

The Road of Applied Forgiveness

Three perspectives of
a single precept

Rick & Eunice Johnson

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Three Perspectives of a Single Precept
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Originally written and published in Spanish under
the title:

EL CAMINO DEL PERDÓN APLICADO
Tres perspectivas de un solo precepto
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Published by
International Action Ministries, Inc.
2610 Galveston Street
San Diego CA 92110

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ISBN 978-0-9818804-7-1
Printed in Bogotá, Colombia
Editorial Buena Semilla

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Acknowledgements

This book was originally written in Spanish under the title of: **EL CAMINO DEL PERDÓN APLICADO -- Tres Perspectivas de Un Solo Precepto.** Its contents were taken from a series of challenges Rick has shared with our Latin American churches, ministry teams and the missionary training programs in Mexico, Central and South America over the course of the past two decades. It is our greatest honor and privilege to be able to serve in these countries with our wonderful and appreciated Latin American friends there. They are the first for whom we want to express our gratitude.

We are also eternally indebted to you, our English speaking partners, who have made the above mentioned years of service possible and for whom we have prepared this English edition. It is with the hope that this small slice of what has been a blessing and challenge in our Latin American world may also be a blessing to some of you, our dear friends. We are eternally grateful for your lives.

Our deepest gratitude is expressed here for those who carefully reviewed the English manuscript.

Thank you Toby Erickson, Steve and Elza Terrell, Jan Piersall, and Becky Johnson for your time, patience and help in editing this English edition.

Rick and Eunice Johnson

Introduction

By Juan Elías Salas and Steve Saint

Juan Elías: The life of the disciple of Jesus Christ is related to individuals who have various thoughts and positions concerning this fundamental issue: The Road of Applied Forgiveness. As imperfect humans, we often need to seek and ask for forgiveness, or to forgive others. This becomes an exercise that we need to implement throughout life for our own well-being, for that of our neighbor, our families and our churches. The disciple of Jesus Christ will need to experience diverse circumstances that will cause him or her to learn the importance of being healthy spiritually, mentally and relationally.

Initiating the Road of Applied Forgiveness may require a very high cost: humility, which is needed if we are intent on obtaining effective reconciliation. In the life of the disciple of Jesus Christ, asking for forgiveness and forgiving becomes an essential requirement which contributes to a life marked by integrity, gratitude and love. This allows us to be instruments in God's hands to bless others.

The Road of Applied Forgiveness requires a unique approach to achieve reconciliation in which it is very important that we utilize good reasoning together with a right attitude and integrity.

Our friends, Rick and Eunice, in a simple yet very clear way, propose several introspective aspects that will help the reader understand and reflect on the importance of tangibly undertaking this Road of Applied Forgiveness. The stories and anecdotes that Rick uses in this book offer us greater clarity concerning the issue of forgiveness and confront us with situations we might be experiencing.

Reading this book will help you understand the importance of this fundamental part of the life of a true disciple of Jesus Christ: The Road of Applied Forgiveness.

Juan Elías Salas

Pastor and cross-cultural missions board director
Servicios Asociados para el Desarrollo Integral, A.C.
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Steve Saint: I have often heard comments of evangelicals who have spoken of others saying things like: “He is a strong Christian!” What has concerned me is that in numerous occasions, people have said this about me upon learning of the story about my family. Over the years, many have used me as an example of a man who greatly understands the issues concerning forgiveness. Unfortunately, I do not feel that way.

It is true that four of the six indigenous warriors who violently killed my dear father later became my good friends. Moreover, I consider them part of my family. (Of the six who participated in the killing, the fifth died before I could know him, and the sixth I did not have the opportunity of knowing well).

The miracle of this story, from more than sixty years ago, is not that I was able to forgive them. If there was a miracle, it was that God gave me a great love for them. God converted these savage warriors into humble and loving men. I was baptized by them, and one of them took me and treated me as his own son.

The secret of forgiveness is not that we become “resilient” men and women able to forgive one another. Rather, it is our recognition of God’s forgiveness of us which produces in us a reaction of gratitude. It’s the obtaining of clear discernment of the reality of God’s forgiveness of our many offenses that now we can show our gratitude for this mercy by forgiving those who may hurt or offend us.

There is an old saying, “The way in which one is treated is how he will treat others.” For many individuals, this is true. However, for the God-follower, there is another truth, one which should be lived and expressed this way: “Let him who has received God’s forgiveness practice forgiveness with others.”

I trust that the following pages of this book, The Road of Applied Forgiveness, can be an inspiration to each of us to be one of those who practice forgiveness.

Steve Saint
Missionary among the Waodani
Founder of I-TEC (Indigenous People’s
Technology and Education Center)

“Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you.” Ephesians 4:31-32

Foundations

The following pages represent a summary of a module we have taught over the years in the missionary training programs in Mexico and South America. We share portions of it here in order to encourage and edify our friends who share with us many of the same fundamental life values of a disciple of Jesus Christ. We will briefly analyze the fundamental precept of applied forgiveness by means of three distinct perspectives.

Although there is a variety of thoughts related to the principle of forgiveness, it seems that some of them should be basic and fundamental in the life of every genuinely “born-again” individual. We must be very careful to avoid allowing a gap to form between our intellectual understanding about forgiveness, and the statute of forgiveness being actually applied in our lives.

The issue of forgiveness has many facets. It’s a topic related to great blessings, but it also lends itself to tremendous discord, often due to the selfishness of our human nature.

We may have the tendency to embrace an egocentric reference point in our thinking about forgiveness. One manifestation of this is the frequency with which the subject leads us to immediately think of ourselves as the injured party (victims), and others as the offenders, instead of first considering the opposite; viewing ourselves as those who have offended others. If humility is not put above our feelings, it is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve reconciliation.

Much of society is swayed by emotions or feelings. For many people, including many so-called “God-Followers,” their feelings determine everything. There are individuals who can *feel* offended by almost anything, and that “feeling” can become a root of bitterness which will control them the rest of their lives.

We should emphasize the word “*feel*.” For if one does not *feel* offended, although the “offender” should seek forgiveness for any misdeed, there

was no actual offense taken. Perhaps the friend was “offensive,” but his colleague did not take it as an offense. In this case, perhaps there was no offense before men, although before God an offense was committed.

Furthermore, where there is mature love, offenses are not easily perceived and therefore resentment does not develop. Whether or not the aggressions or “offenses” have the intention of hurting the other, mature love does not allow them to be taken as such.

On the other hand, we find a mirror that reveals that each and every one of us has been and is an “offender.” Because of immaturity, we may tend to think about forgiveness with a perspective in which we are always the offended one. To strive toward maturity, it will be required of us to consider two things. First, what’s important is not if I feel offended, but rather, if the other person feels wronged. Second, is the need of someone taking the initiative to seek reconciliation.

The essential matter here is not to determine who is right and who isn’t, but rather who will seek reconciliation. The major impediment in the

process of reconciliation is almost always the same: selfishness and pride.

As long as the attitudes of arrogance and selfishness prevail, we will observe that the offender always, and without fail, will seek justifications to protect and defend himself. But here we discover a mystery and a great contradiction. If the offended individual is selfish and proud, in short time he or she will become that very same person he or she despises. That individual will become “the offender,” because the very nature of selfishness and pride is offensive to both God and to man.

Therefore, we see that the alleged “offense” of one individual can serve to reveal the self-centeredness and pride of another. Perhaps the afflicted individual did not reveal any selfishness or pride prior to feeling “offended.” Even so, the alleged offense leads to exposing fundamental flaws in his life, including that of selfishness. So, in this case, although “the offender” has committed a wrong, “the offended” individual should in no way blame him for having revealed that he, himself, also is culpable!

In our churches and in our missionary teams, the issue of forgiveness is foundational. Yet what is needed is not more information or Bible studies about love, forgiveness and other related subjects. Our real need is to apply the principles of forgiveness in our daily lives. We will have to connect our intellectual “sound doctrine” with our feet to embark on this path of applied forgiveness!

The three perspectives we will examine concerning applied forgiveness aim to offer us a practical and biblical outlook on the subject. This may in turn lead us to better define our convictions regarding true Christian living.

In the subsequent pages, we will share some personal stories from our cross-cultural missionary experience along with three brief meditations, three perspectives, and three Bible texts related to applied forgiveness.

Perhaps some of you reading these words have held resentment, animosity and bitterness for years. Others are perhaps struggling, “waiting for the right time” to forgive someone or to seek forgiveness. Some readers will have a special “encounter” with God upon considering

the implications of foundational truths discovered in His Word. Those who decide to apply these principles will find themselves at the door of great treasure.

In our congregations, whether in big cities, crowded barrios or in small towns, as well as within our missionary teams working in isolated villages, the same thing is required of each of us. It is imperative that every God-Follower not only understand intellectually about forgiveness, but also practice it by living the way of applied forgiveness.

We write these words to our friends, our partners and fellow servants. Let us encourage one another to live on the Road of Applied Forgiveness!

Rick and Eunice Johnson

THE ROAD OF APPLIED FORGIVENESS

Three perspectives of a single precept

The HOW of the Road of Forgiveness

Every born-again man or woman should understand the importance of HOW to respond concerning the following three issues:

1. How to forgive others
2. How to seek and ask for forgiveness
3. How to receive forgiveness

These three principles are interwoven. In one way or another, all three should be present in the mind of every God-Follower no matter if one feels offended or if one finds him or herself to be the offender. In many cases, those who feel they have been offended have at the same time wronged others. Therefore, the three dynamics described above will always relate to each of the individuals involved in a conflict.

Before introducing the first perspective, I want to share a story with you.

A story from our discipleship program

It's been nearly three decades since that dark night, but I remember it as if it were yesterday. It happened in a strange context. That night marked a point of determination and with it, a series of consequences.

Over several years, I dedicated much of my time to a discipleship focus which included an organized program of various phases. Each year I led a team of two to four young men through this discipleship process. The first phase was to take them with me to learn and participate in our ministries in the beautiful country of Mexico.

The teams in the first phase – Mexico

The guys accompanied me living, serving and learning in the communities where we worked. In addition to having the privilege and opportunity to help and serve in some of the communities, including the large settlement in the Tijuana municipal dump, our teams had various learning tasks. Among the assignments were studying language and culture and also learning about life in extreme poverty.

Our teachers in this first phase were the residents of the dump community, individuals who lived

and worked in the garbage. We also had other teachers including a few pastors, missionaries, and even some young orphans. Each of these formed an important part in our lives.

Some of the objectives of this phase were to expand our vision and understanding of the needs in our world today. I also wanted to get to know each member of my teams and observe their reactions and attitudes while struggling, serving, growing and learning.

In the mornings and at night, I had each one share what he was learning from the Word, and we would discuss many things. During these first weeks, we also practiced different disciplines to learn and grow together.

The second phase of the program was conducted in a desolate and secluded part of the California desert, in the middle of the summer heat!

Phase two – Testing and training in the desert

From Mexico, we traveled to an isolated and barren stretch of the California desert on the north side of the border for the second phase of the program. Upon arrival, turning off the engine of the 4x4, one can feel overwhelmed by the

penetrating silence. Here, with the help of a friend in the military, the goal was to “break” the egotism in every one of us: arrogance, independence, pride and selfishness. A week with no bath, under the intense heat of the sun, working together through extreme activities, to the point where each one would come to exhaustion.

Without the team understanding the objectives in advance, each of the exercises, long runs through the valleys, and the other team activities were not designed to encourage everyone in their endurance, but rather to take each of us to our limits. Each day we would push one another to our limit, and then a little more, until each of us would come to the end of our strength.

Every year we saw this awesome dynamic in each team. Perhaps one day I’m the one who is unable to go one more step and the rest of the team had to carry me. Then the next day, in another activity, a different team member would find himself incapable and in need of the team carrying him. This proved to be vital in our team building. He who was broken and carried one day was the one who extended his hand and shoulder to carry his broken brother the following day.

These dynamics allowed us to experience a genuine shared humility and, at the same time, learn to be grateful for our teammates and how to treat them. Early in the morning each one would spend personal time alone with God until the sun came up. Then we would continue with the day's extreme, difficult and trying activities. After sundown, we would sit on top of a sand-dune, and there be challenged from the Word of the Living God, thank Him and worship Him. Over the years during this phase in the desert, each group shared many humbling times as well as edifying and meaningful experiences.

Upon completing our time in the desert, we would head to a place in the nearby mountains where we could hike up to some springs, take a bath and be refreshed. We would spend the night on the mountain and early the following morning travel eight hours further north to a friend's property in the Sierra Nevada forest of Central California. There we would pitch our camp, sleeping outdoors under the stars.

Phase three – team training

Here, in the third phase of the program, our purposes turned to building and edifying the teams. We also wanted to see the development of

each one's gifts, character and various disciplines.

Many of the dynamics implemented from the first phase of this discipleship process are the same qualities we should find working in our churches today, including that of applied forgiveness. Living in a close team context allows for many opportunities and the need to seek forgiveness and to forgive others!

The focuses here were on building team spirit, unity, service, humility and practicing concern for each other. This time also included practical training in lumber milling. Each team learned how to operate a portable chainsaw mill similar to the one Jeff Huckabone and I used over a number of years in the jungles of South America while building homes and other buildings for the missionary teams.

Phase four – living among unreached tribes

In the fourth phase of the discipleship process I took teams to live in indigenous villages in South America. These villages were places where missionary teams were establishing new works.

Our goal was not to “do a project,” but rather, by means of our work, “earn” the privilege of being

there, living with the tribal people, learning some of their culture and what is required to carry out effective cross-cultural discipleship.

Every year the same experiences were lived by each new team. Those times living, learning, serving and working together have left me with very special memories. I continue to this day praying for and remembering each and every one of these special friends. We experienced very few “unpleasant” events over the years. Although few, perhaps in most of these, if there was someone at fault, that someone was probably me!

Our time in Mexico, the desert, the mountains, and then in the fourth phase, in the Amazon jungle, proved that in every trial and difficult circumstance, anything could be overcome. Well, perhaps I shouldn't say “anything,” but rather “almost anything.”

Expected and unanticipated experiences

Each phase of this discipleship program would bring its own set of experiences – some expected, and some not. It would seem that the bulk of the “unexpected experience category” transpired during the fourth phase, the time living in the jungle.

The team members faced a variety of challenges, ailments, infections and sicknesses including rotting sores, hepatitis and malaria. The list could also include a team member falling into the river near where we were cutting lumber and being swept over a waterfall, or the day we came across a jaguar. No one will forget the occasion when one of the team members was pulled under the rocks by a strong river current, or the time we had an extraordinary encounter with a witchdoctor who came upon us in the jungle. Then there were the ordinary daily occurrences such as coming across poisonous snakes and other animals, the night hunting adventures and many more experiences in the course of our daily living and work.

Although some things were unexpected, most of the experiences fit naturally into what could be considered “normal” in the places where we worked. However, the experience we had of the “night of forgiveness denied” was one that I could never have anticipated.

One particular year my team was in an indigenous community where the people live between the jungle and the savannah. I had four young men

on that team. Upon our arrival in the village, the people showed us where to hang our hammocks in one of the small huts.

There our routine began very early each morning. Each of us would head out of the village in the dark for a time alone with God before dawn when the millions of mosquitoes would come out in force! Just as the sun would come up, a cloud of mosquitoes would arise from the savannah, making it almost impossible to accomplish anything! So, after everyone had returned from their quiet time, we would meet together for a brief reflection from the Word and have a simple breakfast. After eating, we would hike through the jungle to where we were cutting lumber with the saw mill for the construction of the missionary homes.

At the end of each day we would return to the village to get the soap and scrub-brushes, and then head down a path about ten minutes away to reach a lagoon where we would bathe and wash clothes. We did this in a bit of a hurry because as the sun sets, the mosquitoes would return again with twice the fury and aggression as in the morning! After a refreshing bath in the lagoon, we would run nonstop back to the village through

the cloud of mosquitoes to avoid being consumed. By the time we would make it back to the village, everyone would be drenched in sweat, needing another bath! This was the daily routine!

THE ROAD OF APPLIED FORGIVENESS

First Perspective

The Night of Forgiveness Denied

From the beginning in the first phase, two of the guys had some minor scrapes with each other. At the time it didn't appear to be anything of great concern. Perhaps this was my shortcoming in not recognizing their small disagreements as something needing more attention. Through each phase, Timothy and Teo had small differences and disagreements. Perhaps it was the stress of the cross-cultural experience together with everything else that brought it all to light.

One day, after our work, we went by our hut to pick up the soap and clothes, and then continued to the lagoon as was our routine. Everything appeared to be normal. After bathing, we quickly ran back to our hut. We ate together and then had our team meeting. After preparing our things for the next day, each one of us ducked under his mosquito net to get into his hammock. As always, before going to sleep, we would spend some time praying together. All was well and peaceful.

After praying, I blew out the candle. It was dark and quiet, except for the birds of the jungle, and the mosquitoes doing everything possible to penetrate our nets.

As mentioned earlier in this book, it's been nearly 30 years since that dark night, but I remember it as if it were yesterday. We were almost asleep when Timothy spoke.

“I don't want to be a hypocrite”

“I can't keep going on like this. You all know that Teo and I have had some conflicts. I don't want to continue like this. Tonight I want to ask for forgiveness.”

There was a quiet pause, and then he spoke directly to Teo saying: *“Brother Teo, I recognize what I have done. I also know that this has caused problems and disagreements between us. I am very sorry. Forgive me.”*

The silence and absolute darkness covered us like a thick fog. After a few seconds that seemed to last forever, Teo replied: *“I don't want to be a hypocrite. Why should I say ‘I forgive you’ if it's not in my heart to do so. I should be honest. No, I don't forgive you!”*

That night was “the night of forgiveness denied.” There were no more words. The last thing I heard was Timothy sobbing under his sheet. I stayed awake late into the night thinking and reflecting on things. In the morning we got up early as usual. I wanted to talk with Teo before starting our day’s activities. We lit a candle, got up and everyone took off to his own place of study outside of the village.

As Teo departed the hut with his flashlight, in the darkness I followed him at a distance. When he arrived at his spot, Teo sat on a tree trunk. When I caught up to him I quietly sat down and asked if we could talk. Teo was quiet, but he knew what I wanted to discuss with him. I asked what had happened concerning Timothy. Teo repeated something similar to what he had expressed during the night. He did not want to be a hypocrite and tell Timothy that he forgave him if he didn’t honestly feel that forgiveness in his heart.

Forgiveness accepted and forgiveness denied

After talking about various things, I asked Teo if it seemed right to him to accept God’s forgiveness for all he had done wrong in his life, and not to forgive Timothy for a few relatively

insignificant offenses. We conversed about how great God’s forgiveness is to each of us and to Teo specifically. We also discussed our obligation to forgive others.

Teo was in full agreement. Even so, he thought for a moment and then responded saying: “*Yes. Of course I accept God’s forgiveness for my sins. Yes, but we should also be honest. I don’t want to be a hypocrite and that’s why I have not forgiven him, because it’s just not in my heart to do so.*”

There had been so many awesome shared experiences: serving one another, living and working as a team, united in purpose, sharing in the Lord’s Supper together and much more. However, given the opportunity to reconcile, the desire to do so was not found in his heart. To Teo it was not hypocrisy to accept God’s forgiveness for all of his sins and yet withhold the forgiveness that his brother requested of him. To Teo it was not a matter of forgiving, but rather a matter of honesty and hypocrisy.

Jesus teaches about giving to the needy, prayer and fasting

Now, to make the most of the time you are

investing in this meditation, we invite you to take your Bible and two or three other Bible translations if you have access to them. Open to Matthew 6. In many of our contemporary Bibles, the chapters also include subtitles to highlight or emphasize the main themes. These subtitles were of course added later and are not part of the original text.

Between verses 1 and 18, many of our Bibles include subtitles that separate the three main themes Jesus is addressing. Depending on the Bibles you are using, you may find a subtitle immediately preceding Matthew 6:1. This subtitle may appear a little different in each Bible.

The heading introducing verses 1–4 may read something like: “Giving to the Needy,” “Teaching about Charity,” or perhaps “Do Good to Please God.” Then reading verses 1-4, we see Jesus’ teaching related to this theme of giving to the needy.

If your Bible does not include these subtitles, the result is the same. However, if these headings appear in some of your Bibles, they serve to highlight the importance of a point we want to emphasize concerning the Scriptures.

Now we move to the next theme in His teaching introduced by another subtitle preceding verse 5. Here you may find something like: “Teaching about Prayer,” “Jesus Teaches Us to Pray,” or perhaps “The Model Prayer.” If you continue reading verses 5–15, you will find several points related to prayer.

The last part we will consider within the context are verses 16-18. Here the heading may read something similar to: “Jesus Teaches about Fasting,” “Fasting,” or “Fasting to be Seen Only by God.” As you read these verses, the emphasis Jesus gives to fasting is observed.

What we want to emphasize here is the context of Jesus’ teaching. Once we have established the context, the main focus of Jesus’ teaching will stand out clearly highlighted.

The meaning of Jesus’ teaching revealed

Before continuing reading this short book, take a few minutes to read the complete related text: Matthew 6:1-18.

Do Good to Please God

“Take heed that you do not do your charitable

deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ³ But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.

The Model Prayer

⁵ “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ⁶ But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. ⁷ And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

⁸ “Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. ⁹ In this manner, therefore, pray:

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done

On earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,

As we forgive our debtors.

¹³ And do not lead us into temptation,

But deliver us from the evil one.

For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

¹⁴ “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Fasting to Be Seen Only by God

¹⁶ “Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they

have their reward.¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,¹⁸ so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

We can now see that perhaps “the help” of the subtitle headings does not always provide good orientation as to the purpose or meaning of the text. In fact, the headings here would appear to actually mislead the reader concerning the biblical context!

We can see that although Jesus does indeed speak about giving to the needy in Matthew 6:1-4, this is not His focus. The principle point being made is not about giving, but rather about not being a hypocrite! The emphasis is found in the exhortation in verse 2 – “Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do....” Jesus’ main point in these verses is to not be a hypocrite in our serving.

Now we turn to verses 16-18. We clearly see that Jesus’ focus is not so much on fasting, but rather on hypocrisy. This portion begins with the

words in verse 16 - “Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites....”

Let’s now consider something apparently perplexing. Why is Jesus teaching about prayer amid a context of these two exhortations related to hypocrisy? Here, in the middle of this context, we find the world’s most well-known or repeated prayer – “The Lord’s Prayer.” But before Jesus offers this as a “model prayer”, again we find an exhortation regarding hypocrisy. What does the problem of hypocrisy have to do with His instruction concerning prayer? Why is Jesus teaching about prayer in this seemingly misplaced framework?

Teaching about prayer or about how to think?

Perhaps we should reconsider the context if we are to understand the meaning of His teaching about prayer. In Matthew 6:5, Jesus leads with the strong exhortation: “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites....”

There are several important points to note in verses 5-8, that although related to our meditation, will have to be left for another occasion due to our focuses here.

Therefore, we continue in verse 7. “*And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do....*” Then in verse 9 we find the well-known “Lord’s Prayer.” Here Jesus states: “*In this manner, therefore, pray....*” or in another version “*this, then, is how you should pray....*”

Although there is great spiritual wealth to be found in the words of this prayer (verses 9–13), our purposes here are focused on the overriding point Jesus is emphasizing. The context of Jesus’ teaching and exhortation is regarding hypocrisy. We see Jesus emphasizing hypocrisy in three areas: hypocrisy related to giving, to prayer, and to fasting. Let’s now read in our Bibles verses 9-13, the “Lord’s Prayer,” and if possible, repeat it out loud. Matthew 6:9-13.

Did you read everything out loud? Perhaps you could repeat it from memory! Many of us have heard these words countless times, but perhaps without giving much thought to *the context*; a context which requires us to think and to reason, not to mindlessly recite certain words. Did you say “amen” at the end of the prayer? Did you say it with all your heart?

Thinking before you speak (pray)

God’s Word invites us to reason and think, not to blindly follow rules, liturgies and commandments, or chase after formulas. In this prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), some may identify more than twelve wonderful points. However, the context surrounding this part of Scripture is that concerning hypocrisy. The teaching Jesus is imparting here is not focused on giving to the needy, on fasting or on prayer. So with that in mind, let us consider two questions.

First question: Honestly, with all sincerity, do you really want to ask God to forgive you *in the same way* that you have forgiven others? Is your forgiveness so exemplary, clean, perfect and without any reproach that you could be so courageous as to ask God to: “forgive us our debts *as we also have forgiven* our debtors.”?

Most readers, if not all, would say: “*No way do I want God to forgive me in the same imperfect way I have often ‘forgiven’ others. No way! To pray that way would be hypocritical. I would rather pray: ‘Forgive me my sins and help me God to forgive others in the same way that you have forgiven me!’*”

Yes! Now we are thinking straight and are better aligned on the road of applied forgiveness!

If you are not convinced that Jesus is actually trying to inspire His listeners to think and reason rather than to recite certain prescribed words of a prayer, then let's move on to a second question.

The second question: Of all of the facets observed in the prayer (verses 9-13), why is only the point concerning forgiveness expounded on at the end (Matthew 6:14-15)? Now we see more clearly that Jesus was focusing on the problem of hypocrisy when He emphasized this last part.

There are those who enjoy engaging in deep theological studies, seeking to extract impressive doctrinal issues. One such example can be drawn from the last two verses which speak of an apparent "conditional forgiveness" ("*...if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.*"). But here it is neither necessary nor helpful to exhibit or try to develop some other doctrinal issue in the middle of a context where Jesus is teaching about hypocrisy. The point is simply: "forgive others in the same way that you have been forgiven." If we track with Jesus' central focus

within the context of what He is teaching, we will see the logic of His words, words of truth, words of transformation and power.

So then, we will ask God for His forgiveness, His grace and His mercy. Yet let us be careful to avoid being hypocritical in expecting to receive the full grace of God upon us while at the same time, we refuse to forgive others. This is the way of applied forgiveness: Forgiveness is given by God in abundance, but it is also expected of us who have received it.

It doesn't matter if you "feel" or don't "feel it in your heart" to forgive. Forgiveness should not be tied to "feelings," but rather to character and duty. Hypocrisy is not the forgiving of someone when you don't "feel" it, but rather it is the seeking of forgiveness, or being thankful for having been forgiven, while withholding forgiveness from others.

THE ROAD OF APPLIED FORGIVENESS

Second Perspective

Be on your Guard!

Now we turn to Luke chapter 17. Here again we find Jesus teaching His disciples. Luke 17:3 *“Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.”*

You don't need to be a great theologian to imagine what Jesus' disciples were thinking upon hearing this part of His teachings! *“Here we are Lord! If anyone is sinning, here we are to rebuke them!”* No doubt the second part of this verse, the part about forgiveness, was not as attractive to them as the first!

But Jesus was preparing them for a learning process. This training included the disciples' participation in both thinking and reasoning as part of this course of action. This same process can be helpful for those of us who desire to abandon clinical theory in favor of real life practice. This is the path of applied forgiveness!

After these tangible words of verse 3, Jesus began to take His disciples through a process of reasoning. In verse 4, we see Jesus “raising the bar” on their standard of forgiveness, and in doing so revealing their basis for determining to what degree it might be “reasonable” to forgive.

“And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”

Now Jesus really had them thinking! Here He presents them not only with the idea of a brother who has sinned, but rather something much more menacing! *“Against you seven times in a day....”*

Forgiving someone who “sins against you” once in a long while would seem reasonable to most people, although not to everyone. But twice? And twice in the same day? What about three times offended by the same individual, and in the same day? Jesus' disciples felt pressured by this new concept of forgiveness which seemed irrational to them. With this teaching, Jesus had placed them in a process that required their participation, and at the same time, compelled them to think and reason.

Our dear friends, we now invite you to join us in this process of analytical thinking and reasoning. How many times might we realistically and reasonably expect someone to forgive the same person in the same day? How many times could you forgive in a single day? Two? Three? Up to four? We know some individuals who have expressed that they felt they could sincerely forgive the same individual perhaps up to five times in one day! But you really have to think about it to answer honestly.

Seven times in a day would mean the individual in question would be committing an offense approximately every hour and a half throughout the entire day, and also seeking forgiveness for the offense within that same amount of time. That would not even allow enough time for a shot of coffee between the time of the offense and when the brother would come knocking on the door again to apologize!

There is no doubt that the disciples were getting a “spiritual migraine” thinking through the implications of Jesus’ words that were seemingly pointing to something humanly impossible to achieve. Perhaps some of you have come to the same conclusion. Some may be thinking that

although this appears difficult, if an individual has a lot of faith, with God’s help, true forgiveness might be achieved. This was precisely what the disciples were thinking!

And so the disciples responded saying: “*Increase our faith.*” or “*Give us more faith*” (Luke 17:5). It was both reasonable and logical to ask Jesus for increased faith in order to be equipped to meet this challenging demand. Without a great measure of faith, it would seemingly be impossible to confront such a challenge.

It would appear that the disciples ended up uncovering a good lesson for every sincere God-follower: *The great importance of having faith in all things!*

A journey through the Amazon rainforest

Several years ago a tribal indian friend and I were traveling upriver in the Amazon jungle from one village to a number of others, taking with us medicines and other supplies. This tribal indian partner was later in life given the Spanish name, “Jaime.” Jaime and I were working together, teaching and helping the people in a number of very remote and isolated villages of his people’s group.

Jaime's village is located a number of hours by small plane from the nearest civilization. It was from his community where we would begin our travel, several days by river, to reach the villages above the waterfalls, and then from there, continue by foot.

After two days travelling by river, we were approaching a village on the river's edge, a community that we were not contemplating visiting on this particular trip. From afar we saw the men running with their bows and arrows from the village toward the riverbank. They had heard our outboard motor as we came around the bend in the river. My friend turned to me as if to say: "*Don't stop.*" I was thinking the same thing, to keep running full speed and simply pass their village. However, as we approached, we saw the men, now at the edge of the water, yelling and prancing around with their bows and arrows. They were obviously upset seeing that we were about to pass them. Therefore, I told Jaime that we would stop, but only for a moment.

Upon reaching the shore, I turned off the engine. By that time a larger crowd had gathered, and everyone was emotionally shouting and asking us: "*Where are you going?*" So we responded,

explaining that we were heading upriver, above the falls to some distant villages. As we conversed with them, their intense interest as to what we had with us in the boat was very obvious. Soon they began to ask if we might have some fishing line and hooks, among other things, that we could give them.

Seeing that we were anxious to continue our journey without giving them anything, they began to warn us about the serious problems and dangers upriver where we were heading. According to them, we would be in grave danger because the villages were at war and the shamans were very active. They urged us to stay with them and tried to convince us that their whole community really wanted to hear our talk about "Great Spirit" (God). They insisted that we shouldn't continue upriver where the people there would surely kill us.

Jaime signaled to me to get going and then pushed us away from the bank into the current. The men jumped up and began yelling at us and waving their arrows. I replied saying that if they really wanted to hear "the words of Great Spirit" that we could later come back and share with them. I started the motor and Jaime

and I continued our journey.

The time passed and we were finally heading back downriver. When we began to approach this same village, the entire community heard the motor and ran to the river to meet us (or rather, to see if we had some fish hooks!). It was getting late. Jaime and I were exhausted, so while the people sat on the steep riverbank asking endless questions about the people we had visited, Jaime and I stretched out in the small boat.

As the animated conversation developed, suddenly I thought I saw some movement up above the riverbank, about twenty feet above us. When I looked up, I didn't see anything. A few seconds passed and the same thing happened again. And then we all heard some shouting from above the riverbank. Everyone quickly grabbed their bows and arrows and scampered up the embankment. Jaime and I jumped up and followed behind them.

As we climbed up to the jungle floor above us, I realized that in fact I had seen something, and "that something" was an eight foot pole with which one girl was beating another! It was a

bloody fight in full swing! Among this tribe, the settling of disputes by means of fights using poles from between six and fifteen feet long is common practice. There are numerous culturally acceptable and expected ways of resolving personal or community conflicts among this ethnic group, pole fighting being one of them.

Split heads!

Both girls had received some good blows and blood was running down from their heads and faces covering their breasts, backs and arms. Those already gathered were yelling while others were running back to the village and returning with clubs, poles and more arrows. The fight and dispute was growing in intensity. By that time I was considering staying only until the end of the fight in order to sew up the wounds and split heads of the injured. Then Jaime and I would continue downriver and make our camp for the night.

I went over to where Jaime was watching the action and asked him what he thought. He was in agreement. We would wait and see how things developed before continuing our journey. Just about that time, one of the girls cracked the other one in the head with her pole leaving her skull

exposed. The girl fell to the ground. Meanwhile the others who had gathered around were yelling, pushing and raising their own clubs as the tension escalated.

A number of the men took up their bows and arrows and distanced themselves from the nucleus of the fight, tensely eyeing the others. At the same time, some attended to the girl on the ground. They took the wounded girl and stood her up. Although she was obviously dizzy and in great pain, they shoved her toward the other. "Good fortune" would have it that when her pole came down, it hit the other girl straight across the top of her head. The luck of her marksmanship resulted in the head of her opponent being split wide open from side to side, as well as ripping her ear and fracturing one of her fingers!

Now both of them had their heads split open. Both were covered in blood. The two of them had also suffered a number of other blows, cuts and bruises. The people kept shouting angrily as they watched the two girls, both of them equally bloodied, beaten and with their heads split open.

Within this tribal people, to reach a culturally acceptable resolution in this kind of situation and level of conflict, the individuals involved need to be viewed as having come out of the rivalry sufficiently avenged. If not, the battle can quickly escalate. Seeing that the two girls were more or less equally bloodied, the tension in the group began to diminish. All this is quite "normal," but not what happened next!

Jaime stepped into the middle of the circle and loudly announced that if it really was true that everyone wanted to hear the talk of Great Spirit, to go put away their poles and weapons, stop the fight and, in the shade near the village, we could have our talk with them. It was comical to see how the people gazed at the girls for a moment, and then at each other, as if nothing had ever happened. They all responded enthusiastically: *"Yes, yes, yes! Let's put our weapons back in the communal house and stop fighting. Now it's time to hear what they are going to share with us!"*

With that said, everyone went back to the village round-house to put away their poles, clubs, bows and arrows, and then went to sit in a circle to listen to Jaime. I went down to the boat to

bring up the medical box to where the fight had taken place. The two girls were still very angry, but sat on a tree trunk facing away from each other. While the meeting got underway with Jaime, I stayed with the two girls sewing up their heads, bandaging the other wounds and setting the fractured finger.

Splitting heads – Christian style

It was some time later when I had returned to Mexico from South America, that one day I found myself with two Christian men who were having some difficulties. The situation and the attitudes of these two reminded me of that day with the indians. Neither of the two men wanted to forgive the other. Every time that one of them would say something to the other, the other would reply: “*well you also...*” The attitude of these men from the church made me think about the fight between the two tribal girls. There would be no peace in the village until the girl who already had her head cracked open could “settle accounts” with the other, leaving her with her head split wide open too!

We have observed this attitude among brethren in a few different contexts, including, shamefully so, in a few “church meetings.” Perhaps some of

you have also seen firsthand one of these scandals. Something similar to the following craziness occurs:

One of the church ladies stands up during the sharing time in the service to “share a testimony” saying: “*This morning I want to share a testimony for the honor and glory of God. You all know that quite some time ago I asked for prayer that the Lord would give me more faith and strength to be able to forgive someone. You also know that there is someone in our congregation who is extremely rude. I have suffered many humiliations because of this individual, but not just I, but many of you also.*”

The woman pauses and then angrily looks directly toward “that someone,” taking a breath, and continuing with her “testimony:” “*I do not want to be gossiping, so I won’t mention any names. But the truth is that this person is a total fool. She is one of the most foolish, vain, deceitful, ill-mannered and irrational people I have ever seen in my life. She has deeply hurt me, but I put her and everything she has done before the Lord in prayer. I asked God to give me increased faith to forgive her.*”

Well, I want you all to know that, thanks to God, the Lord gave me that faith and strength to forgive. I no longer feel anything at all toward that woman. Amen!”

It’s always the same thing. The “sound doctrine” that one supposedly lives by can be upright and admirable. At the same time, in practice or function, it can be depraved and shameful. Some have the idea that they will indeed someday forgive, but not before doing everything possible to hurt the other person first. Just as in the story of the pole fight involving the Amazon tribal group, we may be willing to recognize our duty to forgive, but not before doing everything possible to “get even” with the other individual first. Perhaps we all have a little of the same blood of the tribal group mentioned!

In so many cases it would seem that the idea of “forgiving” can’t be considered until those involved feel that in one way or another the others have also suffered sufficiently. *“Since they hurt me, there is no need to talk about forgiveness until they see what it feels like for themselves.”* The idea of simply forgiving, and forgiving several times, and even forgiving numerous times in the same day is difficult and challenging.

That day described in Luke chapter 17, the disciples could clearly see that Jesus was teaching them to forgive others, without splitting their heads open in the process! But what He was asking of them seemed extremely unreasonable: *“And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”*

From the disciple’s perspective, Jesus was requiring of them “extraordinary” forgiveness. Therefore, “an extraordinary faith” would apparently be required. Many today might logically come to the same conclusion the disciples did – that to forgive in such great measure, one must seek increased faith.

Friend, do you see this in the same way that the disciples did? Are you one of those who believes that although forgiveness is necessary, that in the face of such demand forgiveness should not be the priority, but rather that of seeking God and that He would first increase one’s faith?

A need for more faith?

And so the disciples responded to Jesus saying: *“Increase our faith.”* Then we see Jesus’ answer in Luke 17:6.

And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and be planted in the sea’; and it would obey you.”

For some of you who have read this text before, it might seem at this point that Jesus is shifting the focus of His teaching. It may appear that He is transitioning His teaching from forgiveness, or sin, and is now centering in on the subject of the importance of faith. This would seem a logical transition due to the fact that His disciples had just asked Him to increase their faith.

Before continuing with what we are considering, it may be helpful to recall a point brought out earlier in this book where we were emphasizing the importance of understanding the context of the passage we are studying.

Seeing the context of Luke 17, we realize that there is no change at all in the focus of Jesus’ teaching. We see that Jesus continues developing the same theme concerning forgiveness, but here He introduces something very important for His disciples, a message that perhaps we have swept aside in many of our Christian circles

today. If the following sounds hard to you, put yourself in the disciples’ sandals! To them it surely sounded extremely difficult!

Jesus will now correct His followers concerning a thought they have; one which is very similar to what we often observe today. Some think that before doing anything “uncomfortable,” they need, or should “feel peace in their heart.” If they don’t “feel peace” about doing something, they take the position that they should pray and wait until they have obtained peace or greater faith before proceeding.

But what Jesus is saying here is simply: *“No! You do not need faith to be able to forgive someone! If you had faith, even if only a very small portion, you could do great things. Forgiveness is no great feat but rather one of the most elementary and basic things in the life of a God-follower. You do not need increased faith, strength, time to pray or anything else. What is needed is to simply do it! This is the road of applied forgiveness!”*

**Forgiveness – a basic responsibility
and not a matter related to faith**

Some things in the life of a believer are not

related so much to “faith” but rather to that which is “normal life.” We should not hide or shield ourselves behind a cloak of false spirituality to avoid basic responsibility. Forgiveness is a fundamental duty.

Everything else that we might say to exonerate ourselves of the need to simply forgive or to seek forgiveness is just pretext and justification to ignore a basic responsibility we have as God’s children. In these types of discussions, where almost any excuse is used to avoid the issue of forgiveness, something else will always be discovered. It will always be found that behind all the spiritual verbiage and religious adornment is something comparable to a “pole,” and behind the pole, a desire for revenge and “getting even” – “the splitting open of someone else’s head.”

Hence, we should be more honest. When we see something like the illustration of the woman sharing her “testimony” in church, spewing offenses at the other, someone with maturity should speak up in front of everyone saying: *“Sister, thank you for your trust and openness in asking for our prayer support. But we can not pray for you until you have fulfilled your*

obligation. You need to forgive and reconcile. Afterward we will gladly pray for you and also thank God with you.” Friends, this is the path of integrity, the road of applied forgiveness.

The Lord Jesus continued His teaching and now shifts to using an illustration to emphasize the fact that forgiveness is a basic responsibility. Once again we want to remember that the context of the teaching will often lead us to understand the meaning of it. The meaning or the implications of a teaching are always more important than the teaching in itself! So now we continue in Luke 17:7-10.

“Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come immediately and sit down to eat’? But will he not say to him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink’? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.’”

Here we can clearly see that Jesus is still talking about the same topic: forgiveness. He has not changed the subject. In the “parable” the servant comes in from having fulfilled his duties in the field. He’s probably tired. But it’s not time to sit down, enjoy some coffee, relax or rest up to get one’s strength back, or even to pray for more faith before continuing. No. There are still basic responsibilities to which one must attend.

And so it is, just as we observe in the “parable,” the servant goes from one responsibility to another. This is normal living for every servant. The attitude of forgiveness should be normal in the life of every Christian! As we continue in the text, we note that it explicitly states: *“He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he?”* (Luke 17:9). The master doesn’t hold a big recognition banquet for the servant for having fulfilled his most basic responsibilities. Dear friends, there is a great lesson for us and our churches here!

There are members in our congregations who are living with animosity or resentment toward others. Some of these don’t even have the

slightest desire for reconciliation. There are some of you who maintain unresolved conflict in your marriage, and bitterness has followed in the wake to become your ruler. Others reading these words have family, yet instead of sharing a home with your children you are only sharing a house. There are families in serious crisis and conflict.

Much of what has previously been discussed can be traced to a root of offenses that have yet to be resolved correctly. If these words fit your situation, either in your personal life, in your marriage, in your family, or in your church, consider today taking a different course, a new path.

There is no guarantee that things will “work out” just because someone has chosen to take the road of applied forgiveness. It may be that in some cases, even doing the impossible, there may be no reconciliation or restoration. We know of cases, and some we have lived firsthand, where despite all attempts and efforts, and persisting in love, the other party is simply not interested in reconciliation. Yet for us, we should be humble, live in integrity and give ourselves to live in these precepts.

The true child of God will not seek to sidestep this issue of forgiveness. He or she will not try to escape from the need to forgive or to seek forgiveness. The question of forgiveness is perhaps one of the most complicated issues for mankind. Even so, it is critical and of utmost importance for those who have been born-again. This issue of forgiveness is not so much related to one's faith, but rather to the idea of stewardship, responsibility and that of the most basic obligations. This is the road of applied forgiveness!

Therefore, when we have done all that God has commanded us, we should say: "*We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.*"

THE ROAD OF APPLIED FORGIVENESS

Third Perspective

Offerings and Priorities

The following story I share with you, our friends, hoping that it may serve as a helpful introduction to this, the third and final perspective that we will consider related to the precept of forgiveness. It is a story combining several situations we have observed over the years.

In a small and very isolated indigenous village there was a missionary team. This team, consisting of three families, had no one else outside of their team with whom they could converse, fellowship and share life in their own language and culture. A few feet from their houses was the hazardous short airstrip carved out between two jungle mountains where the small mission plane could land. Surrounding the short airstrip and the small village was the dense jungle that stretched to the horizon.

The years passed and the team managed to learn the people's culture and to fluently speak

their language. After so many years of hard work, they were on the threshold of a very important goal: sharing God's story with the people, starting from the beginning and explaining the meaning of the message with all clarity. What a privilege! No one else could do what they were on the verge of accomplishing. In the entire world the only individuals capable of communicating with these people were the members of this missionary team.

During that time, every few months, mission consultants would fly in to help the team in reviewing the progress in the different areas of the work. The consultants would fly in from a faraway town and spend a number of days working with the team in accordance with the needs of each member. The consultant visits were always looked forward to with great anticipation and excitement. There was one visit in particular that went far beyond what anyone could have expected!

A visit beyond all expectations

From a distance the sound of the little plane's engine could be heard. The day of the long anticipated visit had arrived. Upon landing, the consultant got out of the plane with his

backpack. After a few minutes the pilot departed, leaving the consultant with the missionaries in the small village, a community with great expectation, on the doorstep of hearing, for the first time, the message of the Creator.

The days passed, and everyone worked hard with the consultant. They reviewed the translation of the key biblical texts, the preparation of the Bible lessons, and the development of the literacy program. Everyone worked together and the team was obviously encouraged. The consultant, who besides being a partner and friend with extensive experience and knowledge in the different stages of cross-cultural work, was also a man with deep spiritual insight and practical wisdom. Near the conclusion of the visit, the consultant took several hours with each family separately to ask questions, listen, and to also give a summary of the progress observed in the work.

It seemed evident that everyone was encouraged and inspired as a result of the work evaluations. During the consultant's visit, the missionaries were able to put aside and forget their conflicts, frictions, disagreements and the bad feelings

harbored among themselves.

For years there had been struggles and conflicts among the team, but each one tried to live above any feelings of resentment toward the others. The realities of the team conflicts were not the most important issues to them. Each one was willing to endure any problem or offense to accomplish the work to which they felt called: to present the Word of God to the people and to see a church formed among them.

Consequently, the focus of the work and the visit of the consultants were always of encouragement and blessing. And in this particular visit, it was clear from the consultant's observations and comments that the work was indeed advancing well! They were very close to being able to begin the greatly anticipated teaching of God's story in the language of this unreached monolingual people!

Surprising conclusions

The night before the consultant's departure, he announced that prior to the plane coming the next day, he wanted to have one more meeting with the team together. The next morning everyone joyously gathered sitting in a circle in

one of the homes. Again, as in the previous days, the consultant reemphasized the good progress each one had made and highlighted a number of important details. He soberly congratulated each one for his or her dedication and hard work. After discussing various technical aspects of the work, he concluded by saying he wanted to share something of still greater importance with the team.

Everyone was cheerful and encouraged. The consultant paused as he looked around the group and at each member of the team, then he put his head down. In his eyes you could see a storm of turmoil and sadness well up. A moment passed. When he looked up from the floor, once again he thoughtfully set his eyes on each of the missionaries, one by one, and then took a deep breath and spoke: *“So the plane will soon be here. Before I depart it would be good to share a few other observations with you, together as a team. For some time now, we on the field leadership have been thinking much about you, about the people of this tribe, and about God’s ultimate purposes for them. We have come to the difficult conclusion that the best thing for the people would be your departure from this work and this place as soon*

as possible. We believe that the time has come for you to pack your things and return to your countries.” With deep grief and seriousness chiseled into his countenance, the consultant paused while surveying the group of missionaries.

The missionaries quickly and jovially responded with a big smile. They laughed while applauding the consultant for his spirited character and good sense of humor. *“Ha ha ha brother. Always the joker...”* they exclaimed. A moment passed and then the silence became awkward. Again the consultant spoke: *“I’m not jesting. The best for these people and for this work is that you leave. This work is over.”*

Because their consultant friend spoke with such seriousness in his voice, the missionaries didn’t know what to think. Although what he said sounded like a joke, the way he said it, with such deep sadness, communicated a frightening seriousness. Another prolonged silence was broken by one of the missionaries who asked: *“But what about everything you told us these days about our progress in the work? What do you mean?”*

Evaluations – ministries and ministers

The consultant responded, trying to correct what had apparently caused some confusion: *“Your work is going very well. There is no problem with your good work. I commend you for your excellent efforts. My comments have nothing to do with your technical endeavors. The decision reached concerning your departure has nothing to do with your work, but rather it is related to the resentfulness among you as a team. The field supervisors have no doubt that you would be able to teach very well, but you will not be able to make disciples. Your negative sentiments and attitudes towards each other are not hidden from the people. The people can see your team conflicts, the lack of love and forgiveness you have for one another. Neither you nor your teaching will have any credibility among the people. It is best that you leave. This work, with you as the team, has no future.”*

As the consultant spoke these last words, everyone heard the little plane landing. Without another word, the consultant friend stood up, took his backpack and walked out the door.

Normally, whenever the plane would come in, everyone would run out to meet it, but not this

time. The missionaries were left in shock, staring at the floor, not even wanting to look up. There they remained, everyone looking down, not a word spoken. No one even flinched when the roar of the plane’s engine shook the tin roof of the house as the plane took off.

Little by little the sound of the plane faded away. Everything became silent. All that could be heard were a few of the tribal people conversing in the distance, some of the indigenous children playing on the airstrip, and the birds in the jungle surrounding the house. Yet the missionaries remained motionless, still sitting in a circle, the consultant’s empty chair seemingly echoing his last words.

The meeting that day didn’t end like the many others they had held over the years that ended with disagreements, resentment and unresolved conflicts. Before the sun had set, the team had together discovered a perspective that was new to them. For the first time they saw their many years of work and sacrifice as waste, empty and nothing.

Repentance and reconciliation

The experience of that day brought about a

reaction which had the result of aligning the team on the road of applied forgiveness. They were awakened to realize that it is useless to do a good work while being a corrupted worker. It became clear to them that God's people who are not living in integrity cannot be used by Him to raise up works characterized by integrity.

That day the team came to see that what they had experienced and lived over all the years was utterly absurd. What a ridiculous drama they had practiced for so long – gathering together to pray for the people and for the teaching that was to soon begin. Preparing for the teaching about God's grace, salvation, and forgiveness, while all the time doing everything possible in their own lives to ignore the meaning of what they intended to present to the people!

With the experience of that day, a new revolution shined its light in each of their lives. They began the process of confessing many faults, asking for forgiveness, forgiving and learning how to communicate better. It became completely clear how the lack of forgiveness, accumulated over so many years, had fostered a great impairment in each one's communion with God and in their relationships with each other. With many tears,

humility, and with new joy, things were made right – amongst themselves and with their God.

Standing at the altar with a new attitude

Having been reconciled, the team returned “to the altar” to present God their offering of service, but now, with a different attitude. They were now able to continue with new “wind in their sails,” with integrity, genuine humility, love, unity, and gratitude.

This story brings us to the text and focus of our third perspective: The condition of God's people is of greater importance to Him than is their service or their offerings. This shows us that although we might accomplish great works, at the same time we may be failures in them personally.

So, if when presenting your offering, there you remember...

Now we move to the book of Matthew, chapter 5. Here we can see that the principles observed in the story about the missionaries are the same ones that form the context in this part of the Scripture.

Matthew 5:23-24 – *“Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there*

remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”

In these two verses we discover a depth of perspective, spiritual richness and meaning. We will include here a focus on five points which can have important connections with these two verses.

First: Conscience and responsibility

There is absolutely no indication in the text that puts any negative light on the individual bringing his offering to the altar. It is commendable that this individual is bringing an offering, a service, sharing his or her spiritual gift, or anything else to put before God! Nonetheless, however outstanding the offering may be, upon reaching the altar, (the point of service), the individual remembers that there is unresolved conflict with one or more brothers or sisters.

The text here speaks very directly and personally. It does not treat this principle as theoretical but rather as practical. So let us also work with it in these same terms!

Although the individual being pointed out here (you and I!), may very well be able to say: *“If that brother has some problem with me, he knows where I live or he can call me. I have no issues or conflicts with him whatsoever. Therefore it isn’t my responsibility to be chasing after and pampering him. If there is a conflict, the problem is with him, not with me.”* It is very likely that for many, this argument sounds absolutely logical. However, it is not valid before God, nor appropriate for His followers.

The text puts all the weight of responsibility on *the conscience* of the one who “comes to the altar” with the desire of offering whatever he wants to God. Here we are not necessarily speaking about a “burden of conscience” but simply “conscience,” “awareness,” your conscience, and mine! In the moment when you “approach the altar” to serve God or express your gratitude to Him with any kind of offering, and there you “remember”..., this is the instant that you should realize you have a higher responsibility.

In that instant when your “conscience remembers” that there is a rift in the relationship with your brother, it is at this same point when

you should leave your “offering” or “service” right there for a moment, as there is something more important to attend to before proceeding with your service. You will soon be able to return and resume with your sincere offering or service, but first you should attend to a higher and greater priority: that of reconciliation.

We should mention here that perhaps some of you have had the experience, just as we have, of having sought reconciliation, but the brother or sister refuses to speak or perhaps rejects you. It can happen, and sometimes it does; “the brother who has something against you” prefers to withhold forgiveness and, instead of reconciling, chooses to hold a grudge, resentment and bitterness. In these cases, one should “park the matter, with the motor running” in the principles of 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, and anxiously await a future opportunity to try again.

Although the other person should also share in the responsibility and in the process of facilitating restoration, any lack of responsibility or immaturity on their part is no excuse for one to take an attitude of “washing their hands” of the other person. Having an attitude of “just forgetting about it” and moving on with one’s life

is not right. Although this attitude may be acceptable by the world’s standards, it is not acceptable before God.

Second: Regardless of fault and causes

The text does not take into account who is to blame, or “who is in the right and who is not.” It does not speak at all of the other person, nor of any responsibility that he or she could or should take.

The possibility exists that this person mentioned in the text who brings his or her gift to the altar, (you or I), has not committed any wrong doing. It is possible that “the offense” is something conjured up in the imagination of the one who has something against you. Worse still, perhaps you did something for the benefit and blessing for this friend, however it was not taken as such and now your friend is resentful, bitter and angry! There are instructions in the Scriptures for such situations and for those involved in them, however these have no relationship to the challenge we find here in Matthew 5:23-24.

Dear friends, this reflection is not meant to be a burden. Its implications are not supposed to be a

hardship. Upon being confronted with the text we should not be so immature to think or say: *“What a regrettable misfortune! Here I am with the best of intentions and with all sincerity to offer my service to God, follow through with my good plans and participate in a profitable ministry. I just wanted to give my offering and then go home, have a coffee and relax. Why do I have to have the misfortune of being reminded of “that troublesome brother” now? He always creates problems with everyone; God, you know I have no fault nor did I say or do anything to him. Oh please God, let me just forget about him. I want to be able to continue teaching at church, singing in the choir and participating in the other church activities. Lord, please, I didn’t want to and don’t want to even think about him. I don’t want to neglect my ministry and waste a bunch of time trying to pamper that wimp! Oh Lord, please!”*

In this second point we must recognize that the question of guilt is not what is important, but rather the principles of Matthew 22:36-40, *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

Third: Priorities, reconciliation and attitudes
Jesus clearly emphasizes the qualities which are

of utmost importance for those who desire to serve Him. Jesus came to reconcile sinful man with his God. His ministry was focused on reconciliation. There are too many “Christians” today who view this through a very narrow and egotistical framework. We should remember that Jesus not only sought to reconcile us with God, He also sought to unite us to function as His body.

God’s priority is reconciliation. Therefore Jesus said: *“...leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother...”* Or, *“...leave your gift there before the altar and first go and be reconciled to your brother...”* Your ministries, your service, your gift or your desire to express gratitude to God are good. Even so, if you are not willing to “minister” or give within the breadth of reconciliation, then God is not interested in your other good intentions.

Here we find a principle related to Cain and Abel. The two were “believers.” Both of them had “faith” in God. They shared the same parents, the same education, the same home, the same upbringing and background. However, their attitudes were very different. One day Cain

brought an offering to the Lord. Abel did the same. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering He did not look with favor (Genesis 4:3-7).

What we can glean from this point is the following: There is an intimate relationship between the gift and the giver. At the altar both the offering and the one presenting it are placed before the All-Powerful One. God will not only examine the man and his faith, but will also appraise the bedrock upon which his faith is founded. The man and his faith are related, and these are interwoven with what is found in his offering.

The offering cannot be measured separately from the person who gives it. Although the offering may represent to some extent one's great sacrifice, dedication, surrender or commitment, it does not always reveal the motivation or the attitude of the giver.

Cain believed in God, but in his own way, while Abel believed God's way. To say that Cain "believed in God" or had "faith in God" in no way insinuates that he had his trust in Him. Cain wanted to be accepted by God in accordance

with the values of his own egotistical standard. He believed in and desired God, yet his confidence and trust were in himself. Cain wanted to do things his own way and by his own means earn God's favor. By contrast, Abel sought God with his faith and trust on the foundation represented by "the death of an innocent one to cover the life of a guilty one" -- a shadow of the future and coming reconciliation.

When we approach the altar, we would do well to not have the attitude that Cain displayed that day. The man or woman who wants to serve God must focus on God's purposes and priorities, not on his or her own interests. God's priority is that of reconciliation, and it should be ours as well. When you and I embrace this priority, we will discover many opportunities to both seek forgiveness as well as to forgive and to pursue reconciliation.

It is possible, or even likely, that at some point in pursuing reconciliation, our best efforts may be rejected by the other person. In those cases we may need to attempt many times and with great effort to do that which is right. Even so, there will be times we find it impossible.

Fourth: The WHAT and the HOW of forgiveness

After achieving reconciliation, we can return to “the altar” and present our offering, continue with our “ministries” or enjoy any other service we want to undertake to express gratitude to God. The text puts it this way: “..., *leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.*”

That which may trouble some of us is the great abyss found in the middle of this verse! The text does not give us a formula or guidelines to follow on how to pursue peace. It only says: “...*go; first be reconciled to your brother....*” The question some will be left with is – How?

There are a myriad of circumstances and situations in this life. There is a great array of offenses that affect us. Some offenses are intentional and others are not. Then there are others which are not actually offenses at all, yet are perceived and taken as such by individuals who may draw unwarranted and erroneous conclusions.

Each and every one of us is formed from the

same fragile clay. We would do well to continue learning how to treat others and how to respond to the way they treat us.

The search for the road of applied forgiveness is something that Jesus decided to leave to the creativity of His children. He or she who is growing in maturity and wisdom will understand that this path is also much like a door through which forgiveness is received as well as given. Through this door forgiveness can flow toward others and at the same time be the portal to receive from others this grace in one’s own life.

Let’s review the three expressions of forgiveness mentioned in the beginning of this book:

1. How to forgive others
2. How to seek and ask for forgiveness
3. How to receive forgiveness

We want to emphasize that this booklet has the intention of encouraging us in the road of APPLIED forgiveness. We are not interested in theory, but rather in practice. Therefore, in every conflict we should not only be aware of the objective to forgive or to be forgiven, but also of the path in this process of applied forgiveness. “The path” or “the road” represents the HOW in

this process. The HOW in which we do many things in this life may also have a certain influence in HOW things work out. This consideration may help us understand the importance we should give to our personal values and attitudes.

In this fourth point we can analyze a number of attitudes that are revealed in common conversation.

That which is required

For both the one taking the initiative in the process of reconciliation, as well as the other individual, an attitude of genuine humility is required. This humility should be expressed in concrete action, persistent love, and also in words.

For many, it can be very helpful to write down your words and what you desire to convey before meeting with the other individual. In this way you will have the opportunity to read your words aloud and attempt to perceive if they have any “taste” of arrogance, haughtiness or pride rather than the spirit of humility you desire to have and convey. On occasion during a conflict, both individuals may find themselves overly sensitive to small and very insignificant

details. A small gesture or a slightly sharp or strong word, even with no malicious intent, can serve to derail what otherwise could be a good meeting.

A genuine attitude of humility is required of both individuals, yet especially of the one taking the initiative. In the case where you find yourself in this position, you should understand that the other person may not have processed the situation to the same extent you have. You can find yourself happily going to meet with your friend to seek reconciliation, yet when he sees you coming he may take up arms if he thinks you are coming to argue or fight. This is not necessarily your fault, but you should be prepared to make every effort to “disarm” him from the idea that you are seeking a new battle.

If you are the one taking the lead in this process, you should be prepared to do everything to the best of your ability. You will do well to prepare your heart for any unexpected or negative response in order for you to not counter in an agitated or inappropriate way.

It is important to remember that your goal is reconciliation. It may cost you. In many common

conflicts, “the price to pay” is simply being genuinely humble. The mature servant of God will not feel threatened or intimidated by the need of assuming the “burden” of humility, nor even that of being humiliated. However, if you are prideful, your arrogance will not allow you much room before you feel compelled to react defensively.

Sincere humility helps open doors on the road of applied forgiveness.

Fifth: The importance of our words

Let us carefully analyze the importance of our words and the attitudes they many times convey.

In a dispute, when anyone involved recognizes his own mistake, personal offense or failure, even if his part in the conflict is due to simple poor communication, he should ask for forgiveness. Although the fault in the disagreement may be minimal, it is unwise to minimize it.

The true purpose of reconciliation is healing. Therefore, in many cases it can be advisable to apply the “medicine” generously. That does not

mean to “exaggerate” or “bend” the reality of a problem in which both individuals share responsibility. It is dishonest to put on a mask of false humility. We should seek to live in total honesty and integrity, together with genuine humility. The attitude we are to take is that of generosity and consideration.

When the moment comes to actually express the words: “*I ask for your forgiveness,*” the person who is taking the initiative in this process of reconciliation should not undervalue this opportunity and honorable effort. Do not dilute it by communicating something of lesser value, like: “*Well friend, nobody is perfect. Perhaps what I did wasn’t the best... but I wasn’t the only one! You screwed up too!*” These words only serve to highlight an attitude of pride and ego. Be humble. Simply ask to be forgiven.

When finding ourselves engaged in a conflict we should be wise, prudent and reasonable, being aware of our own shortcomings. We need to understand that when there is a falling-out in which both parties are responsible, a shared forgiveness is needed to achieve true reconciliation.

There are times when the responsibility for an offense belongs to only one individual who then should quickly take the responsibility. When the responsibility for the conflict is shared, then all those involved should willingly share it. This being said, there will be times when only the individual taking the initiative to “reach out” to the other recognizes his or her own fault and has accepted responsibility for it while the other hasn’t. Even so, it is important to understand that someone is going to ask for something (forgiveness) and the other should freely give it.

When someone asks you for forgiveness, it is implied that they are waiting for you to grant the forgiveness requested. An immature and prideful attitude can manifest itself in many ways. When someone says to you: “*Please forgive me,*” your answer should be, at a minimum: “*Yes, my friend, I forgive you.*”

Why is it that so often the other responds with such thoughtless and foolish words like: “*It’s okay,*” or “*It’s no big deal.*”? No, it’s not okay, and that’s why the other individual is asking for forgiveness! Or, if it really is “okay,” then it should be all the easier to respond saying:

“*Of course I forgive you.*” Why does it seem so extremely, outrageously difficult for some people to simply pronounce the words: “*I forgive you.*”? Asking for forgiveness requires a certain degree of humility; expressing forgiveness does too.

Never say: “*It’s okay*” when someone is asking you for forgiveness, but rather have an attitude that clearly expresses that the forgiveness requested has been freely granted.

“No worries; there is nothing to forgive”

Other absurd and foolish answers often heard when someone is seeking forgiveness are things like: “*No worries,*” “*No problem,*” or “*There is nothing to forgive.*” Although these kinds of responses may be said out of habit, they only serve to communicate to the other person that: “*No, I will not forgive you, but don’t worry; there is no problem!*”

In this segment of our meditation we are considering the importance of understanding HOW to seek and ask for forgiveness, HOW to forgive, and HOW to receive forgiveness. Each requires genuine humility. Being prideful and selfish will always present

burdens, barriers and obstructions in a process that otherwise could and should be of blessing.

Matthew 5:23-24 contains a great challenge for our lives and for our congregations. For the man or woman who wants to live a life of integrity, honesty and credibility, the principles of reconciliation revealed in these verses and in the other texts already considered serve as a reliable compass in times of difficulty.

These principles, once applied, help bring healing, unity, reconciliation and restored relationships. This, in turn, facilitates some of life's most valued qualities: trust, long-standing friendships and faithfulness. We have personally experienced these blessings living with the cross-culture missionary teams in some of the world's most remote and isolated places, as well as in the sprawling barrios of the cities where our team's service has resulted in new congregations and multiplied discipleship.

But we have also seen what happens when these principles of reconciliation are rejected or ignored. When one or more of those involved in a disagreement are carried away by their ego, selfishness or pride, a sad, painful and shameful

result is guaranteed: shattered marriages, abandoned children and ruined friendships. Bitterness, resentment and deeply rooted animosity often remain for years if not for a lifetime:

Where these most elementary principles have been discarded, we have seen missionary teams disintegrated. This deeply affects not only the team members, but also their churches which, with indescribable sacrifice, had sent them. Then there is also a multitude of others affected, including the people who they supposedly went to reach with "the message of God's forgiveness." Furthermore, and painfully, we have observed in our own congregations several truly absurd and irrational instances in which many ended up suffering due to the pride and selfishness of a few who refused to forgive or to seek forgiveness.

THE ROAD OF APPLIED FORGIVENESS

Our decisions in times of challenge

“Conditions” and Persisting in Love

For some people, more important than reconciliation is to feel justified. As long as they feel they are in the right, everything is fine. But what a great shame and dishonor when their pride is manifested with such immaturity! Where there is a prideful attitude, there is no honor. Where self-centeredness and arrogance exist, integrity will not be found. We should always find those who have been “born-again” living with humility, honesty, integrity and in the principles of the road of applied forgiveness.

We recently spent several weeks working with a number of Venezuelan pastors in some of the cities of this beautiful country. One of these pastors is a very dear friend with whom we have worked and lived over the years. This servant makes up part of a pastoral team dedicated to the care, well-being and provision of several missionary teams in their country. His work, along with the other pastors of this group,

helping, empowering and providing care for these teams and mission works among the unreached tribal groups is huge. This undertaking has been further complicated in these past years of widespread scarcity of food, medicines and other supplies, collapsing infrastructure, boundless social unrest, crime, violence and other extreme difficulties in the country.

A couple years ago we watched him go through a difficult situation with one of the missionary teams. Things did not go as we all had hoped, yet more unexpected was the rejection he suffered by one of the missionaries involved.

The missionary disagreed with the pastors and became resentful of them despite their many efforts seeking his well-being. He didn't have to agree with them, yet his resentfulness toward those who had served him with such great sacrifice, and for so long, was indeed a great disgrace.

From time to time we may have strong disagreements with others. But when these conflicts arise between brethren, none of those involved should be overcome by anger, resentment or pride and slam the door in the face

of the others involved! In this particular case, the missionary mentioned could and should have expressed his disagreement with the pastors. On the other hand, it would have been appropriate for him to have also communicated to them deep gratitude for their love, esteem, care, and for the support that for many years these pastors, with great effort and sacrifice, had invested in his life. However, instead of expressing any gratitude, his response was to the contrary. For him, having their “approval” of his poor decisions was a “condition” for considering restoration.

In this case, we observed the manipulative and shameful response of this ex-missionary which demonstrated a “conditional love” toward the pastor. He developed an immature attitude which communicated: *“If you are supportive of me in my independent decisions and plans then everything is fine and we can continue being friends. If not, you will suffer my rejection.”* This particular individual ended up viewing friendship, unity and reconciliation through a lens of “approval” and “support.” This attitude is always related to immaturity, arrogance and selfishness. True love is unconditional, and so is true forgiveness.

Whenever there is a conflict, and as a result, with or without any bad intention, others are hurt, reconciliation is necessary. Even so, it is not necessary that everyone be in agreement. Reconciliation should be reached despite the seriousness of the disagreement and even if the differences lead to a separating of ways. Even in a case of brethren parting ways, the parties should do so without bitterness and resentment.

Paul, Barnabas and John Mark – appreciation, unity and solutions amid contention

We see in the book of Acts a conflict involving Paul, Barnabas and John Mark. The contention became so serious that Paul and Barnabas ended up splitting ways (Acts 15:36-41). Apparently Paul was in the right due to the fact that, from that point on, Barnabas is not again mentioned in the book of Acts. Even so, all evidence demonstrates that despite their strong dispute and the resulting separation, the division did not affect their “brotherhood” and profound appreciation for each other.

The strong argument and disagreement did not

lead to bitterness and resentment. Paul's love and appreciation for Barnabas and John Mark, despite their prior dispute, is seen later in his writings: In 1 Corinthians 9:6, Paul offers Barnabas and himself as an example. Then in Colossians 4:10, he instructs the brethren to welcome John Mark and receive him. Finally, in 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul states that John Mark is needed and useful in the ministry.

There are several aspects of this conflict from which we can learn. The separation between Paul and Barnabas because of John Mark did not leave a poor testimony of "bitter and fighting brethren." Although they had a fight, together they also sought the best road forward in the middle of the conflict. We can see that when they separated, they had already hammered out a mutually agreeable work plan. The split did not lead to contempt of one for the other. The separation was rather a solution regarding how each one could continue serving, each within his personal convictions, while at the same time carrying the other in high regard and with love despite their conflict.

There are several facets of this story which stand out. Most important for our purposes here

is the fact that Paul, Barnabas and also John Mark remained in a reconciled relationship despite their disagreement and separation. At no time was the love or the convictions of one of them despised by the other. They both followed through the process of their conflict to the point of finding a solution. Neither one abandoned the process.

Something else shines out here as well. We see that the love and appreciation they had for each other did not allow the conflict to be taken by any of them as an offense. None of the three left feeling offended, and the result of this was a blessing for all; a blessing which multiplied in and through their lives. Even in their conflict, these men show us the essence of the road of applied forgiveness. But where immaturity, selfishness and arrogance can be found, resentment and bitterness will rule. These will yield detrimental "conditions" and obstructions to achieving reconciliation.

Facing rejection – persisting in love

The Venezuelan pastor mentioned in the story had not committed any offense whatsoever. Nonetheless, his selfless service and that of the other pastors, their many sacrifices, help,

work and efforts were all taken by the embittered ex-missionary as animosity. It was his duty and responsibility to seek out the pastors and ask their forgiveness, because it was actually he who had been the offensive one. Even so, it was this pastor who, without gunning to be justified nor simply taking the path of just “forgetting everything,” instead took the initiative to seek reconciliation with the “offended” brother. The pastor did the right thing before God, even though in the process he suffered still more rejection and resentment from this individual who continued insisting on his poor decisions.

The pastors showed the missionary unconditional love and were unmoved in seeking that which was for his well-being. However he was not interested in this, but rather in having the approval of others and to proceed in his misguided ways. Since he could not obtain what he sought, he became embittered and broke off communications and his relationship with the pastors. And so, according to him, if the pastors wanted to seek reconciliation, it was simply a matter of accepting “the condition” of extending him their support, and with this, all would be well.

The decision of this brother was to split ways, but

not like Paul and Barnabas did. He rejected and separated himself from those who loved and cared for him the most. He continued ahead on his independent trail, even speaking ill of many, blaming and falsely accusing those who cared so much for him. Meanwhile the pastor continues persisting in love and in the path of reconciliation, even with the door closed in his face.

The relationship between love, forgiveness and reconciliation

We must “insist” on love! There is a relationship between love, forgiveness and reconciliation. Love gives; selfishness takes. Forgiveness releases; pride enslaves. Reconciliation brings unity; immaturity cries for division.

In order for love, forgiveness and reconciliation to deliver their good end, there must be some degree of genuine humility and consideration in the mix. No one should impose conditions -- not the one who hopes to be pardoned, nor the one who should offer forgiveness.

In these pages we have reviewed three perspectives of a single precept: that of applied forgiveness. Together we have considered that:

1. It is hypocritical to want to be forgiven but not want to forgive. We should ask God: *“Lord forgive my sins and help me to forgive others in the same way that you have forgiven me.”*
2. Forgiveness is not a matter related to measures of faith, but rather, it is a basic and fundamental responsibility and obligation. When we are presented with the need to forgive someone, we should not consider placing conditions to be able to do so. When the disciples were challenged by Jesus’ commanding them to forgive, they responded by asking the Lord to increase their faith. But the Lord answered them saying “no,” because faith is not needed to be able to extend forgiveness. What is needed is for God-followers to simply take the responsibility to do so.
3. When we become aware that, for whatever reason we have hurt someone, we should do everything possible, and even the impossible to reconcile with that person. This determination is God’s priority. No one should say that their “offering” or service to God is more important than their relationship with their

fellow man. You should leave your gift or service, go first to be reconciled, and then you can return to whatever other things you have.

The fork in the road of decision

For some individuals, these challenges may sound unreasonable or extreme, even if only in theory. When at some point in life they are confronted with these principles in the midst of a conflict, many will opt to reject the road of applied forgiveness and rather choose a path of deceptive self-justification.

There are, however, other individuals who, while considering these precepts, perhaps at this very moment, are plotting out their steps to seek reconciliation with someone. Before concluding these last pages, some will have committed themselves to initiate a process of conflict resolution in their marriage. Others, with the same commitment, will be following through on a plan to restore a broken family relationship. Some, before closing this little book, will have found a new perspective and new resolve to remedy a severed relationship with a brother, sister, friend or neighbor.

Forgiving and seeking forgiveness are essential,

elementary and fundamental in basic Christian living. No one should persist in a selfish, proud and arrogant attitude. We should be at least marginally reasonable, mature and humble. If we have achieved sufficient humility and maturity to be able to forgive others, then perhaps we have also secured enough to be able to likewise ask them to forgive us. We should never forget that in exercising these two aspects together, both that of forgiving and also that of seeking forgiveness, a greater blessing is obtained.

The next opportunity we have to forgive someone, perhaps we should first pause and say: *“Of course I forgive you, but I also need you to forgive me! I know very well that I also have failed. How does that sound? Let’s forgive each other!”*

When we understand that we all are formed from the same clay, that each of us needs forgiveness and reconciliation, both with our Creator and with our fellow man, we will become more loving and merciful. We will show more grace toward others and forgive more easily. We will also discover deeper riches like those found in the following transformational text –

Romans 11:33-12:2 (the emphasis on 12:1-2).

All of the challenges in this little book are closely related to the precepts set forth by Paul in these words (Romans 12:1-2). When we have introduced foundational changes into our way of thinking, this will immediately result in a transformation in our way of living, which in turn will align us with that which is truly good and perfect.

The way by which the murderer of a family became a part of their home

We have a missionary friend, who, when he was a child, said his good-byes to his dad at the edge of a distant jungle airstrip. His father and the other men of the team departed from that airstrip with the intentions of making a friendly contact with a tribal group known for their violence and aggression. His daddy never came back. The indigenous people that they were trying to reach murdered his father and the others of the team, spearing and leaving these missionaries on the edge of the jungle river.

It was not easy for him growing up without his dear dad. Later, as a young man, perhaps the easiest thing for him would have been to hate

and despise those tribal people and live a life embittered against God and everyone else. This friend, now an adult, along with his wife and children, are serving among this same people. This missionary friend chose to live his life on the road of applied forgiveness. As a result, an incalculable number of lives found this same road as well.

A number of men from this tribe became his close and intimate friends and partners, including one of those who murdered his father. This dear missionary friend's children have a special name for the one who killed their grandfather so many years ago – they call him “grandpa.” The road of applied forgiveness is the way by which the murderer of this family became a member of their home.

The road of applied forgiveness is not a mysterious path, but it certainly is an amazing one. God-followers who establish their faith in such a way as to involve their head, heart and feet together in unison, will discover that real faith is not a simple “belief,” “sound doctrine,” or a “creed,” but rather a living and increasing conviction!

A question of attitude and perspective

From time to time we would do well to reexamine our standards and values, that is to say, “HOW we think.” Our attitudes and sentiments are directly related to the precepts in our thinking process. Due to the root of pride and ego in mankind, the subject concerning forgiveness frequently provokes defensive reactions which are often reflected in questions like: “*But, what are you supposed to do when...?*” These words can reflect sincere searching. However, they are more often than not related to the intentions to cultivate justifications and excuses to avoid simply being humble, forgiving or seeking forgiveness. It is most certain that this subject of forgiveness deals directly with our attitudes.

Perhaps there are more questions than answers regarding the issue of forgiveness! Our intention in these few pages has not been that of presenting “a study” about it, but rather to get to the essence of some of the perspectives related to the road of actual applied forgiveness. More than anything else, the three perspectives and the other principles set out in these pages seek to challenge our attitudes.

The Apostle Paul is an example of what can happen in the life of any individual when there is a change of attitude. His life was transformed. God took a destructive, angry, violent and bitter man, a man full of rage, and transformed him into a great leader and an example of compassion and mercy.

Part of this testimony is found in Acts 26:4-23. Paul's transformation is rooted in the moment he experienced a change of attitude. That day, while forging ahead with his evil plans, he was met by the very God he pushed against. On his trail of destruction Paul had an encounter with God's grace. In that very moment his attitude was transformed and his life took a different course. Paul embarked on a life even more radical than his previous life of egotistical religion. Now his life was totally different, a life reborn on the road of applied forgiveness!

The change in his attitude and in his way of thinking about God became evident in his life story. The perspectives and principles presented in this little book are some of those which constituted the convictions of our brother, the Apostle Paul. These principles are expressed,

in part, in his words directed to the Ephesian believers, words with which we opened, and with which we close this introspection on the road of applied forgiveness:

“Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you.” Ephesians 4:31-32