

Sound Living

Forgiveness

Jerry Nelson

“Why should I forgive? It isn’t fair!”

Forgiveness truly is divine. When someone sins against us, it takes the grace of God working through us to forgive. And only those who have been forgiven by God can know what it means to forgive someone else. Learn about forgiveness in new ways and be reminded of the power of forgiveness and the freedom of forgiving.

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Chapter One

Changing the Past The power to forgive

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, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

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 give (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

"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."

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 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, and then longing for that woman. That longing grew into active adultery and then the discovery that the General's wife was pregnant and David was the father of the child.

David's devious heart and 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 was obvious, everyone including the General would assume

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

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 will die. The plan worked perfectly and David married the pregnant widow.

The incident is recorded in 2 Samuel 11 and 12 and illustrates what has taken place in the lives of many others in whole or in part many times since. In Psalm 32 King David describes the psychological and spiritual turmoil he went through in the aftermath of his hideous sin.

*"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."* (Psalm 32: 3-4)

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, of whom I have spoken before, 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 Lewis Smedes a seminary professor, in which he writes that there are two anxieties that dominate most of peoples' lives: One of them is the unpredictability of the future. People long to control their future but they cannot bring them under management. The other anxiety is about our unchangeable past. 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 unpredictable and the past is unchangeable. That is the tragic plight of every man or woman without God. But with God we are offered solutions to those two great anxieties of life. God will recreate our past and He will control our future.

It is the first of those that I wish to address—the subject is changing our past, undoing some of what we have done in our past. Wouldn't that be something? Wouldn't it be phenomenal if we could actually undo some of those things we have done in the past? There are two ideas that will weave through this sermon: God's power to change our past and 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 and His word. 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 feel what he must have felt?

"Blessed is he whose transgressions, (whose sins) are forgiven..." (Psalm 32:1) He is now free from guilt. He is now free from the pain of unholiness that hung like a cloud over his head. 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. Today my sister is living proof of the power of God to change the past. She will never be held accountable for her sin. She will never pay for her offences against a holy God. 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 great sin of David or others. You say, "Of course those kinds of sins require a great forgiveness." But if we are honest and don't just compare ourselves to 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 it is not altered/changed. Our history needs to be changed and through forgiveness, God changes it! *"How blessed is the person whose sins are forgiven."*

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Too many people try simply to forget their past by busying themselves with the present. Those attempts are like an anesthetic—it soon wears off and the past penetrates the consciousness once again. And any thoughts of God and the future fill their minds with fear. But when a person is forgiven, when forgiveness changes the past, then true peace comes into our lives. *"How blessed is the person whose sins are forgiven!"*

Think with me about some aspects of forgiveness. First of all, forgiveness is never deserved; it is always a matter of grace. There is no way to earn forgiveness, contrary to what many people think. What many think is that "if I make

up for what I have done, then I can be forgiven” whether they are thinking of someone else or of God. But that is not logical or correct: If you could make up for it, then you would have paid for what you did wrong and forgiveness would be unnecessary. But the only sufficient payment for sin is death according to God. You can’t make up for sin against God.

Forgiveness is never deserved—if it is sin, it deserves death. If forgiveness is going to be granted it must be out of 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.”* 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 deserves

***“Why should I forgive—it isn’t fair!”
Forgiveness runs counter to our sense of
fairness and justice.***

is justice not forgiveness. If they are going to be forgiven, it must be of grace. Anytime someone sins against us, has hurt us, forgiveness starts with a choice by us, not any action by them.

Simon Wisenthal 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-days work, a nurse led Wisenthal 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 tried to escape a house the Germans had set on fire. At the end of the tragic confession, the soldier asked forgiveness. Wiesenthal jerked his head away and walked out. He would not, he could not, forgive. In his book *The Sunflower*, 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.

We are hurt in other ways and we say the same thing, "Why should I forgive—it isn't fair!" That is correct—forgiveness isn't fair. They don't deserve to be forgiven anymore than we do. Forgiveness runs counter to our sense of fairness and justice. 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 forgive. Forgiveness truly is divine. And only those who have been forgiven by God can know what it means to forgive someone else. Not to just overlook it, not to ask them to make up for it but to truly forgive. First of all then forgiveness is not deserved—it is of grace—undeserved favor.

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 or to take revenge for your sin." But He also says, "I've decided not to even remember your sin any longer. I will not allow it to affect my attitude toward you. You are forgiven." Jeremiah 31:31 says, "*I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.*" And, in Ephesians 4:32 God tells us to forgive each other as God has forgiven us. This means that I am choosing to treat you as if you never sinned against me. Not only will I not retaliate but also I will treat you as if it never happened. The third thing about God's forgiveness of us is that it is

possible only through the sacrificial death of Christ. This is very important in our forgiveness of others as well. 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? Because God's Son, Jesus the Christ, took our sin and died in our place. He took God's fair judgment against sin, judgement that is rightfully ours, and He, Jesus was condemned in our place. Jesus was judged guilty of David's adultery, my sister's

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immorality, my sin and your sin. He who had no sin of His own became sin for us. The holy/just Son of God took our sin on Himself and died in our place. Then God declared us not guilty—no longer any condemnation. Christ took our guilt and our punishment. That's why David cried out, "*Blessed is the man whose sin is forgiven!*"

Charles Colson, known to us for books and his work in prisons, was a tough, self-sufficient attorney working in the Nixon administration. He wrote in his book, *Born Again*, that he sat in his car after hearing the Gospel from Tom Phillips of the Raytheon Corporation and couldn't control the tears. He pulled off to the side of the road and sobbed with release. He later wrote, "I felt old fears, tensions and

animosities draining away. I was coming alive to things I'd never seen before; as if God was filling the barren void I'd known for so many months." It'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 shouldst die for me?"

In all of this there are implications for my forgiveness of others. First of all judgement belongs to God alone. I usurp God's place when I act unforgiving toward another human being. God alone has the right to judge. Secondly, Christ paid the penalty not only for my sin but also the penalty for the sin of my Christian brother against me. Who am I to suggest that the death of Jesus is insufficient to pay for my brother's sin against me, when 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 someone who sins against me is the same substitutionary death of Christ. Forgiveness does not come from my ability to overlook another person's sin—that would be unjust. Neither does my forgiveness of another come from the other person's ability to make up for what they have done—that's impossible. 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; they are no longer guilty—they are forgiven. There is no room left for vengeance. There is no right left for anger. 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 sinless. 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 still know that was the person who hurt us—we don't pretend. But we also 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 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 tells. Corrie spent years in a concentration camp—humiliated and tortured. Especially revolting were the delousing showers where the women were ogled by the guards. She made it through that hellish ordeal and 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 the face—the face of one of those guards. Her hand froze by her side and all those 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. 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 others.

Blessed is the person whose sin is forgiven. Does your history need to be changed? Come to God 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 God asking for the will, the ability to forgive as you have been forgiven. Choose forgiveness—the power of God to change the past.

Chapter Two

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors Matthew 6:12-15

"Forgiveness is a beautiful word until you have something to forgive."¹ That pregnant statement by C.S. Lewis, too often captures our feelings quite well. "Forgiveness is a beautiful word until you have something to forgive." 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 like the idea of forgiveness, but to actually forgive is quite another thing.

While I've not done a formal study of our culture, it seems to me that forgiveness is not a very popular theme. Revenge, on the other hand is quite popular. It is amazing how many television shows and motion pictures strongly appeal to the motive of revenge. I was watching a kids' movie with my son this past week. In it, for 60 minutes or more, a proud, strutting, soccer coach commits one mean act after another until you can hardly wait for him to "get his." Then a cheer wells up within you as he finally loses and better yet, because of a foolish wager he loses, he must kiss a goat. Yes!

Or you're watching a television show where some bad guy commits some heinous crime and you feel a sense of satisfaction when in the end he holds out against the police and is shot dead. And you find yourself thinking, "That's right, no pesky defense attorneys and no lengthy judicial appeals, just justice, swift and certain—Yes!"

Or much more to the point, someone does us wrong, terribly wrong, grievously wrong, and irreparably wrong, what wells us within us after we get past the initial shock and hurt? Isn't it revenge? "No," you say, "It's justice that I seek." And I say, "No, justice might be in there somewhere but revenge is also there and it is the pulsing, driving force." Have you ever felt it: The hurt, the anger, the helplessness, and the dark desire for some kind of retaliation? And if you won't admit to such feelings of wanting to do them harm, how about those feelings of homicide? Oh, not literal homicide but putting them out of your existence—killing them off in any kind of relationship with you. You say the pain is too great, the hurt is too deep and you can't deal with it anymore, you're done with them. As far as you are concerned they cease to exist—relational homicide.

Jesus is speaking of those actions for which there is no excuse, no mitigating circumstances that forced the action, and no way to compensate for it.

Into all those feelings Jesus comes with these words: *"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. 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."* (Matthew 6:12-15) "Forgive! You've got to be kidding!" Does God really expect me to forgive that? Or again as Lewis said, "Forgiveness is a beautiful word until you have something to forgive."

Jesus is not talking about forgiveness in the way we so often use the idea.

- We so easily speak of forgiving someone because they didn't mean to do it.
- Or we forgive them because they couldn't help it.
- Or we forgive them because they've never done it before.
- Or we forgive them because in every other way he or she is a nice person who deserves to be forgiven.

But that is not forgiveness, that's excusing; that's explaining their actions so that guilt is not attributed to them, or at best it is allowing their other goodnesses to compensate for this indiscretion.

Jesus is talking about the forgiveness necessary when what was done was evil, harmful, and with malice. He is speaking of those actions for which there is no excuse, no mitigating circumstances that forced the action, and no way to compensate for it. The harm has been done and it is incapable of being undone. That person is the one we are called on to forgive! It is with that person, or those people, in mind that we must read what Jesus said, *"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."* (Matthew 6:12)

Even for the non-Christian there is good reason to forgive others. The medical and mental health communities have demonstrated the therapeutic value of forgiveness both physically and emotionally. But the forgiveness of which Jesus speaks is of a higher order and Jesus ups the ante when He ties it to God's forgiveness of us. Matthew 6:14-15 says, *"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."* This is not the only time Jesus does this. In Luke 6:37 we hear Him saying, *"Forgive and you will be*

forgiven." In Mark 11:25 we read, *"If you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."* The implications of this are disturbing to us. Does Jesus mean that we have to forgive others before the Father can forgive us? Is Jesus saying that God's forgiveness of us is dependent on our forgiving those who have sinned against us? Doesn't the Bible teach that we don't earn forgiveness?

I think the best way to answer these and similar questions is to go back and think carefully about what Jesus said we are to pray. When Jesus speaks of forgiveness where does He start? He starts with God's forgiveness of us: *"Father forgive us our debts."* So before we can understand our forgiveness of someone else, we must understand God's forgiveness of us. Most of you know that the word "debts," in this context is another word for "sins." And so we recite it, *"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."*

Outside of church, the word "sin" sounds strange today—almost embarrassing! Who speaks this way any longer except preachers? Tongue in cheek I ask, "Haven't we learned enough about the human psyche to know that people don't sin today, they are simply maladjusted or they are in error or they do something with negative consequences?" We don't speak of "sin" because "sin" is believed to be an obsolete category for describing human behavior. But if sin disappears then so too does guilt. Guilt then changes from objective guilt (being guilty for doing a sinful thing) to a guilt complex (a feeling of guilt). If that is true, then we don't need the forgiveness of sins, we need help in overcoming the psychological complex.

But God teaches that we are sinful and we are guilty.

- We have violated the holy standards of God

- We have not lived in obedience and loyalty to Him,
- We have rejected His overtures of love
- We have violated each other.

The Bible indicates that the reason why we feel guilty is because we are guilty! Most of the people of the world, as evidenced by the religions of the world, spend a great deal of time attempting to deal with their sense of guilt—hence many good works, sacrifices and rituals. And even among the so-called “enlightened” secular people of the world, those who reject religion, countless hours and millions of dollars are spent in psychotherapy and other means attempting to get beyond the feelings of anger,

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resentment, and guilt that people have mostly because of broken relationships. We may not call it “forgiveness” but forgiveness is what people long for.

The first time the conjunction “and” is used in The Lord’s Prayer is between the request for bread and the request for forgiveness. You won’t find it in the New International Version but in the New American Standard and in the Greek from which the translations come, the word “and” sits between the two requests: “*Give us today our daily bread (AND) forgive us our debts...*” Forgiveness is as daily and as necessary as bread.

When we preachers talk about sin, we are not just trying to get people to feel guilty so that they will turn to the church or the preacher to get help. We are not just creating a market for our ecclesiastical wares. We believe what God

says and we see it in ourselves and in all the people around us—we have sinned against God and each other and we are guilty. That's why forgiveness is so necessary. Without forgiveness we would have no relationship with God or others—we would live estranged from God and each other. Forgiveness and reconciliation are essential human needs—as necessary as bread.

And forgiveness, when granted, is an awesome experience! God's forgiveness of us is marvelous. "The wonder and glory of Divine forgiveness lies in the measure of its necessity."² We are desperately in need of it! Many of us treat forgiveness as if it was required of God when we make up for the sins we've committed. By analogy we might say, "A husband forgot his wife's birthday and so he brought flowers to ask forgiveness." She measures the contrition in his voice and the value of the gift and decides that he has done enough to make up for what he did and

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"Father, forgive us our debts..."***

thus is worthy of being forgiven. That's not forgiveness that's compensation. Forgiveness is in a totally different category. Don't ever think someone deserves to be forgiven! Forgiveness is undeserved!

That's why forgiveness is part of what we call the gospel—good news. The miracle of the gospel is that what is impossible for us to accomplish, God accomplishes; we can be forgiven and be no longer under the weight of the guilt of our sin and no longer liable for the penalty for our sin. And the basis of that forgiveness is nothing less than Jesus' death for us. He took the penalty for our sin on Himself. Our sins and forgiveness met on the cross.

The cross makes clear the true cost of forgiveness. The Bible says that God's own death was necessary for forgiveness to be granted.

"We may not know, we cannot tell
What pains he had to bear;
But we believe it was for us
He hung and suffered there.
He died that we might be forgiven
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by his precious blood."³

The church is the community of the forgiven! It is our message! Forgiveness is the remedy for the world's relationship with God and with each other. "Father, forgive us our debts..."

It is imperative that we understand and experience that first half of the request about forgiveness before we attempt to understand the second half. One man said, "No one can rightly claim to be Christian unless he has received the forgiveness of sins."⁴ And it is the awesome experience of God's forgiveness of us ("Father forgive us our sins") that makes possible the experience of the rest of the prayer ("as we forgive those who sin against us"). This takes us back to our earlier questions: Is Jesus saying that unless I forgive others God won't forgive me? Let's read again Jesus' own commentary on that part of the prayer: *"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."*

(Matthew 6:14-15)

That is pointed language. Is Jesus saying that we earn our forgiveness from God by our forgiveness of others? It would be relatively easy to conclude that, if it were not for the vast amount of Scripture that make it abundantly clear

that we do not and cannot earn our relationship with God. God's forgiveness of us is pure grace, not something we earn. But the language Jesus uses is strong because God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others are inextricably linked to each other. It is God's forgiveness of us that creates the possibility and likelihood of our forgiveness of others.

Bob Guelich writes, our forgiveness of others "does not form **the prerequisite** for experiencing God's forgiveness. Rather the genuine experience of God's...forgiveness of (our) immense debt **conditions** (our) ability to forgive others."⁵ Greatly forgiven people forgive greatly. Unforgiven people don't forgive. Forgiveness, properly understood in all its cost and glory, stirs us to gratitude and a forgiving spirit. Oudersluys wrote, "The wonder of Divine forgiveness lies in what it can do to the forgiven soul, and in what it can make the forgiven soul do."⁶

But it is not only that. God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others are linked in another way. We are not ready to ask for and receive God's forgiveness until we are sufficiently broken of our own pride to be forgiving of others who sin against us. When I cannot or will not forgive someone else, when I harbor resentment, when I refuse to be reconciled, and when I intentionally replay the memories over and over again, I am too proud to sincerely request or receive God's forgiveness of me. Listen to several other voices on the matter:

- "The spirit open to receive love is of necessity open to bestow love."⁷
- "What Jesus apparently is saying is the pride which keeps us from forgiving is the same pride which keeps us from accepting forgiveness, and will God please help us do something about it."⁸

- “If we harbor within our hearts grudges and enmities, petty jealousies and hatreds against (others), these attitudes become spiritual obstacles to the entrance of God’s love and forgiveness...We cannot be sons (or daughters) if we are not willing to be brothers (and sisters).”⁹

So how do I forgive others who have sinned against me? First, Christ paid the penalty not only for my sin but also the penalty for the sins 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 me, when it IS sufficient to pay for my sin against a holy God? Forgiveness does not come from my ability to overlook another person’s sin—that would be unjust. Neither does my forgiveness of another come from the other person’s ability to make up for what they have done—that’s impossible. Forgiveness of our Christian brothers and

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sisters comes from the fact that justice has already been served on the cross and we are commanded to carry out the verdict in our actions toward others; they are no longer guilty—they are forgiven.

The basis of God’s forgiveness of me is the substitutionary death of Jesus. The basis of my forgiveness of a fellow believer who sins against me is the same substitutionary death of Christ. Remember the story of Onesimus, the run-away slave? Paul wrote on his behalf to Onesimus’ master, Philemon. The letter urged Philemon to take Onesimus back into his household without punishment. The most compelling request Paul makes is for Philemon to receive

Onesimus as Philemon would receive Paul. He further says than any debt that Onesimus owes should be charged to Paul's account. Jesus speaks to us about the Christian who has hurt us and he says, "I want you to treat that person as you would treat me and I want you to take their great offense against you and charge it to my account." If I have it right, and I think I do, Jesus says, "I want you to treat that fellow-Christian who has wronged you as you would treat me!"

I understand that the debt of the injustice of a Christian's sin against me has been paid in full by the death of Christ so that I ought not to seek further compensation. But what about the non-Christian who sins against us? Is he or she

Forgiveness is just because Christ paid for the sins of my fellow-Christians against me and non-Christians will pay for their sin for eternity.

"fair game?" No. The Bible says in Romans 12:19 *"Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."* All judgment against sin belongs to God alone. All sin not covered by the death of Jesus will be punished for eternity. Justice will be served but God will serve it.

I usurp God's place when I seek or take revenge. God alone has the right to judge. John Wimber wrote, "When we take it upon ourselves to decide whether we will extend forgiveness in a particular situation, we are seizing a function that belongs only to God. We are in effect, making ourselves God!"¹⁰ Whether it is a Christian or a non-Christian who sins against me, there is no basis left for vengeance. No foundation remains for enduring anger.

There is no ground left for me to demand anything. I am left only one alternative—forgiveness.

Let me more succinctly say it this way: We say forgiveness isn't fair. If by "fair" we mean, "deserved," we are right—forgiveness isn't deserved. But if by "fair" we mean "just," saying forgiveness isn't just, we are wrong. Forgiveness is just because Christ paid for the sins of my fellow-Christians against me and non-Christians will pay for their sin for eternity. Forgiveness may not be deserved but it is just.

So what does such forgiveness look like? Ephesians 4:32 says, *"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."* And, Colossians 3:13 says, *"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."* How do we want God to feel and act toward us when we sin against Him? Isn't that the comparison the Bible is making? But what if the offender has not asked for forgiveness or they even continue to hurtfully sin against me? Read Jesus' words:

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get

anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”(Luke 6:27-36)

I don't know what "turning the other cheek" means in every situation. But I do know it has to do with my attitude toward that person and my desire for their good rather than their harm. It is no wonder Alexander Pope said, "To err is human, to forgive, divine." To forgive, as God asks us to forgive, is something that God will have to empower us to do. But the question is, are we willing? Are we even willing to be made willing? But how do I forgive when I can't forget what they've done? Maybe not forgetting is God's gift to us. Forgiveness is at its best when the offense is remembered not when it is forgotten. God gives us continual opportunity to remember His forgiveness of us and renew our forgiveness of others.

Michael Wilkins, a Free Church minister and professor at Talbot Seminary writes of his anger directed at his stepfather who caused him and his family much pain. When Michael was in Vietnam his anger toward his stepfather turned to rage and he vowed that when he saw him next he would kill him. But when Michael returned from war he became a Christian and his world changed. Four years later the stepfather found Michael who by then was married with a young child of his own. Michael's wife invited his stepfather into the home.

As Michael talked with him he suddenly blurted out, "I made a vow in Vietnam that the first time I saw you, I would kill you. Today is that day."

Terror came over the face of the stepfather but Michael quickly added,

"But now I know that I'm no better person than you. God has forgiven me. And if he can forgive a sinner like me, I

can forgive you. I will not allow you to hurt my family again, so don't think that this (forgiveness) is made out of weakness. Rather, I forgive you because I have been forgiven." Wilkins said he was personally as shocked by his own words as was his stepfather. He writes, "I was deeply aware of the mercy and forgiveness that God had extended to me. I knew my sin better than anyone. I may not (have done the things my stepfather did) but in other ways I had used and abused people in my own self-seeking way. When I came to that awareness, I knew that I needed mercy and forgiveness. And in receiving the gift of life that Jesus extended to me through his work on the cross, extending forgiveness to my stepfather was a natural response... I discovered that the key to forgiveness is to stop focusing on what others have done **to** us and focus instead on what Jesus has done **for** us."¹¹

"Father forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

Books Worth Reading:

H.R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*

Yohan Arnold, *Seventy Times Seven*

End Notes

- 1 C.S. Lewis quoted in *When Forgiveness Doesn't Make Sense*, by Robert Jeffress, p. 9
- 2 Oudersluys in H.J. Kuiper, *Sermons on the Lord's Prayer*, p. 109
- 3 Ibid, p. 112
- 4 Ibid, p. 106
- 5 Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding*, p. 298
- 6 Kuiper, p. 110
- 7 Robinson in Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, p. 147
- 8 Fredrich Beuchner, *Wishful Thinking*, p. 28
- 9 Kuiper, pgs. 114 and 119
- 10 John Wimber, *Kingdom Mercy*, p. 22
- 11 Wilkins, Matthew The NIV Life Application Commentary, p. 636-7

Chapter Three

The ABC&D for Forgiveness

Forgiving others for the real and deep hurts of life

Admit the reality of the past:

1. Pray for accurate memory.
2. Who hurt you?
3. How deeply are you hurt?
4. Which situation will be your focus?
5. What actually happened? (Be specific)
6. Is there legitimate “excuse” for the other person’s actions?

Be Aware of your present anger:

1. Pray for insight and honesty.
2. Do I still think about the offense often?
3. Do I think the offense changed my life for the worse?
4. Do I still feel the hurt and anger when I think about it?
5. How have I dealt with my hurt and anger in the past?
 - Denial? I wasn’t really hurt or I can get over this!
 - Revenge? I will punish him/her at every opportunity.

Choose to forgive:

1. Pray that God’s Spirit will change your heart.
(Ephesians 3:14-19)
2. Review the basis of forgiveness
 - Forgiveness is an undeserved act of grace. (Isaiah 43:25; Romans 5:8)
 - Forgiveness is based on justice; Jesus suffered for their offense. (1 John 2:2) Or they will spend eternity suffering God’s revenge—justice belongs to God alone (Romans 12:19-20)
 - God forgives me! (Jeremiah 31:31; 1 John 1:9)

3. Get perspective on your offender
 - Imagine or describe what life was like for them earlier in their life.
 - Describe what life was like for them at the time of the offense.
 - Describe your relationship with the person other than the offense.
 - Describe what your relationship with the person could be if the offense were removed.
4. Make a decision. Am I willing to begin to forgive or do I wish to hold on to my “right” to retaliate?

Do it!

1. Pray that God will enable you to persevere.
2. Write a letter granting forgiveness.
 - You may or may not send the letter depending on circumstances.
 - Be specific about the offense and the hurt; how you have responded to the hurt in the past; the basis of the forgiveness; and your decision; ending with a forthright statement of forgiveness.
3. Take control of your thoughts—refusing to re-live the hurt and continually choosing to forgive.
4. Take positive steps of compassion and affirmation toward the offender. (Luke 6:27-36)

Ephesians 4:32 *"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."*

Acknowledgement:

Some of the above is taken from an excellent secular book by Robert Enright entitled *Forgiveness is a Choice*, May 2001, published by APA Lifetools.

Chapter Four

Getting our Head around Magnanimity

Note: Prison Fellowship President Mark Earley delivered this commentary.

Every now and again, I come across a news story that stops me dead in my tracks. Last week, I came across two such stories about mind-boggling injustice and mind-bending mercy. The first story concerns Willie Pete Williams, an African-American man from Georgia. He served more than two decades in prison for crimes he never committed.

In 1985, Williams was accused of aggravated sodomy, kidnapping, and rape. Despite his claims of innocence, Williams was sentenced to forty-five years. For the next twenty-two years, he slept on hard bunks, ate prison hash, and could only wonder about the life he might have lived on the outside. But Williams did not give up. In July 2005, he contacted the Innocence Project, a nonprofit legal clinic that reexamines criminal cases using post-conviction DNA evidence. After investigating Williams's claims that he was wrongly convicted on faulty eyewitness evidence, the Innocence Project took his case back to court, and Williams was found innocent.

After singing a few lines of *Amazing Grace*, 44-year-old Williams walked out of prison a free man and went home to eat a steak dinner with his family. A few days later, he appeared at a news conference claiming he wasn't angry about spending half of his life behind bars. Instead, he demonstrated mercy and forgiveness. "Anybody can screw up," he said. "We're all human." Would you or I have

reacted to such horrific injustice with such grace? I pray we'll never find out. Williams attributes his remarkable ability to forgive to his conversion to Christ in prison. "That's been my rock," he said. Williams's faith in Christ carried him through years of being labeled a sex offender and gave him hope that his innocence would one day come to light.

And guess what? Williams wasn't the only innocent man exonerated last month. James Waller, a 50-year-old Dallas prisoner, who also lost half his life to prison and parole, was declared innocent, also by the Innocence Project of a 1982 conviction of raping a boy. At the court ruling, Waller, like Williams, said he wasn't angry because the Lord has given him so much.

One commentator on a liberal weblog admitted he was astounded when he read Waller's story in the *New York Times*. I tried to imagine having that kind of magnanimity, the blogger wrote, and I just couldn't wrap my mind around it. Well, the only way we can wrap our minds around that kind of forgiveness is to receive that kind of forgiveness ourselves, which God offers us in Christ. It's only then that we will know what Waller and Williams know: that revenge and bitterness, while they abound on earth, have no place in heaven.

In the end, I believe it's the graciousness, the forgiveness, and the hope in men like James Waller and Willie Williams that act as a signpost pointing even the most hardened skeptic to the reality of God's love and forgiveness. These men are living examples of Peter's admonition in 1 Peter 2:12 that we *"live such good lives among unbelievers that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God."*

There is no better evidence of the presence of Jesus in our world.

Found on Prison fellowship website February, 2007

