

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### To forgive is divine

Presented by Chris Witts

#### INTRODUCTION

I don't often remember quotations, but there is one I can recall, and it has to do with forgiving people. You might know it, too. The quote says "*to err is human... to forgive is divine*". This opens up a topic that touches the heart and soul of each person alive. The matter of forgiving others. Anyone can make a mistake, but can everyone forgive another human being? I don't think so. How many people do you know who say "I'll never forgive what that person did to me". Something very unfortunate has happened, and the memory of the incident stays alive and active in their mind. People remember an unkind word, a stinging criticism, or an ugly act of violence affecting them and they say to themselves "I will remember what you did till the day I die".

But is there another way of dealing with the hurts of life? I believe there is. The problem is that some of us find it very difficult to forgive others. Feelings run deep on this issue, and memories last a long time. With God's help we can deal with problems like this and find resources outside ourselves. CS Lewis used to say "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely thing, until they have something to forgive". With God's help we can learn to forgive others.

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Learning to forgive has to be one of the hardest things we human beings can do. It's not easy to let go of a painful memory, especially when we feel we're in the right, and the other person is in the wrong. For example, what if a close friend or family member has betrayed us in some way, perhaps breaking a confidence. A friend lets us down for the second time, and we feel devastated by gossip which gets back to us. Or a son cuts off all ties with his parents over some issue he is upset about. These are the hard issues of life which come our way. There are no guarantees that life will be without difficult situations.

But there is nothing more valuable than a close, strong relationship. A broken relationship will never be put back together until we learn to forgive. It's inevitable someone will hurt us with their criticism or sarcasm. What do you do with the hurt? Bury it deep down for months or years, and rehearse the words until it becomes an obsession? Isn't it better to forgive and deal with it? My wife and I were leading a church group years ago where two families had not spoken for years. They sat on opposite sides of the church on Sundays, and would not speak to each other. Years before, there had been a falling out and neither side would forgive the other. It was a distressing and sad situation for us and others who knew what was going on.

Simon Wiesenthal tells of his days as a prisoner in a German concentration camp during World War 2. He was a young Jew, cleaning an old barn the Germans had turned into a makeshift hospital. One morning a nurse took him upstairs to where an SS soldier was dying. He desperately wanted to speak to a Jewish person to confess his sins and seek forgiveness. As Wiesenthal stood by the bed, the soldier clutched his hand and

told the story of his battalion who herded several Jews into a two-storey house. Gasoline was thrown on the building and set alight. People ran from the doors or jumped from the windows, and the Germans would shoot them. Painfully the old man said “I shot a man, his wife and little child. It still haunts me. I can’t forget it. Please forgive me”.

Simon Wiesenthal was frozen to the spot. “Should I forgive, or continue to hate and despise him?” What would you have done? I am so pleased we are not left to fumble around looking for a solution. There are some guidelines and they are found in the Bible. We might well ask, “Why should I forgive? Who says I need to?” God our Heavenly Father forgives us for our wrongdoing against Him, and we are called, as His children, to be like Him. His Word says “Stop being mean, bad-tempered and angry. Quarrelling, harsh words, and dislike of others should have no place in your lives. Instead, be kind to each other, tender hearted, forgiving one another, just as God has forgiven you because you belong to Christ” (Ephesians 4: 31-32. Living Bible).

Can you move past an old grudge and move onto forgiveness? Bob Horner of “Campus Crusade for Christ” once said “Forgiveness is to my family what oil is to my car. It keeps us cool, reduces friction and adds length to our days”. I like that description because it’s true. One act of forgiveness is a powerful antidote to the hatred and vengeful spirit so common in our world today. Revenge and retaliation are dangerous words because they can destroy us. Do you know we must get out of the punishment business? The New Testament tells me “Never avenge yourselves. Leave that to God for he has said that he will repay those who deserve it. Don’t take the law into your own hands” (Romans 12:19. LB). God is the divine judge who will sort out this matter. It’s not our business to keep score. Revenge is like a cancer which eats away and destroys the spirit and soul of good people. Instead, listen to Jesus who said “You have heard that it was said ‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth’. But now I tell you: do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too. And if someone takes you to court to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well. And if one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one kilometre, carry it two kilometres. When someone asks you for something, give it to him; do not ask for it back. Do for others just what you want them to do for you” (Matthew 5:38-42, Luke 6:31, GNB).

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I have a feeling that many people today are miserable because they have not felt the healing power of forgiveness. In other words, if you want to be miserable, hang onto your grudges. Don’t forgive, and you’ll remain miserable. The behavioural scientists say that people who can forgive are healthier and happier. Building up resentment can lead to heart disease. It’s been proved medically that unforgiving people have a higher incidence of cardio-vascular disease, cancer, hypertension and high blood pressure. Those with hidden hostilities die earlier at six times the rate than people who have a more forgiving attitude. A New York Times article said “Chronic anger is so damaging to the body that it ranks with cigarette smoking and obesity as a risk factor for early death”.

So, bitterness is a dangerous thing to your health. No wonder God’s Word in Proverbs says “Being cheerful keeps you healthy. It is slow death to be gloomy all the time” (Proverbs 17:22 GNB). Don’t become a bitter angry person with resentful thoughts and plans. There’s a verse from Job 5 which says “To worry yourself to death with resentment would be a foolish, senseless thing to do” (v2, LB).

Our eternal God knows that unforgiveness causes great physical and psychological damage. He made us the way we are, and this baggage and emotional wounds are unnecessary. Jesus says “I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness” (John 10:10 GNB).

I have already said “to forgive is divine” – and that is true. God offers His grace and power when we are unable to forgive. It comes from Heaven. If you find it impossible to forgive, ask God to do it for you. Be honest and He will answer your prayer.

A Turkish soldier beat a Christian soldier until he was semiconscious. As he continued to kick him on the ground he sneered “What can your Jesus do for you now?” The injured Christian very quietly replied “He can give me strength to forgive you”. Of course the choice is ours. We can forgive if we want to. God will enable us.

Think for a moment of the destructive nature of unforgiveness. It causes divorce, spoils loving relationships in families, destroys churches, and ends friendships. It can even cause wars. The Cuban Missile crisis in October 1962 brought us close to World War Three. Soviet Premier Krushchev sent an urgent message to President John F Kennedy. “You and I should not pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied a knot of war, because the harder you and I pull, the tighter the knot will become. A time may come, Mr President, when this knot is so tight, no-one can untie it. You understand perfectly what dreaded forces our two countries possess”.

Wise words indeed. And it emphasises again that returning evil for evil only leads to disaster. In dropping one end of the rope, we lessen the tension and bring hope. And an untangled rope can restore peace. Hatred only writes people off; forgiveness holds out hope that a relationship can be restored and enemies can be made into friends.

Unforgiveness also has to do with God and our relationship with Him. It’s quite remarkable that Jesus said as part of the Lord Prayer “If you forgive others the wrong 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.” (Matthew 6: 14-15. GNB).

Leonardo Da Vinci painted his famous “The Last Supper” in a Milan church. At the time he had a bitter enemy, a fellow painter. They had argued and Da Vinci despised him. When it came time to paint the face of Judas Iscariot at the table with Jesus, he decided to use the face of his enemy. He relished the idea, and as the weeks went by he kept painting. But he couldn’t paint the face of Christ. He had a sort of “painter’s block”. Da Vinci felt frustrated and confused, and he soon realised what was wrong. His hatred for his colleague held him back from painting the face of Jesus. He eventually made his peace and changed the face of Judas. Then, he could paint the face of Christ and complete his masterpiece. It is only when we forgive that we can look God in the face and enjoy a close walk with Him.

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There’s little doubt that forgiveness is a difficult topic. It can be extremely difficult to forgive a person because it goes against our natural feelings. Elizabeth O’Connor once wrote in an article “Despite a hundred sermons on forgiveness, we do not forgive easily, nor find ourselves easily forgiven. Forgiveness, we discover, is always harder than the sermons make it out to be”.

If you saw the movie “Dead Man Walking”, you’ll recall it was based on a true story of a Catholic nun who became the Spiritual Director of a death row inmate. He was convicted of the brutal murder of a young couple. Yet this nun, Sister Prejean, continued to guide and help him. He confessed his crime and said to the parents of his victims “I hope my death gives you some peace”. But there is no peace for the parents of the

girl he killed. Only hate. The father of the young man who was killed was not as hardened, and said to Sister Prejean “Sister, I wish I had your faith”. And she replies honestly “It is not faith. It’s a lot of hard work”.

Forgiveness is hard, and we have to work at it. When Peter asked Jesus some questions about forgiveness, His answers probably caused a few shock waves. Peter said “Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?” “No, not seven times” answered Jesus, “but seventy times seven”. In other words, Jesus said there was no limit to forgiveness, which was a shock. Jewish tradition allowed a person to forgive someone only three times ... so Peter probably was expecting a “congratulations” from Jesus for being generous. Not so. Obviously, Jesus didn’t mean for this instruction to be taken literally. He merely picked up Peter’s suggestion and multiplied it by seventy to make the point.

Even in the New Testament church there probably were Christian believers who couldn’t agree with this generous serve of forgiveness. For example, some still were very suspicious of Paul, who as Saul, tried to destroy the church. Who would have guessed that he would become the apostle Paul, preaching love and forgiveness? Isn’t it ironic that the one who treats us as our enemy today may become our sister or brother tomorrow?

This is why Jesus said we are even to love our enemies. Doesn’t make much sense, does it? But it means more than simply doing good things toward them ... it means to feel deep, warm positive affection for them. Sounds radical, but it’s a powerful way to live. After all, Jesus practised what He preached as He hung on the cross at Calvary. He prayed “Forgive them, Father. They don’t know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34, GNB). At this defining moment in history, the Son of God forgave all those who had turned against Him. Is it any wonder, then, that forgiveness is the most powerful therapeutic idea in the world?

Do you know how much the world needs forgiveness? Ernest Hemingway wrote a story about a father and his teenage son. In the story, the relationship had become somewhat strained, and the teenage son ran away from home. His father began a journey in search of his rebellious son. Finally, in Madrid, Spain, in a last desperate attempt to find the boy, he put an ad in the local newspaper. “Dear Paco, Meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father”. The next day, in front of the newspaper office, 800 Pacos showed up. They were all seeking forgiveness. They were all seeking the love of their father! There is an obvious need for forgiveness in our world.

## CLOSING COMMENTS

If you’ve struggled over this issue of forgiveness, can I suggest you take to heart the words of Colossians 3, verse 13, from the New Testament? Here are words that could change your life and bring peace to your soul. The verse says “Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you” (GNB). What we feel is impossible can be made possible through the love of God in our hearts.

It’s not a matter of feeling like forgiving others ... it’s a matter of the will, the reason, the mind. It’s a conscious decision, that with God’s help, we will do our best to forgive others who have wronged us, no matter how painful that might be.

*Heavenly Father, today we admit we’ve not done very well in the area of personal forgiveness. It seems so unfair, and yet we know it’s for our best. You have commanded us to forgive others. By your grace, help us to put it into action – today and every day.*