



Forgiveness

Several years ago I read the classic by Simon Wiesenthal, *'The Sunflower'*. Wiesenthal, who died a few years ago, was one of the many millions of Jews who suffered at the hands of the Nazis in concentration camps. Wiesenthal was one of those who survived and he became a voice of conscience for the rest of his life in his attempt to both offer forgiveness as well as to seek justice. These two concepts do not seem to go hand in hand and yet Scripturally they do.

While imprisoned Wiesenthal had a job cleaning the grounds at a nearby hospital where German soldiers were being treated. One day while doing his duty he was summons to the bedside of a wounded Nazi soldier. The young soldier was wracked with guilt and he knew that he was dying. He wanted to seek forgiveness from a Jewish man as representative of those whom he had horribly treated. And so as he was dying he asked a nurse to 'get a Jew, any Jew will do', he said, to whom he could make his confession and receive absolution.

Thus Wiesenthal found himself standing by the bedside of this heavily bandaged young German soldier. He told Wiesenthal about the time that he was ordered to burn down a house that had become a hiding place for some Jewish families. Further, he was told that if anyone tried to escape the inferno they were to be shot. The German soldier told how he shot and killed some children and others as they tried to escape. He was racked with guilt. He asked Wiesenthal to forgive him. Wiesenthal stood there unsure how to respond. He was horrified and despised what this man had done. Having suffered so much himself he felt no burden to forgive. Further, he contemplated whether it was even right for him to grant forgiveness to a man on behalf of wrongs done to another. Wiesenthal eventually pulled his hand away from the dying man and left, having never granted the soldiers wish. That night the soldier died.

For many years after Wiesenthal's eventual liberation from the concentration camp that day haunted him. Questions about forgiveness plagued his mind and heart. As a result he wrote many well-known individuals around the world asking for their counsel: should he have forgiven this man? Some said that he had no moral obligation to do so, that he was in no position to grant forgiveness representatively. Others argued that the soldier's deed was so evil that he could never be forgiven. Still others offered the viewpoint that Wiesenthal should have forgiven the man. Among those some said that to do so would have been in his own interest; freed from ever having to carry the burden of this question. And yet some, a few, argued that Wiesenthal should have forgiven the man simply because he was a fellow sinner who himself is in need of forgiveness; in other words, granting forgiveness was the right thing – though incredibly difficult – thing to do. How would you have answered? This question is the point of the book. Its subtitle is, *'On the possibilities and limits of Forgiveness.'*

Forgiveness is perhaps one of the most perplexing matters with which we are often confronted. It confronts us in the workplace, in school, amongst friends, in families and yes, in the church. In fact it may be that forgiveness is the most challenging when it is needed in our family and in our church. As a prophet is usually without honour in his own country, sometimes we may feel the same way when we need forgiveness: everyone is willing to offer it except those with whom we are the most familiar.

As we learned recently in Ephesians 1:7, to forgive a trespass is literally 'let it go.' We let go of the moral debt that the person's sin has created in the relationship. This does not mean that we excuse it but it does mean that we are making a commitment to 'move on' and to not allow their past failure to control the present and future of our relationship. In other words, when we forgive we

are seeking reconciliation; we are seeking a 'normalizing of the relationship.' And this at times can be incredibly difficult. Our emotions scream louder than the Scriptures, such as that of Ephesians 4:32, *'Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.'* The pain of betrayal or the emotional incision of insult has just cut too deeply and so like Wiesel we are tempted to simply pull away and leave the offender to writhe under the agony of his painful conscience. But of course the Christian loyal to Christ does not have such an option.

Unlike Wiesel, the offences which we are asked to forgive are usually those that were aimed at us personally. And our biblical responsibility is not ambiguous. *We are to grant the requested forgiveness.* If we refuse to do so then we will soon find ourselves in need of forgiveness from them. For to refuse to forgive is to sin. To refuse to forgive is therefore to put yourself in the position of needing yourself to be reconciled with God.

When we refuse to forgive someone we are not only behaving cruelly but also self-destructively. As someone has so wisely put it, *'Bitterness is the poison that we drink in hopes that it will kill the other person.'*

But what if the one who has offended you refuses to acknowledge their wrong? Can you forgive them?

Recently I was buying an ice cream at a shop on the South Coast. Behind the counter was this insightful sign, *'Life becomes easier when you learn to accept the apology you never got.'* Amen.

You see, regardless of the offender's response, we are responsible to 'let it go.' Though it is certainly true that apart from forgiveness sought reconciliation cannot take place, it is equally true that we are to always have a forgiving disposition. Those who follow Christ must adopt His disposition of forgiveness, *'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.'* It was this kind of attitude that made Jesus the freest man ever to walk the planet. He was free to live and free to love because He was freed from bitterness. The love that He experienced from the Father and the Holy Spirit was such that He refused to allow His life to be 'shrink wrapped' by bitterness. Clearly Jesus was not, and will not be reconciled to everyone. Multitudes will defy Him and will suffer the wrath of God. But Jesus will be supremely happy because He pleases the Father. Such is the nature of forgiveness in the life of the Christian. As we seek to walk with the Lord and to please Him we will let go of the gnawing temptation to hold a grudge. And like the lavishly loving father, we will open our arms to the prodigals who have caused us so much hurt; even when they remain aloof and defiant of us. Such is the nature of the love of God. Such is the response God expects from His children. Such is the example of our Saviour.

With the Lord Jesus Christ there is every possibility and no limit to the forgiveness that He offers. Even for sinners like that SS soldier many years ago. Even for sinners like me. And I dare say, even for sinners like you and like those who have wronged you. So ask God in Christ for it. And then reach out your hand to forgive others. They, and you, and God will be glad you did.

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