



The Freedom of Forgiveness

SIMON WIESENTHAL I'm sure that many have you are familiar with Simon Wiesenthal, the Nazi hunter who was responsible for bringing many war criminals to justice. *Wiesenthal himself was a victim of the holocaust, losing most of his family to the Holocaust. During World War II he spent months in a German death camp and experienced the horrors and tortures first-hand. While imprisoned in this camp, Wiesenthal was brought into a room with a dying German soldier to listen to his deathbed confession. Wiesenthal sat quietly and listened as the Nazi described the atrocious acts which he had committed against the Jewish people. The dying man begged Wiesenthal's forgiveness, as a Jew, for unspeakable crimes. Wiesenthal actually felt tinges of compassion for the man, and did a noble thing by simply hearing him out, but after the soldier had said his piece, Simon Wiesenthal walked quietly out of the room. Since that day, Wiesenthal had had doubts about his decision. He has never actually said that he was wrong for not giving the Nazi soldier the forgiveness he sought, but weighed heavily on his mind for many years and he even wrote a book called *The Sunflower* about his moral dilemma.*

He said this: WIESENTHAL QUOTE *"Was my silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi right or wrong? This is a profound moral question that challenges the conscience of the reader of this episode, just as much as it once challenged my heart and my mind."*

It's a question that would challenge most people. How clear cut is the answer. To God it isn't a grey area. Remember the Lord's prayer. There's that phrase isn't there FORGIVE US OUR SINS AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST US. We forgive as God forgives. Which begs the question WHY FORGIVE?

One answer to that is in the rest of the passage in MATTHEW 6:14-15: *"If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done."*

It's an uncompromising pair of verses. If we don't forgive others, God won't forgive us. And that's that. Ouch! Think of the worse thing that anyone else did to you? Perhaps it is something you've never forgiven them for. What about other people you haven't forgiven? And God says we should we should forgive *them*? Yep! God says we must. So why forgive? Let's see what the Bible says:

- ◆ **IT IS REQUIRED BY GOD** We just read it from Matthew's gospel. Our relationship with God is intricately bound up with other people. We can't have a relationship with God in isolation from our relationship with others. We must relate to people in the same way God relates to us. Beware not to apply verses 14 and 15 wrongly. God is our judge and our Father. Look at this communion table and it will remind you that you no longer have an issue with God as our judge – the question of our sin has been dealt with. But as a Father, He'll do His fatherly stuff and won't let us be comfortable with Him until we forgive others from the heart as we should. Our destiny may be secure but our daily victory is at stake.
- ◆ **IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR OUR FREEDOM** Let me remind you of a verse from earlier: *21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?" 22 "No, not seven times," answered Jesus, "but seventy times seven.* To the Jews, you give people a certain number of chances – seven seemed a good number – and then you wrote them off. Jesus repudiates this but He doesn't mean we keep a calculator until 490 times are up, but what He's saying is that we should be forgiving on all occasions – why? God doesn't want His children to languish with bitterness and resentment for people they can't or won't forgive. Life is too short for that.
- ◆ **THE EXTENT OF OUR OWN DEBT** Jesus used this parable read to us this morning to compare what God has forgiven us to our attitude of forgiveness to others. One of the reactions people have to the 70 times 7 is "should I really forgive someone that much? They have done x x x". Jesus uses this parable to give us the story of a servant who had been forgiven much. He wasn't just a common or garden servant. He had responsibility and money – the king's money – and was now in debt to the king to the tune of millions; a debt he couldn't repay when the king called it in. It reminds

me of ROGUE TRADERS who break banks using other people's money! For Nick leeson, the penalty was a spell in prison. That was to be the fate of the man in our story, but the king took pity on him and wrote off the debt.

That's wonderful. I'm sure it was a load off the man's mind – but not that much of a load as we find him pursuing somebody who owed him a small debt. He didn't write it off but had the debtor jailed. You'd have thought having been forgiven much by the king, he would have forgiven his debtor too – but none of it. The lesson is obvious. He should have forgiven as he was forgiven – and because he didn't the king was angry.

That's the message of this passage for us - *“That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”*

- ◆ **REPAYMENT IS IMPOSSIBLE.** As we come around this table today we are reminded of a debt that was paid on Calvary. It was a debt too large for us to repay, but Jesus paid it on the cross. If we know Christ, we have already done as the servant in huge debt did and recognised like the servant and the king that we have no ability to pay back the debt our sins – but God has done that and in his mercy freely forgives.

The story is told of a conversation between a General Oglethorpe and John Wesley. OGLETHORPE proudly said to Wesley “I never forgive” to which WESLEY replied “Then I hope Sir you never sin”.

We forgive a little because God has forgiven us much. What we need to forgive people for is nothing in comparison to what we have been forgiven of by God. Therefore God has every right to expect us to have the high standard of readily showing mercy to those who have sinned against us.

- ◆ **SO THAT NO ADVANTAGE CAN BE TAKEN OF YOU.** There's more to this. When the king finally caught up with the unforgiving servant he had him jailed and tortured by the jailers until he paid back all he owed. The word torture used here means in the Greek to be tormented. Unforgiveness puts us in chains – the term often used in scripture is bondage. We're chained up by someone else. Who? You know the answer – Satan. Here's a verse VERSE from 2 Corinthians: *When you forgive someone for what he or she has done, I forgive them too. For when I forgive - if, indeed, I need to forgive anything - I do it in Christ's presence because of you, in order to keep Satan from getting the upper hand of us; for we know what his plans are. 2 Cor 2:10-11 GNB* FOOTHOLD Unforgiveness gives him that foothold and he chains us up and you'll find that unforgiveness causes all sorts of other negative emotions to take us over – anger, mistrust, bearing a grudge, a critical spirit, revenge, retaliation, vendettas, lies, rumours, gossip, bitterness and worst of all, separating ourselves from God. What starts with unforgiveness often ends in broken relationships, broken families, broken churches and a whole lot of pain for ourselves and for those with whom we have a conflict – all because people don't forgive from the heart.

Unforgiveness is one of the key areas for many Christians that prevents them from growing in the faith and hinders their relationship with God and often with others. And often unforgiveness goes right back – often years and years and can blight our lives. I once knew a Christian lady who really had a very critical spirit. She had a wonderful grasp of the scriptures and attended church faithfully. But her gossiping, her moralising and criticism alienated her from other people and she moved from church to church because they were always falling out with someone. Why was this? We found out that she had been very badly abused by her previous husband who she had never forgiven and was bitter about him, about church and about God. She couldn't see that she needed to forgive him because he had never been sorry for what he had done. Her spiritual life had been totally blighted by it. The devil had taken advantage – what a pity!

FOOTHOLD Unforgiveness opens the door and makes the foothold for the enemy's influence. If you have unforgiveness in your life, however long it's standing, then you need to deal with it. I've given you each a sheet of paper. It's something you can take away and give your response to this morning – both to yourself and to God. STATEMENT SHEET. I would encourage you to pray this prayer and keep praying it until every hurt was put on the table as it were before God. We have to let God lead us to the emotional core where healing is going to take place.

THE CRISIS OF FORGIVENESS I won't underestimate that for some of you that forgiveness is going to be a challenge. For most of us it's just a matter of forgiving someone who's crossed us, but some of you have had dramatically awful things happen in your lives – yet the Father says; forgive.

So let's get a few guidelines. First of all, what if someone has been offended by us? We must give them the opportunity to forgive us! Usually it involves going to see that person and asking for forgiveness. This is what Jesus says in *Matt 5:23-24* : *23 So if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God. Eph 4:31 Get rid of all bitterness, passion, and anger. No more shouting or insults, no more hateful feelings of any sort. 32 Instead, be kind and tender-hearted to one another, and forgive one another, as God has forgiven you through Christ.* Our aim should always be to keep short accounts. If there is a problem, forgive and be forgiven.

What if it's the other way around and someone has offended us? Then we should go to God first. You see, forgiveness starts with our preparedness to forgive. Forgiveness is the attitude of being prepared to forgive before it becomes an act of forgiveness.

Look at God. God is a God of love and because He loves he is a forgiving God. As a forgiver, He didn't just write us off as a race and say "they've sinned, so I'll give them their just desserts". Right from the beginning of creation, God, the forgiver had a plan to redeem men and women. *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."* (NIV). That's the forgiver's intent for us. And the reality of it is shown by this table – the Son took the harm to Himself that our sins might be dealt with, that we may be forgiven and reconciled to God. That's why God can put His hands out in welcome with His offer of forgiveness and the blessings that come with it. And the forgiver says – you do the same for people that forgive you.

However sinful people, people who have offended God (that's everyone); only come into the reality of God's forgiveness when recognise that we need to ask for Him to forgive us and become reconciled to Him. Then he freely and personally gives us that forgiveness and reconciliation becomes a reality in our lives

It should be the same for us. If we love as God loves us, then before God we should be prepared to forgive from the heart in the same way that God does. First and foremost, forgiveness is an issue between us and God. When we are able to act and feel the way He does then we are able to forgive those who have wronged us and if we can to offer reconciliation with those who have offended or harmed us. Forgiveness from the heart starts with a decision to forgive; a decision not to harm or take revenge; a decision to walk away from our feelings of anger and grudge and then seek all that is worthy and good for that person.

What if they are never reconciled with us? What if they rebuff our overtures, what if they feel they never did anything wrong, what if they die first or we cannot contact them? In the end we can't control people, but the question remains – have we forgiven them? The measure of our forgiveness is that if they did come and ask our forgiveness, would our forgiveness be full and free and from the heart? Our freedom does not depend on their actions, but on our attitude and actions before God because that is where the crisis truly is.

FROM THE HEART? But what is forgiving from the heart? It's best expressed by God turning our unforgiveness into love for those who offend us – into our wanting the greatest benefits on earth and in heaven to be theirs. In His forgiving nature God desired that through Christ, we should come into the greatest benefit possible – now we do the same for others – we live by the same standard. Jesus said in *Matt 5:43-44* "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your friends, hate your enemies.' 44 But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven. Jesus doesn't mince His words does He? But this is the Word of God. God's forgiveness of us was very costly – the body and blood of Jesus. Forgiving costs. Forgiveness is never a case of saying: "It's all right; it doesn't matter." Forgiveness is the most costly thing in the world and by that I mean, costly to the forgiver, but it isn't nearly as costly as remaining in unforgiveness!

WE FORGIVE TO STOP THE PAIN Why's that? Because it's us who don't forgive who suffer the pain of unforgiveness. It is we who are bitter, it's we who bear the grudge, it's we who don't trust others, it's we how experience hurt.

Look at this ridiculous picture – but not so ridiculous if it's ever happened to you. You're walking along the river just as an angler is casting off and his hook lands in your cheek – ouch! How do you resolve the situation? Do you shout at the angler and tell him what a stupid man he is? Do you suppress your feelings for him and ignore him. None of that is going to help the pain of having a hook stuck in your cheek. You have to take it out and get rid of the pain. Then you may just see that rather than exploding at the angler, or bearing a grudge against him, you'll just see it as a freak accident.

But, but, but I hear someone say ... that means by forgiving people, you're letting them off the hook, not facing them up with their wrongdoing. The problem is us that we are the ones on the hook, suffering pain, not them. And what did God do when we were sitting around not accepting our sin? The forgiving God was already thinking about us. He was already planning a way by which we could be reconciled to Him. He didn't wait for us to realise the problem – all ready to accept us. *God has shown us how much he loves us — it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us! 9 By his blood we are now put right with God; how much more, then, will we be saved by him from God's anger!* Romans 5:8-9. Did God let us off the hook? Actually yes. Jesus Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross. Why did He suffer our punishment. So He could make his enemies friends. *Lincoln was asked why he was pardoning Southerners at the end of the Civil War: "Mr. President, don't you want to destroy your enemies?" Lincoln: "Is that not what I do when I make them my friends?"*

What should we be doing about those who have offended us? Rather than being bitter in our unforgiveness, we should be making our enemies friends! That's the God way.

So our pain stops when we deal with the source of pain – unforgiveness. It may be a pain we've suffered from for years. Something we've suppressed, or something we're still smarting from because of the row it all caused. Often the unforgiveness and its consequences is far worse than the initial offence. God does not want us to suffer the bondage of unforgiveness. When we are in unforgiveness, it is we who suffer pain, not those who have offended us. Freedom from that is when we allow God to give us that ability to forgive. Until then those who have offended us, still have a power over us and satan certainly had his foothold.

FORGIVENESS IS TO SET A CAPTIVE FREE AND THEN YOU REALISE YOU WERE THE CAPTIVE.

Forgiveness is primarily an issue between us and God. He commands us to forgive because He loves us. He knows bitterness defiles us and others and causes us to miss out on the abundant life Jesus came to give us. This is all about getting rid of the rubbish in our lives and walking away from it. It's for our sake and in one sense has little to do with the person who hurt us in the first place, although it may actually lead us into reconciliation to them.

And what do we do? We ask the Holy Spirit to show us who there may be in our lives we need to forgive and resolving before God to do so and from our hearts. We're going to do that in a moment but before that let me finish with this

ETCH A SKETCH Yes it's an Etch a Sketch. It's a wonderful device which you could use to draw pictures. This is the version that you could use to draw straight lines. But there was also one where you have a stylus and draw the pictures freehand. The amazing thing about an Etch as Sketch is that it didn't matter how rubbish your drawing was, you can wipe the slate clean. God wants us to wipe that which hangs in our lives and damages our relationship and growth in Him. When we deal with unforgiveness it gets wiped out. Let me be clear about one thing this morning that I haven't said so far – unforgiveness is a problem because it's sin. God commands us to forgive and that's why unforgiveness wrecks our relationship with God. Let's recognise it, renounce it, repent of it and walk with Jesus! *1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* It's promise of God. Let's allow Him to challenge us as we look at the short video:

END VIDEO

Let's pray

Our Father,

We thank You for the riches of Your kindness, forbearance and patience, knowing that Your kindness has led us to repentance.

We confess that we have not extended that patience and kindness towards others who have offended us, but instead have harboured bitterness and resentment.

We pray that as we wait on You, we may be reminded of those we have not forgiven, in order that we may do so. We ask this in the precious name of Jesus,

Amen

Purify my heart

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MRBC Felixstowe 1/8/09

*Based on the Freedom in Christ Discipleship Course
by Neil Anderson and Steve Goss*