of love, and Paul teaches us that “love does not take revenge” (1Cor 13:5). In the end, revenge is selfishness. We may try to convince ourselves that revenge is the enactment of justice, but if we attempt to bring about justice in unjust ways, we actually have thwarted justice.

We also should reckon with the fact that if revenge was the way to deal with sin, we all would fall before the wrath of God. Instead, God, in His mercy, extended forgiveness to us in spite of the fact that we had sinned against Him. If our hearts are attracted to revenge when someone sins against us, it is time to rehearse once again how God forgave us, and to revel in the glory of His love. When we have experienced His forgiveness and love afresh, we will be far more able to extend forgiveness and love to the one who has sinned against us.

Likewise, we should remember that when we take revenge as our duty, we have taken to ourselves what rightfully belongs to God. This is a very dangerous step, because thinking we can act in God’s place is the very substance of Satan’s rebellion from the beginning. He wanted to be “like God.” A heart set on revenge is a heart governed by bitterness, and bitterness gives way to the devil. Whenever we begin to plan revenge, we should be awakened to the fact that we are giving into the very ways of the enemy.

3. “As soon as he asks for forgiveness, I’ll give it to him, and not a second before!”

This roadblock to forgiveness is founded upon the common misunderstanding of what forgiveness is in the first place. Forgiveness is not something that is earned by one’s seeking it, or warranted by one’s repentance. What if the person who sinned against you never asks for your forgiveness? Does that mean you harbor ill feelings against him or her for the rest of your life? What good would that do either for yourself or for the one who has sinned against you? It only leaves you harboring an offense, and vulnerable to bitterness.

Here is where Paul’s admonition to forgive “just as God forgave” us in Yeshua is insightful. Just as God forgave us before we ever sought forgiveness, so we are able to forgive those who sin against us before they ever approach us for forgiveness. Remember, forgiveness means 1) believing that God is in control of every situ-

ation, meaning that He has the ability to take your current situation and turn it to His glory and your good, 2) confessing that God is the One Who is in charge of the person who has sinned against you, and He is the One who will administer discipline or punishment, and teach that person what he or she needs to learn, and 3) the offense against you can be used to understand the deeper issues and problems of the offender, giving you the ability to love them in genuine ways.

These steps to forgiveness, which are really nothing more than agreeing with God and acting upon what He has said, can be done well before the offender ever seeks your forgiveness. In fact, they should be! The sooner we can move toward forgiveness, the better. Don't leave any time for bitterness to grow and take root. When someone sins against you, begin the process of forgiveness. Then if and when that person comes to seek your forgiveness, you will be fully able to offer it without reservations.

4. "He's not sincere when he asks me to forgive him! The reason I know, is that he's done this before, and I think he'll probably do it again. He's just taking advantage of my kindness!"

As we have seen, Yeshua teaches us that we are to keep on forgiving, regardless of how many times someone sins against us. So the choice is not whether I should forgive or not, but whether I will obey or not. The idea that if I withhold forgiveness from someone who continues to sin against me, this will rectify the situation, is wrong headed. Withholding forgiveness is itself a sin, and one cannot overcome sin with sin.

Once again, however, this roadblock stems from a misunderstanding of what forgiveness is in the first place. Forgiveness is the change of attitude on the part of the one who has been offended. Its primary effect is not on the one who has caused the offense, but upon the heart of the one offended. Forgiving frees the heart to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Lk 6:27). In other words, forgiveness frees a person to follow in the footsteps of Yeshua.

## *What to expect if you commit yourself to exercising forgiveness*

I wish it were possible to promise that when we commit ourselves to forgiving those who hurt us, we will always experience happiness and success without trials! But we all know that is not the case in this fallen world. If we do follow in the footsteps of Yeshua, and love those who hurt us as He commanded, we can expect that there will be some measure of suffering. Forgiveness is an act of love, and love means giving oneself away. That, too, is contrary to our sin nature, and that means we will have to die to self in order to forgive.

But what can we expect as the outcome of exercising forgiveness toward those who offend us? First, people may consider us weak, and think they can take advantage of us all the more. We may be diminished in the eyes of some, because we are not willing to slander the one who has sinned against us, because we have already forgiven that person. But our strength is in the Lord. We leave the outcome of obeying Him in His hands.

Second, we may be slandered. People who are bent to revenge and bitterness will consider our willingness to forgive as a character flaw—an inability to “stand up for our rights.” This may particularly be the case in the workplace, where slander and revenge is the common stock and trade.

Third, and most importantly, we should expect success in our own lives, because God promises to bless those who obey Him. And forgiveness is first and foremost a matter of obedience to our Master. A forgiving heart is one that is at rest with the Lord and with itself. Self-contentment is a rare treasure, and one that should be highly prized. Being able to go to sleep at night, knowing that no bitterness or revenge is harbored in one’s heart, is a great delight. Moreover, obeying God by forgiving those who sin against us keeps our hearts pure before the Almighty. Withholding forgiveness means harboring sin in our hearts. The bitterness that an unforgiving heart nurtures is a cancer that will eventually affect one’s entire outlook and perspective on life. Practicing forgiveness therefore frees the heart to fervent worship, a joyful spirit, and the ability to enjoy all of the good things God has given us. Finally, a person who knows how to forgive is a vessel fit for the Master’s use. He is not self-consumed with the way others have hurt him, because he has placed these situations into the Almighty’s hands, and is content to leave them there. He is not constantly burdened with the offenses

of others, and is therefore able to bear the burdens of others, and in so doing, to fulfill the Torah of Messiah (Gal 6:2).