

## “Changing the Past- the Power to Forgive”

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“Forgiveness is a beautiful word until you (really) have something to forgive.” C.S. Lewis quoted in When Forgiveness Doesn't Make Sense by Robert Jeffress, 9)

That statement by C.S. Lewis, too often captures our feelings quite well.

“Forgiveness is a beautiful word.....until you have been really hurt.”

It's like the usually friendly neighbor man who flew into a rage when a child walked in his freshly poured cement.

When his startled wife said to him, “I thought you **liked** children,” he replied, “I like them in the abstract but not the concrete.”

We too like the **idea** of forgiveness, but to actually forgive is quite another thing.

Listen for a moment to a montage of Bible verses related to this subject:

1 John 1:8-9

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will **forgive** us our sins... “

Hebrews 9:22

“...without the shedding of **blood** there is no **forgiveness**.”

Hebrews 10:10,18

“...we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all...And where (sins have) been **forgiven**, there is no longer any (need for a) sacrifice for sin.

Jeremiah 31:31

“This is the covenant I will make with (them) declares the LORD...

I will **forgive** their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

Matthew 18:21-22

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I **forgive** my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Matthew 6:9-15 Jesus said: “For if **you forgive** men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you **do not forgive men** their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Psalms 32:1

“Blessed is he whose transgressions, (whose sins) are forgiven...”

The war had gone on too long and David the King of Israel had grown weary of the meetings, strategies and pressures.

In his many social affairs with the military leadership, he had grown familiar not only with the generals but also their wives.

One of those generals lived next door and his wife was particularly attractive to David.

On a day when he should have been attending to other matters, David spent too much time noticing, then looking, then longing for that woman.

That longing grew into active adultery AND then he discovered that the General's wife was pregnant with David's child.

David's devious mind tried desperately to find a way to get the General (the woman's husband) to come home from the battle front SO THAT when the pregnancy eventually became more obvious, everyone would assume the child was the General's.

Failing in his many attempts to get the General to come home, David finally calls a trusted military aide and commands him to plan an offensive that will put the general in a vulnerable position and then secretly order a retreat so that the general would die.

The plan worked perfectly and David married the pregnant widow.

That incident is recorded in 2 Samuel and illustrates how sins against others manifest themselves in our lives as well.

In Psalm 32 that King David describes the psychological and spiritual turmoil he went through in the aftermath of his hideous sin.

Psalm 32: 3-4

When I kept silent,  
my bones wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.

For day and night  
your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was sapped  
as in the heat of summer.

The guilt of his past was overwhelming – **but he couldn't change it.**

He had sinned and now he lived with the consequences.

My own sister after being reared in a strong Christian home, and graduating from Bible College, grew so lonely that she threw over her values and moved in with a man to whom she was not married.

The difference between how she was living and what she believed required that one or the other change.

She refused to change her actions and so she tried to change her beliefs.

Occasionally she would let others in on the turmoil of her mind – her sin was before her night and day.

Several years ago I came across an article by the late Lewis Smedes, a seminary professor, in which he writes that there are two anxieties that often plague peoples' lives:

One of them is the uncertainty of the future.

People long to control their futures but they cannot.

The other anxiety is about our **unchangeable past.**

Some people would give most anything to be able to recreate parts of their private histories.

“If only I could change this or that in my past.”

“If only I could do it over again.”

But we are stuck with our past.

The future is uncertain and the past is unchangeable.

That is the tragic plight of every man or woman - **without God.**

But **WITH** God we are offered relief for those two great anxieties of life.

God will **control our future** and He will recreate our future.

It is the second of those that I wish to speak to today – the subject is changing our past.

Wouldn't that be something?

There are two ideas that will weave through this sermon:

The first is **God's power to change our past** AND

The second is **God's power through us to change the past of others** in their relationship with us.

In 2 Samuel 12 we are told that the prophet/preacher Nathan confronted David after David's sin.

Through the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, David came to see his sin for all of its "evilness" and he cried out, "I have sinned against the Lord."

David recognized that though obviously his sin was against the woman and her husband and his country – **ultimately and mostly his sin was against God.**

The root of all sin is rebellion against God.

To David's confession and repentance came the most beautiful words any person could ever hear – "The Lord has taken away your sin."

In one stroke of grace David's past was altered.

What could have been held against him for the rest of his life and for eternity was forgiven!

David's response to the whole ordeal is given to us in Psalm 32.

Can you begin to feel what David must have felt?  
Have you experienced this?

Psalm 32:1

"Blessed is he whose transgressions, (whose sins) are forgiven..."

He is now free from the pain of the guilt that clung like a leech to his soul.

He is now free from the past – his past is changed.

After over two years of living with one man and then another, my sister was finally so moved by the convicting power of the Holy Spirit of God that she confessed her sin and repented – turned around.

She became living proof of the power of God to change the past.

She will never be held accountable for that sin.

In the sight of God it is as if it never happened.

Her history has been changed.

"How blessed is the woman whose transgressions are forgiven."

Maybe you don't identify with the heinous sin of David or even the lesser sins of others.

You are tempted to say, "Of course **those kinds** of sins require a great forgiveness".

But if we are honest and don't just compare ourselves just with others more sinful than us BUT INSTEAD compare ourselves to the holiness, the perfection of God, we will see that we too require great forgiveness.

Our past, too, is filled with unholiness that will forever haunt us and keep us from God if something doesn't change.

But the good news is that God changes it!  
"How blessed is the person whose sins are forgiven."

Too many people try simply to forget their past by busying themselves with the present.

But those attempts are like an anesthetic – it works for a while but it soon wears off and the past penetrates the consciousness once again.

And any thoughts of God and the future fill their minds with a holy apprehension.

But when a person is **forgiven**, when forgiveness changes the past – then true peace comes.

"How blessed is the person whose sins are forgiven!"

I want you to think with me for a few minutes about several aspects of that forgiveness.

**First of all, forgiveness is never deserved; it is always a matter of grace.**

Contrary to what many people think, there is no way to earn forgiveness.

What many think is that “if I make up, if I compensate, for what I have done to you or to God then I can be forgiven.” Penance; promising to do better, trying harder.

But that is neither logical nor correct:

If you truly could make up for it, then you would have paid for what you did wrong and forgiveness would no longer be necessary.

The only sufficient payment for sin is death according to God.

Which means you could spend eternity compensating and **never** make up for it.

Forgiveness is never deserved.

If forgiveness is going to be granted it must be by grace – undeserved favor – God doing for us what we don’t deserve.

God says in Isaiah 43:25 “I forgive your sin for my own sake.”

And just as importantly, **our forgiveness of others must be of the same kind** – a matter of grace – undeserved, unmerited forgiveness.

Don’t **ever** think that a person **deserves** to be forgiven. If someone sins against you – what she or he **deserves** is justice not forgiveness.

Jewish Simon Wiesenthal was a prisoner in the Mauthausen concentration camp in WWII.

One day he was assigned to clean out rubbish and manure from a barn that was being turned into a field hospital for wounded German soldiers.

After a long hard-day's work, a nurse led Wiesenthal to the bedside of a young German SS trooper.

The young soldier was seriously wounded.

He grabbed Wiesenthal's hand and clutched it.

He said he had to talk to a Jew to confess a terrible crime.

He and others had gunned down Jewish women and children as they had tried to escape a house the Germans had set on fire.

At the end of his tragic confession, the soldier asked forgiveness.

Wiesenthal jerked his hand away and walked out.

In his book The Sunflower, written years later, he asks the readers what they would have done.

Most who wrote to Wiesenthal said he was right – he shouldn't have forgiven – it wouldn't have been fair.

When we are really hurt we say the same thing, "Why SHOULD I forgive – it isn't fair!"

**And that is correct – on its own forgiveness isn't fair.**

Someone who hurts us doesn't deserve to be forgiven, anymore than we do.

Forgiveness runs counter to our sense of fairness and justice.

Therefore if forgiveness is going to happen, **it must be of grace.**

When someone sins against us it will take the grace of God working through us to truly forgive.

Forgiveness **is** divine.

And only those who have been forgiven by God can know what it means to forgive someone else.

Not to just overlook someone's sin against us (which is what I think most people call forgiveness), not even to ask them to make up for what they've done but to truly forgive.

First of all then forgiveness is not deserved – it is of grace.

**The second thing about God's forgiveness of us is that when He determines to forgive us he also removes the guilt.**

God doesn't just say, "I've decided not to punish you for your sin."

He also says, "I've decided to not even remember your sin any longer. I've changed your past. I will not allow it to affect my attitude toward you. You are forgiven."

Jeremiah 31:31

I will forgive their wickedness  
and will remember their sins no more."

**Do you realize how differently God sees you now that you forgiven through Christ Jesus?  
Do you not revel in that truth every day of your life?**

Now in Ephesians 4:32 God tells us to forgive each other as God has forgiven us.

This means that if I forgive you, I am now choosing to treat you as if you never sinned against me.

Not only will I not retaliate against you but also I will treat you as if it never happened.

I've experienced that kind of forgiveness from my parents, my wife, my children and from others AND FROM GOD!

What awesome freedom; my past has been changed. God removed the guilt.

**The THIRD thing about God's forgiveness of us is that this forgiveness and removal of guilt is possible only through the sacrificial death of Jesus.**

And this truth is also very important in our forgiveness of others. .

As we saw earlier, sin and guilt demand justice.

God's word says, "The soul that sins shall die."

And "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin."

Sin and guilt not only DEMAND justice – justice is what they will get.

All sin will be punished.

That punishment will be borne either by the sinner or by the savior.

God does not overlook sin.

Then how can God declare us forgiven?

This is the essence of the Gospel: Because God's Son, Jesus the Christ, took our sin and died in our place.

The Son of God took the Triune God's just, fair judgment against sin, penalty that is rightfully ours, and he, Jesus, was **judged in our place** and satisfied divine justice.

Jesus was judged guilty of David's adultery, Jesus was judged guilty of my sister's immorality, Jesus was judged guilty of my sins and yours.

He who had no sin of his own became sin for us.

By that God can declare us not guilty – no longer any condemnation.

That's why David cried out, "Blessed is the man whose sin is forgiven!"

I think that's the same emotion Charles Wesley had when he wrote:

"And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood?

Died he for me who caused his pain?

Amazing love, how can it be that Thou my God shouldn't die for me?

**In all of this there are implications for our forgiveness of others:**

First of all judgment, penalty, revenge belong to God alone. I usurp God's place when I act unforgiving toward another human being.

God alone has the right to judge.

John Wimber wrote, "When we take it upon ourselves to decide whether we **will** (or not) extend forgiveness in a particular situation, we are seizing a function that belongs only to God. We are in effect, making ourselves God!" John Wimber in [Kingdom Mercy](#) p22

Revenge is a common theme in much of what we read and watch.

But it is not Christian!  
 Judgment and penalty belongs to  
 God not us.

Secondly, Christ paid the penalty not only for my sin BUT  
 ALSO the penalty for **the sin of my Christian brother  
 or sister** against me.

Who am I to suggest that the death of Jesus is  
**insufficient** to pay for my **brother's** sin against sinful  
 me, when at the same time I claim it IS sufficient to pay  
 for **my** sin against a holy God?

**The basis of God's forgiveness of me is the  
 substitutionary death of Jesus.**

**The basis of my forgiveness of my brother who sins  
 against me is that same substitutionary death of  
 Jesus.**

As I've said, forgiveness does not come from my ability to  
 overlook another person's sin - that may sound merciful but  
 it is actually unjust.

Neither does my forgiveness of another come from the  
 other person's ability to make up for what they have  
 done – they can't.

**Forgiveness comes from the fact that justice  
 has already been served** and we are  
 commanded to carry out the verdict in our actions  
 toward others – we now treat them as no longer  
 guilty – they are forgiven.

There is no room left for vengeance.

There is no ground left for us to demand anything.

“Forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

In God’s forgiveness of **us** he changes our past.

He performs a kind of spiritual surgery.

He removes our penalty and guilt so that it is no longer a part of us.

God now treats us as forgiven!

He, a holy God, has fellowship with us and loves us.

Now God commands us and enables us to do the same for each other.

In our minds we must deliberately slice away the desire for retaliation.

**Yes, we can still recall the hurt – we don’t pretend.**

But at the same time, and repeatedly, we acknowledge that because of Christ’s death, we can remake our history with that person.

And we alter their past with us as God altered our past with him.

How do we do this?

God forgives instantly and I suppose there are some people who can feel forgiveness of others instantly, but for most of us it takes time.

But it starts with a decision - a decision that we make and make over and over again as we work through the emotions of our hurt.

I haven’t heard a better example than the one Corrie Ten Boom of the book The Hiding Place tells.

Corrie was for years in a Nazi concentration camp – humiliated and tortured.

Especially revolting were the delousing showers where the women were ogled by the guards.

Her sister die but Corrie made it through that hellish ordeal and thought that she had by grace forgiven even those guards.

She **preached forgiveness** all over Europe and the U.S.

One Sunday in Munich, Germany she preached forgiveness again.

After the sermon, a smiling man held out his hand to her and said, “Ja Fraulein, it is wonderful that Jesus forgives all our sins as you say.

In that moment she remembered that face – his was the face of one of those guards.

Though his hand was extended to her, her hand froze by her side and all those horrid memories flashed before her.

All of the sudden she felt she could NOT forgive what she had so long thought she HAD forgiven.

Ashamed and horrified, she prayed: “Lord forgive me, I cannot forgive.”

As she prayed she remembered that **she was forgiven and accepted by God in spite of her shabby performance as a famous “forgiver.”**

Out of an overwhelming sense of the greatness of God’s forgiveness of her, she held out her hand and forgave again – a deeper forgiveness than ever before.

## Greatly forgiven people forgive greatly!

And of those two people – Corrie was the most freed.

Freed by the only remedy for our past -

Forgiveness.

God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness  
of each other.

Blessed is the person whose sin is  
forgiven.

Does **your** history need to be changed?

Come to Jesus for the forgiveness that remakes your  
past.

Does your history **with someone else** need to be changed?

Do you need to forgive as you have been forgiven?

Come to Jesus asking for the **will** and the **ability**  
to forgive as God has forgiven you.

A few months ago I was speaking on this same topic when a  
woman came to me after we were dismissed.

She asked if I recognized her.

I said it had been a long time since I had last seen her  
but I did recognize her.

She said "It has been over 20 years."

She asked if I knew what had happened the last time we  
met.

I said I did.

She was engaged to man with an on-going moral problem  
she did not know about.

In premarital counseling I required him to tell her or I would.

I finally had to tell her and in her devastation, she chose to shoot the messenger, as they say.

She left the church.

Now 20 years later she was telling me that she had hated me for those 20 years.

When she arrived that morning at the church where I was speaking, she learned that I was speaking and she walked out though she did not know the topic.

As she got to her car the Spirit of God convinced her to return.

She listened with tears throughout the sermon.

She then stood before me and said she knew it was God who made her hear that sermon.

She told me that she forgave me and asked me to forgive her.

I readily accepted and we embraced there in front of God and many witnesses.

Because her perceived hurt was so deep and so long, she knew that she would have to choose to forgive over and over again every time the enemy of her soul brought the past to mind.

But she had a new beginning and by God's power, she had changed her past.

Choose forgiveness – the power of God to change the past.