

The Heaviest Burden of All

When we think of the word, "burden" we think of that which weighs us down. Physically speaking, examples of burdens would include heavy rocks or trees that would need to be moved in order to make way for a garden or lawn. Emotionally speaking, examples of burdens would include poor health, the loss of a loved one or financial difficulties. Spiritually speaking, nothing weighs us down more than sin (Hebrews 12:1). Among the burdens that we bear from time to time is one that could be the heaviest and most bothersome of all, the burden of an unwillingness to forgive those who have wronged us. The practice of grudge-holding is both emotionally and spiritually draining for those who engage in it.

The Bible has so much to say about God's forgiveness of man's sins. How often do we consider the passages that tell us we are to be forgiving of one another? Jesus said, "And when you stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses." (Mark 11:25-26). Paul wrote in Colossians 3:13, "Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye." In Matthew 18:21-35 we find the parable of the unmerciful servant. He was the individual who owed his master a large sum of money. He begged for relief of the debt and, by the mercy of the master, was granted it. Soon after, this same servant confronted someone who owed him a small amount of money. When given the opportunity to show the same mercy that he himself had been shown, he chose to force the debtor to prison for his inability to pay. The application is clear. In the parable the Lord is the master and we are the servants. God has forgiven Christians of tremendous spiritual debt, the debt of sin that leads to eternal damnation (Romans 6:23). But how do we treat our fellow man who has transgressed against us? No matter what someone has done to us, said to us or said about us, it does not come close to the offenses that we have committed against God and of which God has forgiven us if we have obeyed His Gospel and are continuing in faithful obedience. Just as in the parable there was no comparison between the large debt the servant owed and the small debt that was owed him, there is no comparison between the transgressions we have committed against God and those that men have committed against us. If God can forgive us when we seek His forgiveness according to His will, then we should be able to forgive others when they seek our forgiveness.

Still, at times we are convinced that what someone has done to us is absolutely unforgivable. They've cheated us, lied to us, spread rumors about us. There's no way we could ever forgive that and we're going to carry that grudge with us to the grave. It might even get to the point where it becomes an obsession as we tell everyone who will listen how badly that particular person treated us. Slowly but surely the joy leaks out of our lives as our minds keep going back to the anger we have toward that individual. Maybe he or she has even come to us about the matter and asked us to forgive them. Maybe we have chosen to harbor the grudge rather than give it up. As time has gone by that unwillingness to forgive has become a major burden, a millstone about the neck that has dragged us farther and farther away from God. Oh, we might sit in the church building a few times a week and we might even pray at home, but with the burden of a grudge pressing down on our spirits, we can never draw closer to God.

How important is it that we be willing to forgive those who trespass against us (Matthew 6:12)? The answer is clearly seen in the verses cited earlier, but let me close with an example that I personally saw. By the time I had met this elderly sister in Christ, the dispute she had had with her Christian sister-in-law had already aged 10-20 years. The dispute was over money. She would not speak to her sister-in-law. When I went to her hospital room as she lay dying, I heard her say one thing over and over again. She was not coherent. She didn't know anyone was there. She just kept saying one phrase over and over again: "Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me." Was this being said in reference to the grudge she had held for so many years? Only God knows for sure, but in light of the circumstances, it would seem so. What a waste of years and what a sad way to end a life. Let's not allow ourselves to be weighed down by what might be the heaviest burden of all, the burden of an unwillingness to forgive.