

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

Selected Texts

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Dr. Jerry Nelson

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 (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, then longing for that woman.

That longing grew into active adultery AND then he discovered 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 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 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, 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 no 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 speak to today – 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:

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 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?

Psalm 32:1

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

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.”

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 for a few minutes 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 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 hand 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

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

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 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 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." (Born Again)

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 shouldn't 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, whom I mentioned last week, tells.

Corrie was for 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 though 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 the face – the face of one of those guards.

Her had 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.