

## Forgiving Someone When It's Hard

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Rich Nathan

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"I Believe in the Church" Series

Ephesians 4:32

This morning we are going to consider together just 1 verse of scripture, Ephesians 4:32, *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.* If you were to ask me "what is the distinctive mark of Christianity, what separates Christianity from all the religions in the world?" I would say it was the emphasis that Christianity places upon forgiveness. Forgiveness and the command to forgive are found everywhere in the Bible. To call oneself a Christian and not be a forgiving person is a contradiction in terms. You might as well say "I am a Christian but I don't believe in Jesus Christ and I refuse to follow him." Forgiveness is the mark. Forgiveness is the distinctive. Forgiveness is the identifier that we Christians wear as a badge as we approach each other and as we approach the world. Christians are people who are forgiven and who are forgiving.

Now some of you might say, "Rich, I think of myself as a follower of Christ, as someone who has accepted God's free gift of forgiveness in Jesus, but I guess I am not sure about how forgiving I am. If this is the distinctive mark of the Christian, if this is what identifies us as followers of Christ, I am just not sure of the extent to which I really wear this badge."

And you know, I think a lot of the problem that Christians have is that we don't understand what forgiveness actually means, how it works, what it is and what it isn't. I have spoken with guilt-ridden wives whose husbands are at that very time involved in adulterous affairs and the wives are coming into me saying, "Rich, I don't know how I should communicate forgiveness to my husband. God calls me to be restored in this relationship and I am really trying, but it is not working. I must not be a very forgiving person."

Maybe—or maybe you don't understand what God is requiring of you and what he isn't requiring of you. Maybe you are confused about forgiveness.

I have talked with married couples where one of the couple has had an affair and the offender will sit in my office and say to me that "the problem in our relationship now, Rich, is that my mate won't forgive me." That's possible! It is possible that the current breach in relationship is as a result of unforgiveness and bitterness, but it is more probable that this couple doesn't understand what forgiveness is all about and how it works, what it means.

I can't tell you how many people I have spoken to that will suggest to me that they *just can't forgive* someone for something that they have done. *They just can't do it.* I just can't forgive my father for the abuse he heaped on me or on my mother or on my little brother or on my sister. If what it means to be a Christian is that I forgive, well, then, I just can't be a Christian because I can't forgive.

I have real pity and concern for those who feel that what was done to them is so enormous that they just can't bring themselves to forgive. Some people sitting here right now have suffered unspeakable things at the hands of folks who were supposed to love them. Some of you have suffered terrible betrayal. Or no one particular act, but years and years and years of wounding and harm at the hands of a negligent or insensitive or selfish parent or verbally abusive mate or boss. I have real concern for anyone who would find

themselves in a place of saying, “I can’t forgive” because I know that for you the offense that was committed must be unspeakably great. And to some degree you must feel terribly alone in your pain and in your hurt.

There is a book called *The Sunflower* by Simon Wiesenthal. Wiesenthal was a Polish Jew, a prisoner of the Nazis in 1944, and he had to look on helplessly as Nazi soldiers killed his grandmother on the stairway of her home. They forced his mother into a freight car crammed with elderly Jewish women. All together 89 of his Jewish relatives would die at the hand of the Nazis.

One day, as Wiesenthal’s prison detail was cleaning rubbish out of a hospital for German casualties, a nurse approached him. She said to him, “Are you a Jew?” She signaled him to follow her and Wiesenthal was hesitant. He didn’t know what would await him. Wiesenthal followed her up a stairway and down a hallway until he reached a dark musty room where a soldier lay swathed in bandages. White gauze covered the man’s face with openings cut out for his mouth and nose and ears.

The nurse disappeared and the wounded man had summoned Wiesenthal for a deathbed confession. He said, “My name is Karl. I have to tell you of the terrible deed I did because you are a Jew.” He began to tell his story about how he had been a Catholic, but he lost his childhood faith and joined the Hitler Youth and then volunteered for the SS. Several times Wiesenthal just tried to pull away, but Karl grabbed his arm and said, “No, I must tell you what I have done.”

In the Ukraine, in this particular town, the SS, in retaliation for some Jews booby-trapping the road, rounded up 300 Jews and put them in this house. And then they set the house on fire. They murdered everyone who tried to jump from the house.

This man, Karl, had participated in this horror. He said, “I am left here to die with my guilt. In the last hours of my life, you are the only one who is here with me. I don’t know who you are, I only know you are a Jew. I know what I have told you is terrible and in the nights I have been here waiting to die, time and again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness. Only, I didn’t know whether there were any Jews left. I only know what I am asking is almost too much, but without your answer, I can’t die in peace. Will you forgive me?”

Simon Wiesenthal looked at the man and then silently walked out of the room. He left the man there to die in his guilt.

Who knows what any of us would have done in Simon Wiesenthal’s place? But I know some of the terrible things that have been committed against some of you and your struggle to forgive, to just let something go to release the offended party and to be released yourself. You say, “I just can’t.”

Some people beat themselves up because they say, “I can’t believe that something so long ago would still bother me. By now, it shouldn’t be an issue. This is 20 years old. This is 30 years old.” I should be over it. Or perhaps you ask the question, how do I forgive someone who keeps doing the same thing over and over again?

I believe that many Christians don’t experience the incredible joy and freedom that God wants to give us because we are fundamentally confused about forgiveness. We don’t understand it. We don’t know how to practice it properly, especially when it’s hard.

Today I have called my talk, “Forgiving Someone When It’s Hard.” Let’s pray.

What I want to do is simply teach from one verse in the Bible. A verse that is in the center of an extended discussion by the apostle Paul about the relationships in the church. I have been doing a series of teachings from the book of Ephesians about the church. I have been, over the course of the teaching, attempting to combat what I think is one of the most

dangerous heresies in the church today—American individualism. We American Christians don't get it that Christianity is not just about our private relationship with Jesus Christ. We American Christians don't get the message of the Bible which teaches us that God is not just looking for an individual, God is wanting to create a people for his own possession, a people who know how to relate to each other in love, without gossip, without fighting. A people who know how to meet each other's needs and who understand that life is not a solitary life. It is not an isolated life. Christians often set as a goal the desire to grow spiritually, to get closer to God, to be better disciples of Christ. But how is this going to happen? I'll tell you how. It is a life lived in community, with accountable, close, open relationships with other Christians.

That's why we stress with you over and over again that if you call Vineyard your church home, you need to be in a small group. Are you in a group? If your spouse won't go, you go without him or her. You say that you are busy? Everyone is busy. We have groups that have childcare; groups for younger adults; groups for empty nesters; coed groups, women's groups; day groups; night groups; check out the boards. Get involved in a group if Vineyard is your church home. If you don't like the one you visit, visit another. No excuses...OK?

We American Christians need to be told over and over that we are in this thing called the Christian life together. Certainly, in any exploration of our relationships with each other, we need to highlight Ephesians 4:32.

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

*Forgive.* What does the word mean? If you look at it both in Hebrew and in Greek, which were the biblical languages, the word "forgive" was related to other words which meant to release, to let go, to set free. Certainly, a major part of forgiveness is letting go of the past, letting go of the offense, releasing the offender, allowing a person who has hurt us to get off the hook. Forgiveness meant to cancel a debt. We would say it means that we are going to tear up the IOU's. Forgiveness also meant to carry away. There was in the Old Testament one day set aside for the nation of Israel to have their sins forgiven completely – a day of Forgiveness called the Day of Atonement. On the day of Forgiveness, a priest would symbolically take the sins of the nation and place them on a goat by laying his hands on the goat. Then he would chase the goat out into the wilderness. It was a picture of sins being carried away.

Why should I let someone else's sins be carried away from me? Why should I release a person who has offended me? Why should I cancel someone else's debt, tear up their IOU's?

Well, the simplest answer for the follower of Christ is because it is commanded of us. We have only one choice in the matter to obey or disobey Christ. If we are to follow Jesus Christ, if he is, indeed, our Lord, which means master – the one who calls the shots, the one whose will is done – we must forgive because we are commanded to. Paul writes, "Be kind and compassionate, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God has forgiven you."

Jesus says in Luke 17:3, "If your brother sins, rebuke him. And if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." We are commanded to forgive.

Paul writes in Colossians 3:3, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against another, forgive as the Lord forgave you."

At the most fundamental level, the reason why you must forgive everyone for everything they have done against you is because you are commanded to do so as a Christian. To say I

won't forgive; I won't release; I won't tear up the IOU is saying to Jesus, "Whatever else you are, you are not my Lord. I regard you as an advisory, an unrealistic dreamer, but not Lord."

You know, we'll cover this in a minute, but the commands of Jesus are not unrealistic. It is possible, if something strikes you as impossible, that you and I have misunderstood the command. But the commands are realistic. To be a Christian *is to be a forgiver*. To go above and beyond, to bend over backwards as a forgiver.

And if we needed a cattle prod to move us in the direction of obedience, Jesus gives us a cattle prod in the Lord's Prayer where he says at the end, "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."

Listen to what he is saying. If you do not forgive other people's sins, your sins before God will not be forgiven.

Now, if you are taking notes, you may want to jot down Mark 11:25 where Jesus says, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

Or Luke 6:37 which says, "Forgive and you will be forgiven."

Or even Matt. 6.12 which says, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

Now, many people really struggle with the notion that God will not forgive us if we don't forgive others.

They try to turn the passages that I just read on their head and suggest that rather than being conditions or prerequisites for us obtaining forgiveness, our forgiveness is a proof, it is evidence that we are a forgiven people. Many people try to say that all these passages are designed to indicate that our forgiveness is the natural consequence, it is the way we prove that we are forgiven. It is certainly the case that there are many scripture verses that teach that our forgiveness of others is a proof, it is the ultimate evidence, that we have been forgiven and we understand forgiveness. The texts that I read don't say that however.

I think the best way to understand all the scriptures regarding forgiveness is that our forgiveness of others and God's forgiveness of us are so intertwined that they cannot be separated from each other. You want to hold these two truths together and never pull them apart. We forgive because we are forgiven. And we forgive in order for us to be forgiven. Our forgiveness – let's be careful here – our forgiveness never wins the forgiveness of God. We never earn God's forgiveness or merit it. Whenever we say that our forgiveness is a prerequisite to God forgiving us, we are not turning our forgiveness into a work. I'm saying that if we don't forgive, we cannot receive, we don't have the capacity to take, God's forgiveness.

If you need a cattle prod, something to get you going, toward obeying the command to forgive, I don't know anything better than the notion that we ourselves wish to be forgiven and we won't be, if we don't forgive others for what they have done.

Do you know in your own heart and conscience your desperation to be forgiven?

A company out in California, knowing of people's need to be forgiven, to get things off their consciences and knowing that today most people don't sit down with a priest or a pastor or a confidant and confess, "this is what I have done," a company in California called "Apology Sound-off" allows people to confess their wrong doings for a price of a phone call plus some charges. They get 200 anonymous callers a day. People call up and confess adultery. They call up and confess child abuse. They call and confess criminal acts – rape and murder. A recovering alcoholic left a message saying, "I just want to say I am sorry for all of the people I have hurt in my 18 years as an addict." A woman sobs in to the phone saying,

“I just want to apologize for an auto accident that I caused just last weekend, which killed five people. I wish I could bring them back.” If 200 people a day call some answering machine in a hope of discharging their guilt and stuffing their sins, is this not an indication that we need to be forgiven for what we have done?

Do you want to be forgiven for what you’ve done? Do you want to be released or do you want God to rehearse everything you’ve done wrong over and over again?

Jesus says you won’t be. You might be able to talk to an answering machine, but you won’t be able to connect with God, if you don’t forgive others.

Why do we forgive? *Because forgiveness alone breaks the law of action and reaction.* You know the law of action and reaction? Any of you who have been married know the stupid arguments that you can get into, how embarrassed you would be if these things were tape recorded and played back to you in front of people that you respect.

“Did you cash your check today?”

“No, I forgot.”

“You forgot? You forgot to cash the check today? You always seem to forget.”

“Well, it wasn’t my check. Why don’t you cash it yourself?”

“You can’t do one thing for me?”

“I do a lot of things for you.”

“I asked you just last weekend...”

Back and forth, on and on. How do we stop this stupid cycle? We forgive. Forgiveness is the steel rod in the machine that pumps out reactions for every action. It shuts the whole machine down. Forgiveness operates by a totally different system than America or any other country in the world operates. We in America operate by way of claiming our rights, of demanding what is owed to us, by just wanting everything to be fair and square, just getting what is ours, getting even, making sure no one gets a leg up on us, making sure no one takes advantage of us, making sure we are totally protected and never vulnerable, never stepped on. We never have to sacrifice what is ours – action and reaction.

Think of all the movies that are centered on the theme of getting even, exacting retribution, and getting revenge. There was a movie a few years ago called “Payback.” Payback – Mel Gibson gets even with several dozen people. That is what the Godfather was all about. It was about several generations of a family who understood the principle of getting even, making sure no one steps on them, paying back even years later, not forgetting an offense. That’s the theme of so many of our fantasies – here’s what I should have said when she said that. I see myself pounding that bully, cutting to pieces that sarcastic co-worker, setting my ex-fiancée’s car on fire.

Isn’t this what so many teen movies are about? The nerdy kid, the neglected kid, the kid with problems – gets even with the popular kids. At the end of the movie the popular kids, the cheerleaders, the wealthy kids, the football players, they all get their come-uppance. They fall in the mud. A truckload of manure dumps on their car. And we love it. Getting even – pay back. Action and reaction.

The Serbs and the Albanian Muslims have been at it since 1389. 600 years of memories of getting even, of paying back for generations of hurt. Actions and reactions.

The Protestants and Catholics in Ireland have been at it for generations, since William of Orange in the 1600’s and his massacre of the Irish. And people are still bombing others for what happened 300 years ago. Action and reaction.

We see it with the Palestinians and the Israelis. A suicide bombing leads to a helicopter gunship bowing up a policy headquarters, leads to a grenade launcher attack that kills two boys, leads to the demolition of 20 homes and 5 children’s deaths.

Friends, this is what the world's religions outside of Christianity are based on – this relentless, merciless, exacting of justice and retribution. People say there are many ways to God. Americans today are offended when a Christian stands up and says that you come to God only through faith in Jesus Christ. Americans say, “How intolerant. How bigoted. How narrow-minded. How dare you...there are many roads to God.”

I would ask the person who had the many-roads philosophy to God, “What kind of salvation are you looking for? Are you looking for a salvation that offers forgiveness, an end to the law of action and reaction? Are you looking to get even?” You are not going to find forgiveness in Hinduism. Hinduism teaches karma and what we experience in this life is the result of the accumulation of all of our past deeds and misdeeds. We are on this endless wheel of paying off what our past lives have done. If you are looking for forgiveness in Hinduism, it is not there.

Don't look for forgiveness in Islam, it is not there. The ultimate symbol of Islam is a scale where a perfect and just God weighs your good deeds against your bad deeds and gives you exactly what you deserve. Action and reaction. Justice without mercy.

To the person who says, “All roads lead to God” I would ask, “What kind of salvation do you want? What kind of God are you looking for? Are you looking for a salvation that is based upon forgiveness? Are you looking for a system that puts a steel rod in the principle of an “eye for an eye?” Ghandi once said, “We will practice an eye for an eye until the whole world goes blind.”

But if you are looking for an end to retaliation—in the Mideast; in our inner cities; in your home; if you are looking for someone to just say, “Stop. Let's stop the arguments. Let's stop the fighting. Let's stop hurting each other. Let's stop blaming each other. Let's stop being controlled by the past. Let's open up the possibility of a different future.” If you are looking for something like that, that kind of salvation is only found in Christianity. The symbol of Christianity is not balanced scales; it is a cross upon which the Son of God died to achieve forgiveness.

Why do we forgive? Because only by releasing another person, only by ending the war, by refusing to react to the action, only when someone says “enough,” only when we have put out enough eyes, only then do we have a hope of transforming the offender.

Now, let's break down some of the confusion that surrounds forgiveness because there really are a number of myths. The water is so muddy, so murky, that many of us really struggle with our capacity to forgive because we really don't understand what forgiveness means.

As I said in my introduction, I have had men who have committed adultery tell me that their marriages are not restored because their wives have not forgiven them. That is certainly possible. It is possible that their wives have not released them from the debt. It is possible that a wife keeps dangling over her husband's head an IOU; that the husband keeps being accused; that the bill of hurt and offense has really not been torn up. It is certainly possible that in a situation of adultery where confession is made, that forgiveness is not extended.

But very often people believe that they are not forgiven because the offended person demands that there be some consequences for the particular sin. Let me say this as plainly as I can. *Forgiveness does not mean that there are no consequences.* Do you know even with God, forgiven sin often involves consequences? Read the story of David's sin of adultery with his neighbor Bathsheba, who was the wife of another man. And if you are taking notes, you might want to jot down 2 Samuel 12, especially vv. 13-14 where David says, “I have sinned

against the Lord” and the prophet Nathan replied, “The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die, David. But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt, the son born to you will die.”

David, there are consequences. Let’s be clear. We are not talking about punishment or penalty. God isn’t trying to settle accounts with us when he says there are consequences for our sins. Our accounts were settled at the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross settles accounts. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Condemnation? No. Consequences? Yes.

So, if a person has an affair and breeches their marital vows, the offended party is commanded by God to forgive. That means the offender does not have to pay them off. He doesn’t have to buy them flowers or do the dishes for the next 15 years. Jewelry, a new house – none of that is required. But there are consequences for a breach of your marital vows. And the consequences may be a limitation of freedom. You can forgive someone and still ask them questions that you wouldn’t have asked before the affair. You may require an accounting for their time, or an accounting for money spent, or an end to the use of the computer and the internet. The requirement that we go in for counseling. These are consequences, not penalties for sin.

As a consequence of forgiven sin, a mate might say, “You know, I forgive you, but these incidents point out to me the need for us to fundamentally restructure our marriage. I insist on counseling. This incident or pattern is just the tip of the iceberg. There is something deeper, a deeper pattern of selfishness or secretiveness or busyness or a lack of intimacy. We need to fundamentally restructure our marriage and I insist on that.”

Friends, that is consistent with forgiveness.

If you have a teenager and your teen has just gotten their license and they go out and get a speeding ticket or you see them driving without their seatbelt or they get a bad grade card and they ask your forgiveness – forgive them, by all means, forgive them. Release them.

But that doesn’t mean there are no consequences by way of discipline. It might mean the removal of driving privileges for a season (A season, not just a night). If someone habitually lies to you and asks your forgiveness, forgive! You are a Christian – forgive! But it is appropriate in the future to ask for more proof, more evidence when they promise something. Their lost credibility is a consequence of their sin, not a punishment.

God forgives our sins, and yet, there may be consequences as the result of promiscuity. We might get a sexually transmitted disease. As a result of a lack of self-control in spending, we may find ourselves loaded down with debt and having to pay off creditors for years. Our spouse or friend might insist that we tear up our credit cards.

Forgiven, brought into restored relationship with God – yes. But consequences? Perhaps, also yes. A leader or a pastor may be removed from their job. Churches may be restructured because of forgiven sins, not just sins, but forgiven sins.

Not an absence of consequences; not a get of our jail free card, not a quick pardon, not an event, but a process.

There is often confusion surrounding sin because many people think that forgiveness means asking for and then giving a quick pardon. You know, it is often the case that offenders move to ask for forgiveness way too quickly. The request for forgiveness can often be used as a way to short-circuit the very necessary process of us listening to and really understanding the hurt and offense that we have committed.

I know I have done this and you probably have too. You realize that your mate is offended with you, or a friend is offended by something you have done and so you cut them off at the pass by quickly asking for forgiveness. Part of the reason why you are so quick to

ask for forgiveness is you really don't want to listen to or be reminded of the hurt you have caused. Forgiveness is the *get out of jail free* card that you wave in the other person's face. "OK, I know what I have done, now forgive me." Forgiveness is NOT a *get out of jail free* card.

Sometimes we ask for forgiveness way too quickly. If you really want to be forgiven, we must allow other people the ability to tell us how much our behavior has hurt them. That is a painful process, especially when the person who is telling you is someone you love, someone you care about, someone whose love and respect you want. But often in our desire to just put the history behind us, and bury the past, we ask for forgiveness way too quickly. We are not really looking for full restoration based on truth, based on healing, and based on allowing God's processes to work. We are not looking for full total healing, for restoration. We just want to put the issue behind us and move on.

That is not forgiveness, friends. Forgiveness means healing. Forgiveness means understanding with the heart. Forgiveness means listening and opening yourself up to hearing what you have done and letting it sink in for a while, letting the expression of our offense humble us.

Here's a rule – never ask for forgiveness unless you have really heard and understood what it is that you've done wrong. Lots of folks who ask forgiveness just don't get it – they don't understand the pain they've caused and they don't want to understand the pain. They just want to move on with life on the cheap.

And not only can we ask for forgiveness too quickly, but we can grant pardon and forgiveness too quickly.

You say, "How can that be possible that we would forgive someone too quickly?"

Well, if you really don't recognize the depth of the hurt or the sin, if you are out of touch with your own heart, if you are still in the shock of the discovery of the offense, if you are still reeling from the pain of what has happened, you are probably not yet in a position to forgive. O, you can declare your willingness to forgive. You can say, "Friend, understand, lover, mate, girlfriend, boyfriend, criminal – I am follower of Christ and duty bound to forgive, but I need some time for the pieces of my heart to come together so that I really can forgive from a whole heart. I have just been hit by a tidal wave."

This is not an excuse for foot-dragging – "Well, I'm still hurt...I'm still angry..." Forgiveness is the way you deal with hurt and anger. But many people rush to express forgiveness and then, years later, wonder why they are still struggling with the issues of what was done to them. If forgiveness didn't deal with this, then I don't know what will.

Well, what will is real forgiveness, not the kind of thing we do in the moment of discovering the shocking truth, or the moment of experiencing the pain – but the work out of real stuff that does take time, which leads to the debunking of a third myth. That is that *forgiveness is just a one-time easy thing to do*.

Forgiveness always sounds easier in sermons than it is in real life. Trust me, I am not only a preacher, I am also a human being. Forgiveness is not just a one-time action or a one-time decision. Yes, *it starts with a decision* – a decision to obey God's command that I forgive. It starts with a decision, but that decision only leads to a series of repeated decisions in which I must walk out my decision and forgive every time the offense comes to mind again.

Another way to put it is that forgiveness is a process, not just an event. You commit yourself to walk down the road of forgiveness. That's what Jesus is looking for – not just a snap decision, but a commitment to walk down a road. I love what C.S. Lewis, the English writer, said He said, "To forgive for the moment is not that difficult, but to go on forgiving,



to forgive the same offense again and again every time it recurs to the memory – there is the real tussle.”

Offenders, we must respect the process of forgiving in the life of another and we can do that by making it easy to forgive us. Let me share a little principle here.

I believe it is the job of the offender to make forgiveness as easy as possible in the life of those we have offended. Sometimes offenders make forgiveness really hard by demanding it, by reminding us of our duty to forgive, by refusing to live with limitations for a season, by refusing to listen, by refusing to heal. Make it easy for those you have hurt to get over it. It takes time. There is a process.

That same C.S. Lewis that I quoted before once said that he had an amazing break through one morning. He was in his 50s and he finally felt that he had completely forgiven a horrible schoolmaster who was just a sadist, a cruel, mean, vengeful drunk of a man who ridiculed and bullied and beat not only C.S. Lewis, but lots of other boys. After 40 years he said, I finally feel like it is done. I have really torn up the IOU.

Forgiveness begins with a decision, but then it proceeds to a hundred thousand decisions to really walk out a lifestyle of forgiveness.

Finally, in putting forgiveness into practice, we need to understand the relationship between forgiving someone and having a relationship fully restored. People say, “I would forgive that person, but they haven’t acknowledged what they have done is wrong. I want to forgive Dad, but he won’t acknowledge that he abused me. I want to forgive my erring wife or my boss, or my employee who stole from my business, or my colleague who ruined my reputation through gossip or slander – I want to forgive, but they have never confessed it.”

Let me point out a little distinction for you that I have taught before, but some of you have not heard me say: I believe there is a biblical distinction between forgiveness, which is a unilateral act, and reconciliation, which is a bilateral, two-party act. Forgiveness is something between me and God. I can choose to forgive whatever the offender chooses to do. I can release that person to the justice of God, the judgment of God. I can tear up my IOU. I can release my hurts, anger, fantasies of revenge, and the right to get even to God whether the person who offended me repents or not.

Forgiveness doesn’t require the offender acknowledge their sins. Forgiveness doesn’t require that the offender confess. But *reconciliation*, peace with another person, restored relationship with my offending spouse, boss, colleague or pastor, restored relationship (that is what I mean by reconciliation – a restored relationship) absolutely requires that the other person acknowledge their sin, come to grips with it, stop hiding or lying about it, confess it and repent of it.

So, a wife can forgive her husband for his infidelities whether or not the husband repents, but there can be no peace between the two of them, no real restored relationship unless he absolutely forsakes his adulteries, turns from them, confesses his sins and walks in repentance. Likewise, you can forgive a prodigal child or an abusive parent, but you cannot have a restored, healed relationship without repentance.

For those of you who like to take notes, you may want to look up a text in the Old Testament, 2 Kings 9, regarding Jehu, who was a king in Israel. Jehu was God’s avenger for the idolatry that was in Israel. He was wreaking havoc on the house of Ahab, killing everyone in sight. And people from Ahab’s house came out to try to make peace with Jehu and he responded with this classic line, v. 22, “How can there be peace as long as all the idolatry and witchcraft of your mother, Jezebel, abounds?”

We can't have peace with someone who does not repent. You can't be reconciled to someone who still has their backs to you. You can forgive them, but you can't make peace with them.

And so if someone has abused you or offended you and they have not repented or acknowledged the abuse or the offense, today you can forgive them. You can begin that process, that first step of a thousand steps of tearing up the IOU that they owe you and giving them over to God. But you can't have peace with them. You can't pretend that you have a fully restored relationship without their repentance. If there has been church abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse, the condition of peace is repentance.

And not only can I not be reconciled and not have peace with a person who has refused to repent, it is foolish to announce to a person who is living in sin, "I forgive you." Luke 17:3, I believe, is talking about a public declaration of forgiveness when the Lord says, "If your brother repents, forgive him." He is talking about that declaration of a person where you say, "I forgive you."

So many times I have seen good hearted husbands and wives and friends and in a tragic foolish way walk up to someone who has hardened, someone who is still having an affair, someone who is still abusing, someone who is still gossiping, who is still a drunkard, saying to that person, "I forgive you. I just want you to know that." We can forgive, which is an act between us and God. But we don't announce that forgiveness to the offending person until they repent. And we certainly cannot have a restored relationship without their repentance.

So much of the problem of putting forgiveness into practice is the result of people trying to have relationship with someone who won't have relationship with them. Soft-hearted people feel pushed into a corner and say, "I am a Christian and I am supposed to forgive. I am supposed to be one with my brother, but this other person continues to be abusive. They continue to use cocaine and it is really hard for me."

Of course, it is hard for you. I am not asking you to try to have a relationship with someone who won't relate to you. Peace is based on righteousness. There is a verse in Romans 14 that I love. It says, "The kingdom of God is not eating or drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." And there is an order to this. First, we have righteousness, we have repentance, we have truth, and we have an acknowledgement of wrong. We have a walking in the light and then we have peace and joy.

Often offenders want to have peace and joy without the foundation of righteousness. It is not God's order.

Well, how do I forgive when forgiveness is hard? You say, "Well, it is really hard for me. I can't forgive. I feel like Simon Wiesenthal in that story you told, Rich. I just want to walk out of the room and let the person suffer in their sins. I just can't let go. How do I gain the power to forgive someone who has really hurt me?"

The first thing I think we must do and this is what the story in Matthew 18 about the unforgiving servant is all about. The first thing we must do to gain the power to forgive is *call to mind Jesus' forgiveness of us*. Forget about this other person's sin against you for a moment. Forget about your husband's insensitivity, your mother's neglect, your father's abuse, and your boss' firing. Forget about their sin against you for a moment. If you want to gain the power to forgive, call to mind your sins against Jesus. Call to mind the mercy of God toward you. Preach to yourself Jesus' forgiveness. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who I've quoted on many occasions, once said the problem of many Christians is that they don't speak to themselves. Talk to yourself. Remind yourself that Christ forgave you.

Why? Not to torture yourself. Not to make yourself walk over hot coals or to beat yourself up. But to tenderize your heart, which often gets very hard and very judgmental towards those who have hurt us. The deep mercy and forgiveness of Jesus toward us is the power in us to forgive.

You say, “How do I call my sins to mind?”

Well, you know, churches used to read prayers of confession and forgiveness. The Episcopal church, before celebrating communion, used to read from the book of common prayer this prayer that was composed in the 1500’s. Here is what it read:

O mighty God, [this was before taking communion]

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ

Maker of all things

Judge of all men

We acknowledge and bewail

Our manifold sins and wickedness

Which we from time to time

Most grievously have committed

By thought, word and deed.

Against thy divine majesty

Provoking most justly

Thy wrath and indignation against us.

We do earnestly repent and are heartily

Sorry for these our misdoings.

The remembrance of them is

Grievous unto us.

The burden of them is intolerable.

Have mercy, have mercy upon us most

Merciful Father, for thy Son

Our Lord Jesus Christ’s sake.

Forgive us all that has past

And grant that we may ever after

Serve and please thee

In newness of life

To the honor and glory of

Thy name

Through Jesus Christ

Our Lord. Amen.

Now, you cannot say that kind of prayer in which you say to God you have offended him in thought, word and deed, that you have provoked his wrath against you, that you are heartily sorry for your misdoings. That the remembrance of your sin is grievous to you – you can’t pray that kind of prayer without having your heart tenderized toward those who have offended you.

The powerhouse of forgiveness is first of all calling to mind your own sins against God, not the sin that someone has committed against you.

The second step in forgiveness is *calling to mind sins against committed against you*. Forgiveness is not, “O, I just won’t think about this. It is no big deal. I will sweep it under the carpet.”

No, forgiveness is, in the words of the theologian, Paul Tillich, *remembering sins so that they can be forgotten*. Yes, I will allow myself to remember, you say. I have been keeping myself

from remembering for years and now I want to open that closet. It is full of dead men's bones. I haven't wanted to go near that room. I hate the stench. I am afraid of what is behind there. But I will remember so that I might forget.

So I call it to mind. I allow myself to remember all that was done and said and all that was neglected and all the consequences of that and the effects of the sin in my life. Then I give up my rights. Here I am in prayer. I see this massive debt that this other person owes me. What you robbed from me. You robbed me of respect. You robbed me of my virginity. You robbed me of my innocence. You robbed me of my ministry. You robbed me of my income. You robbed me of a good marriage. You robbed me of a happy home. You stole a relationship. You stole my kids from me. This is what you took. This is the debt you owe.

Before God and I tear up that debt. Forgiveness is nothing other than the sacrificing of the right to collect a debt. By forgiveness, we say to God, "If anyone needs to balance the scales, or collect a debt, that is up to you. But for my part, I say to you that they no longer owe me anything."

I tear up the bill my father owed me. Or my mother owes me.

I tear up the bill from my ex husband or my ex wife. The bill from an old boyfriend or girlfriend.

I tear up the bill from a lot of boys and girls when I was growing up in school. From other churches.

And, finally, if the *other person repents, be reconciled*. Totally, completely, open the future up to a restored relationship. Don't throw their sin in their face. They owe you nothing. The debt has been torn up. You have forgiven them. For a time you may walk with a limp. For a time you may have to be in counseling. For a time there may be some limits. But if they repent, be reconciled. Forgiveness is the mark of a Christian. Let's pray.

## **I. Forgive Someone When It's Hard**

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Rich Nathan  
May 19-20, 2001  
"I Believe in the Church" Series  
Ephesians 4:32

### **I. Why Forgive?**

- A. To Be Obedient To God (Luke 17:3)
- B. To Receive Forgiveness From God (Matt. 6:14, 15; Mark 11:25)
- C. To Destroy The Law Of Action And Reaction

### **II. What Forgiveness Is Not**

- A. Forgiveness Is Not The Absence Of Consequences (2 Sam. 12:10-14)
- B. Forgiveness Is Not A "Get Out Of Jail Free" Card
- C. Forgiveness Is Not An Event, But A Process
- D. Forgiveness Is Not The Same Thing As Reconciliation (2 Kings 9:14-29)

### **III. How To Forgive**

- A. Remember God's Forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-35)
- B. Remember The Person's Sin