FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER

There are two primary words in the Greek New Testament that are usually translated by the English word *"forgive"* or *"forgiveness."* One is ἀφίημι – *aphiemi* from that class of Greek verbs known as *"the mi verbs."* (pronounced "me") It carries the literal sense of *"sending away from"* and thus *"to remit"* or *"forgive."* This word appears 146 times in the Greek New Testament. In the Authorized Version, it is translated *"forgive"* 47 times. 42 of the 47 times translated *"forgive"* are found in the Synoptic Gospels.

The second Greek verb is χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai,* a deponent verb meaning *"to bestow a favor unconditionally"* and is used specifically to communicate the idea of forgiveness, Divine and/or human. This Greek verb is used only by Luke and Paul, 7 times in Luke and Acts combined, and 16 times by Paul spread throughout 8 of his letters. It is obvious that there must be a causal condition as the basis for such an action.

The Greek New Testament for this word study is Ephesians 4:32, which is as follows:

γίνεσθε δὲ εἰς ἀλλήλους χρηστοί, εὔσπλαγχνοι, χαριζόμενοι ἑαυτοῖς, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Θεὸς ἐν Χριστῷ ἐχαρίσατο ὑμῖν.

This verse translates quite easily as: *"But be* (literally *become*) *benevolently kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also freely forgave you."*

In this verse the Apostle Paul uses the Greek verb χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai* to instruct the Church regarding *"forgiveness."*

Word analyses may add some insights to the exegetical study.

The verse begins with the second person plural, imperative mood of the deponent verb of being γίνομαι – *ginomai* meaning *"to become"* indicating that there is to be a change from one state to another. It is the imperative form that adds strong emphasis to Paul's instruction here given to the Church.

δὲ εἰς ἀλλήλους – *de eis allelous* is a directional phrase, but begins with the postpositive δὲ - *de*, that in translation needs to be placed first in the verse. *(A postpositive is a word that cannot stand first in a sentence, clause, or phrase, but may be translated as first)* ἀλλήλους – *allelous* is the accusative plural reciprocal pronoun, thus, *"one another"* and since it is plural, must be inclusive.

χρηστοί - *chrestoi* is a nominative masculine plural adjective from χρηστός – *chrestos*. The primary word is very interesting. It carries the fuller meaning *"well adapted to fulfill a purpose,"* and thus *"useful,"* *"suitable,"* *"excellent."* When it is used as a comparative adjective, χρηστότερος – *chrestoteros*, it is best translated by the English word *"better."* When used of persons the idea is *"kindness,"* *"benevolent."* This seems to be how Paul uses it in the Ephesians 4:32 text.

εὔσπλαγχνοι – *eusplangchnoi* is a nominative masculine plural adjective from εὔσπλαγχνος – *eusplangchnos*, a word built on the particle ευ – *eu* that always adds the idea of *"good,"* *"excellent,"* *"fine,"* or *"well."* It is the beginning of the familiar word *"eulogy,"* indicating *"a good word"* and is used in most funerals when speaking of the departed person. The major part of the word is from σπλάγχνον – *splangchnon* referring to the inward part of the body, such the heart, bowels, or liver. It is found only in the plural form in the New Testament, and is almost always used figuratively to refer to the *"tender emotions"* resident in one's personality. It can be translated *"affection,"* *"deep feeling,"* *"compassion,"* or *"inner love."* This is the background for the use of the word *"compassionate"* in the translation above. It communicates the *"deepest and most positive sense of emotional compassion."*

χαριζόμενοι – *charidzomenoi* – a present tense participle, either middle or passive voice, and masculine plural of χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai*. An exegete of Scripture should not attempt to make anything more out of the *"middle or passive voice"* forms than should be made. This is because χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai* is a deponent verb which always appears in the middle/passive voice form but translated as an active voice form unless the context of its use indicates otherwise. So here, it is active voice in the sense in which it is used.

Other very significant words in this Pauline verse are: ἑαυτοῖς – *heautois*, the dative plural reflexive pronoun, meaning *"to one another,"* and

καθὼς καὶ - *kathos kai* meaning *"just as,"* or *"in the same way."*

ὁ Θεὸς ἐν Χριστῷ - *ho Theos en Christoi* meaning *"God in Christ."* Here the sense is that God, on the merits of the shed blood of Jesus Christ, His eternal, uncreated, one-of-a-kind Son, has given forgiveness to His people.

ἐχαρίσατο ὑμῖν – *echarisato humin* meaning *"(He) forgave you."* It is easily seen that this word is a form of the verb χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai.* The verb form here is third person singular, aorist indicative of the deponent verb. Its meaning is simply *"He forgave."* The pronoun following is a dative second person plural, *"you all."* It is interesting that the dative form is used to indicate the object of the action of the verb. This is because there are some verbs in Koine Greek that are NOT completed by the accusative case, but rather by the dative case. We note here, for example, that forgiveness was extended *"to"* the recipients, and by faith it became a part of their relationship to God. Grammatically, there was no action upon the recipients, but rather, action to them. This may sound like a subtle nuance, but nonetheless it is grammatically true in Koine Greek.

What then is the student of Scripture to learn about *"forgiveness?"* Remembering that the Greek word Paul uses in Ephesians 4:32 is χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai*, it is imperative that the definition of this Greek verb prevail. The verb is developed from the familiar noun χάρις – *charis*, which means *"grace."* In a Bible study on the subject of *"forgiveness,"* it is very easy to look into a Concordance and find the English word *"forgiveness,"* and base the study on various verses or passages using that English word. Such a practice is not appropriate when maintaining integrity with the Word of God. An illustration of this practice would be turning to Luke 17:3-4 in which Jesus instructed His followers regarding *"forgiveness."* Another illustration of this may focus on Matthew 18:21 in which record Peter asked Jesus how many time he must *"forgive"* a brother who had offended him. However, the word Jesus used and the word Peter used is ἀφίημι – *aphiemi*, and while being an appropriate word when thinking of *"forgiveness,"* is not the same as Paul used in Ephesians 4:32, which is the focus of this present word study.

How then shall the student of Scripture deal with the issue of *"forgiveness?"* The approach must always begin with discovering the translational possibilities for the word *"forgiveness."* This involves the morphological and lexical exercises necessary. Syntactical and Contextual elements must then follow. And so for χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai,* the deponent verb, present tense participle, what may be said? It is a response to the imperative form of the verb of being that begins the sentence. The present tense concept is that it must be an ongoing, continuous action; that is, a lifestyle that characterizes the Christian.

The word itself is first and foremost a cognate of the very familiar noun χάρις – *charis*, which means *"grace."* Therefore χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai* carries the idea of *"being gracious toward someone."* The word means *"when offended, to bestow favor on the offender unconditionally."* In other words, *"to forgive"* someone means literally *"to grace them,"* or more rhetorically meaningful, *"to be gracious to them in forgiveness, with the God-motivated intention of never retaliating or returning to the issue of the offense!"* If there is any retaliation, let it be returning good in the place of evil.

There are many Scripture references that include the words *"forgive,"* and *"forgiveness."* Some are very helpful in assisting one in determining what exactly is meant by these words. In the Septuagint *(LXX)* one finds the only use of the Greek word χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai.* It is as follows: *"King Ahasuerus said to Esther the Queen and to Mordecai the Jew, 'Look, I have given Haman's estate to Esther and he was hanged on the gallows because he attacked the Jews."* (Esther 8:7) When the Jewish scholars, *"the Seventy"* translated the Old Testament into Greek, they used the word χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai* to state what King Ahasuerus had done with the estate of Haman. It is the English words *"I have given"* that are the translation of ἐχαρισάμην – *echarisamen*, the first person singular, aorist tense form of χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai*, and is translated *"I gave"* or *"I have given."* The Hebrew word of which χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai* is the translation is נָתַן - *nathan,* the basic meaning of which is *"to give,"* *"to place,"* and *"to make."* Whereas the verb χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai* is built on the noun χάρις – *charis*, *"a favor unconditionally bestowed,"* it seems evident that King Ahasuerus

wanted to express such a favor, and therefore *"graced"* or *"favored"* Queen Esther when ἐχαρισάμην – *echarisamen* – *"he gave"* the estate of the wicked, conniving Haman to her. This seems to help us understand the meaning of χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai* as *"an unconditional favor extended."* THAT then, is *"forgiveness"* in the Christian sense.

In attempting to establish the full meaning of *"forgiveness"* one is tempted to cite only the Scripture references in which the English word *"forgiveness"* is used. This is not altogether a correct approach, for there is the danger of interchanging the two Greek words ἀφίημι – *aphiemi* and χαρίζομαι – *charidzomai*. It is too easy to say: *"O well … forgiveness is forgiveness … so what difference does it make which Greek verb is used?"* That is a dangerous step toward eisegesis. In any study of Scripture in which exegetical integrity is maintained a careful look at the context in which a word is used must be considered. So it is with the use of these two Greek verbs.

At the same time, it is to be recognized that both of these verbs can be translated *"forgive."* The sense of the word itself presupposes a causal condition calling for the act of *"forgiving."* This is made evident in Paul's Letter to the Colossians. He wrote: χαριζόμενοι ἑαυτοῖς ἐάν τις πρός τινα ἔχη μομφήν; καθὼς καὶ ὁ Κύριος ἐχαρίσατο ὑμῖν, οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς – *"forgive one another if anyone has a complaint against another; just as also the Lord forgave you, so also you* (are to do.)*"* (Colossians 3:13) There is a causal condition, namely, *"a complaint against another."* In life's vicissitudes there may arise a great plethora of *"causes"* setting forth the need for *"forgiveness."* Whatever they may be, the Scriptures are emphatic, teaching us that we are to *"grace"* one another in such instances. That is, we are to extend unconditional favor toward those who have offended us.

Each verb, however, must stand on its own and convey the intended meaning established by the Spirit-anointed writer, as stated in the passages of Scripture in which it is used. The question seems to come quickly: *"What happens next?"* Or, *"What if this happens again?"* Some students of Scripture are immediately drawn to the Old Testament reference of Jeremiah 31:34: *"No longer will one teach his neighbor or his brother, saying: 'Know the LORD, for they will all know Me, from the least to the greatest of them' – the LORD's declaration. 'For I will forgive their wrong-doing and never again remember their sin.'"* (Jeremiah 31:34) One may also cite Isaiah 43:25. Let it be stated strongly that the Jeremiah passage is eschatological and is in reference to the establishment of the New Covenant. To attempt to apply it to the daily walk of Christians intermingling their lives is nothing more than taking Scripture out of its context. At the same time, in defense of the theology of Jeremiah 31:34, it should be noted strongly that when God forgives He does indeed elect NOT to remember our sins against us … EVER! Hallelujah! But for the Biblical exegete, one must be very careful to maintain the integrity of the Biblical text. In the light of the text for this word study, let it be stated clearly that the Apostle Paul carefully established the causal context for his injunction to *"forgive."* Let there be no more bitter resentment or anger, no more shouting or slander, and let there be no bad feeling of any kind among you. Be kind to each other, be compassionate. Be as ready to forgive others as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you.

A word of caution needs to be stated as this brief study is drawn to a close. The Letter to the Hebrews is clear in its strong warning: *"See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and by it, defiling many."* (Hebrews 12:15) This is the preventative for those causal elements needing the grace of forgiveness. If, however, there are disagreements that become *"thorns in the flesh"* of others in the body of Christ, if legitimately observed to contributing to the spiritual detriment of others, and if discovered to be divisive in the body of Christ, the Word of Scripture is *"deal with it immediately, recognizing genuine repentance* (Godly sorrow for the wrong), *literally heaping unconditional grace and favor on the offenders, and retaliate with blessing and love."* Let the Church respond in this way, and perhaps the world will begin to notice that what was said of the early Church is still true: *"Behold, how they love one another."*

Dr. Robert L. Morris, 2015; revised by adding some additional explanations, Spring, 2018.