

# Forgiveness (#36)

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## Outline:

- 1) Asking Forgiveness for Yourself (from a person or from God)
  - a) Confession
  - b) Apology (Repentance)
  - c) Forgiveness (granted or denied)
- 2) Forgiving Another Person
  - a) Who Do We Forgive?
  - b) Consequences of Not Forgiving (Wiesenthal and Lewis Syndromes)
  - c) Reconciliation

*You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate* (Ne 9:17). --an attribute of God.  
*But there is forgiveness in You that You may be feared* (Ps 130:4). --the reason why.  
*Without shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness* (Heb 9:22). --the reason how.

## 1) Asking Forgiveness for Yourself

### a) Confession

Sometimes an apology or plea for forgiveness is complemented by a detailed confession. If your involvement in the event is not clear to the other party, this is the place to show your complicity and your motivation. This sets the stage for the forthcoming apology (or repenting) and request for forgiveness. Your motivation for the confession can be to tell the truth or set the record straight, but more nefariously, it can be to feather-bed your motivation. Even if your motivation is to set the record straight, the confession can become a two-edged sword. Let's look at two examples.

A Christian speaker is talking to a group of junior-high-school students about the dangers of drugs. In doing so, he extols his BC or before Christ days with fast cars, fast women, and fast highs. The audience, though young, senses the speaker's fascination with a life he now overtly rejects. They wonder where he really stands.

Dennis Rader (b 1945), the Kansas BTK serial killer who was president of the Congregation Council of his church, when in police custody and on the stand, answered questions in a seemingly truthful manner. When asked details of the 10 murders and how he planned them, he often went into exquisite and neurotic detail. Apparently he was subconsciously trying to prove

his knowledge of penology and that he was in a class above the authorities and the victims of his crimes.

Direct your confession to a specific party or the victims stating only what is relevant. If you are speaking to a child, you need not mention complicity of the child's parent unless there is some special circumstance. It is your confession to this person. Other people can tell their own story.

But what happens when there is no specific party to address since the party is dead? An abortion is such an example. In this case, the guilt shared by the husband and wife must be addressed by a confession to God himself. The confession would be for violating the sacredness of life because their worldly needs were placed above God's plan.

Another example might be a man that through negligence started a forest fire that killed no people, but cost the county a million dollars to put down to protect a block of homes.

In the case of child abuse, a problem that has grown to cover almost a third of today's population, you as the victim must first face the facts of the experience and rid any denial and cover stories that you may have constructed over the years such as thinking that you probably did something to lead him on or that your mother could never have known for sure what was happening. The perpetrator must recognize that the effects of his actions are lifelong.

### **b) Apology (Repentance)**

The dialog between a father and an apologizing 8-year-old son, may go as follows:

Son: I'm sorry.

Since the father is not certain what his son is sorry for, he asks: Sorry for what?

Son: I'm sorry for playing with my drums on my birthday.

The father detects a cover-up here. Maybe his son should be a lawyer. So he says: You were allowed to play with your drums on your birthday. It was when your sick sister was trying to sleep that I said you should stop. You disobeyed my command. So what is it you are sorry for?

Son: I'm sorry for keeping Linda awake.

Seeing his son still does not have the complete picture, he adds: And...

Son: And not listening to you, Dad.

You cannot apologize properly, unless you understand who it is you have hurt.

Another example can come from television news. A public official caught saying something he really believed, but shouldn't have said, may begin his carefully worded, crafted, and fully vetted apology like this: If I have hurt anyone in my official capacity which I have carried out by the

rules of this office, and which various versions of what I supposedly said are circulating in the press, then I must apologize for that... One has to wonder if the apology is for the misreporting of what was said, if anyone really was hurt, and if maybe the people hurt are themselves responsible for their own interpretation. Obviously this apology is no apology at all.

People are quick to relate your body language to your sincerity and the truth of the moment will be borne by your subsequent actions which will be carefully watched whether or not your apology is accepted or you have been granted forgiveness. Tiger Wood's apparently sincere 13-minute apology on national TV will be judged by his family and his countrymen by his future actions for years to come to determine if he was truly "deeply sorry for my selfish and irresponsible behavior". A true apology carries with it the idea of repentance or rethinking the issue through. It involves a change of heart and is more than just saying I am sorry.

### **c) Forgiveness**

Forgiveness goes one step beyond relating the facts (confession) and saying that you have repented (apology) for having done something either bereft of good judgment or without the benefit of your present perspective. It asks the person addressed to respond if done face to face or rhetorically if done at a national address.

There is a famous secular example of a man asking for forgiveness. It is told in the book, *Sunflower*, first published at some unknown date by an architectural engineer with an unfinished degree named Simon Wiesenthal (1908-2005). Simon Wiesenthal in his later years became known as the "deputy for the dead" and the "avenging archangel" because of his untiring prosecution of Nazi war criminals. In 1944 he was unknown and interred in a concentration camp at Lemberg (Lwow, Austria). One day, when on work detail in a neighboring town, because he was a Jew, he was summoned to a former high school now used as a hospital for German soldiers. A Red Cross nurse brought him to the bedside of a severely wounded German officer. His face was completely bandaged. His name was Karl Seidl. Karl was dying and needed to get something off his chest and was hoping that Simon Wiesenthal would be that man. Karl told his story. While the German army was advancing in Russia, 30 German soldiers were killed by booby traps set by the Russians. In reprisal, 300 Russian Jews were rounded up and placed in a house which was set aflame with gasoline. Anyone trying to escape was shot. In detail he recounted the screams of the women and children and the particular shooting of a father, mother, and child trying to escape the flames. His bullets joined the others.

One might be led to believe that after having killed a houseful of people, it would be easier with the reoccurrence of a similar incident. The opposite was true for Karl. When given the order to shoot a similar group of Jews later in the invasion of Russia, Karl balked and would not shoot. While holding his position, a shell exploded giving him the wounds that was causing his painful death.

Peering through heavily bandaged eyes the soldier related that he couldn't die without coming clean by this confession. He was dying with his guilt and for many nights now longed to beg forgiveness from a representative Jew. The soldier realized that he was asking a lot of this Jew who happened to be at his bedside, but ended his story by saying: without your answer, I cannot die in peace.

Thirty-six-year-old Simon Wiesenthal stood there immobile for the longest time, and then without saying a word, he left the room.

This brings out the first important lesson in asking for forgiveness. While our God is a God of many chances and will always forgive when asked, that is not true of the population in general. Many prisoners when released have faced such shunning from their family, associates, and church members have come to the conclusion that they were better off before release.

This experience so moved Simon Wiesenthal, that it actually became a turning point in his life and gave him a vocation that he would pursue to the grave. Twenty years later, he published an account of his quandary and the reactions of 10 other people in his book entitled *Sunflower*. More recent editions of *Sunflower* have included the reactions of 53 people. The majority far and away agree with Wiesenthal, while a small minority of Christians said that forgiveness must be given when asked for. Among the comments of those refusing to dispense forgiveness were 1) Karl Seidl's last request was his last sin, 2) His request was for cheap grace and should not be given, and 3) Giving forgiveness only perpetuates the crime.

To the unbeliever in a secular world, there appear to be many cogent reasons for denying forgiveness. This means that a person asking for forgiveness can expect to be rebuffed even by another Christian who may not think him sincere in his apology.

For the person going to God for forgiveness, he has only to remember this verse that follows the Our Father: *For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions* (Matthew 6:14-15). This means that even God may deny us forgiveness, if we do the same to our fellow man.

## **2) Forgiving Another Person**

### **a) Whom Do We Forgive?**

The following is found in Chapter 18 of Matthew: <sup>21</sup> *Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"* <sup>22</sup>

*Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven* (Mt 18:21-22). Matthew leaves out a very important word here, a word he understands, but one which Luke states explicitly. Luke's account in Chapter 17 is as follows: *And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, "I repent," forgive him* (Lk 17:4).

So the person must ask for forgiveness. If the olive branch is presented, we as Christians must forgive. But think of all the ways we can avoid seeing or pretend not seeing the olive branch. Statements like: He apologized by open letter and he needs to talk to me personally, come to mind, or maybe: You know how he lies. How can you believe him? Forgiveness would just perpetuate the evil.

Jesus did not forgive everybody. He forgave the thief on his right that asked for forgiveness, but not the thief on the left. Only one was with him in Heaven that day. He forgave the Romans with his first of seven statements from the Cross because they did not know what they were doing (Lk 23:34), but he did not forgive the “Jews” in the sense that John uses meaning the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes; and he did not forgive Pontius Pilate even though he tried six times to avoid sentencing him.

This shows that even if someone does not ask for forgiveness, we have the option of forgiving. Furthermore, there are some things that cannot be forgiven. When the Pharisees said: *This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of demons* (Mt 12:24b), the Jews as a nation committed an irreversible and unforgivable national sin. Only on the sixth of seven feasts on the Day of Atonement, will the Jews confess their “iniquity” and once again become the Wife of Yahweh.

If you are in your home with your family and a band of thieves break in, tie you up, and begin torturing your child to make you open the safe, it is not the proper time to blurt out: “I forgive you for all you have done and whatever you plan to do”. If there is to be any forgiveness in this matter, it will come later when the evil has been atoned for and forgiveness has been asked.

The *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve* written in the first century says: *Bless those that curse you, and pray for your enemies; besides, fast for those that persecute you* (Didache 1:3). Do not confuse forgiving with blessing, praying for, and fasting for. Forgiveness carries its own meaning.

The rewards of forgiving will be the fruit of the Holy Spirit: **love**, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). Love alone is prime. The other eight and many more flow from love. Love has hegemony and pedigree over all that flow from it.

### **b) Consequences of Not Forgiving**

Does God almost always answer your prayers? He wants to. If not, then something is wrong. The most likely problem from my experience is the failure to forgive that one person in your life that you know at the very bottom of your heart is unforgivable and deserves everything he gets. Maybe it is a relative, a spouse, a once close friend, an employee at work, a rival in sports, a black-sheep in the family, a church member, or one who insulted you and hurt you irrevocably.

Failure to forgive will fester causing a lingering feeling in the pit of the stomach that turns a normally good day into a melancholy repeat of yesterday sometimes leading to depression. Things will ostensibly be going great, but you will not feel completely in gear. Statistically those too proud to forgive live shorter lives with higher stress-related disorders and a higher frequency of divorce.

Even worse, you may feel revengeful toward this person completely forgetting Scripture which says: *Vengeance is Mine. I will repay* (Romans 12:19, Dt 32:35). Only by trusting in the Lord, can you place this matter fully in his hands.

Simon Wiesenthal did not forgive when given the golden opportunity and spent the rest of his life questioning his actions, asking others for their advice, and pursuing Nazi war criminals in the hope of redemption. This is the **Wiesenthal Syndrome** where the failure to forgive gnaws on you for the rest of your life.

A survey has determined that 75% of women who agree to an abortion actually think it is morally wrong. About 85% of these women said they would not have had the abortion if the situation were different. This is an astounding difference and usually points to the complicity of the man who is unwilling to marry or take responsibility of another's child or his own. The lingering guilt and misplaced anger directed at each other, the other children, parents, friends, the doctor, and God himself can only be eradicated by going to God for forgiveness.

There is also that guilt from a sin that we think is unforgivable. I once had an inmate approach me and then balk when eliciting his problem. Finally he said that there was no way he could forgive himself for what he had done. Would he go to Hell? Usually I don't ask what the sin was, but here I made an exception. After some stammering he said that while his mother was in a drug stupor, he had relations with her. He remembers the event and cannot live it down, but his mother has no recollection of what happened. I told him that his confession, apology (repentance), and forgiveness must come from God because his promise was to forgive us if we forgave others (Mt 6:14-15). There is no penance that we must do to acquire God's forgiveness. His Son Jesus Christ did it all.

In the case of child abuse, where statistics indicate that as many as 30% of today's young men and women have been fondled or abused sexually as a child, forgiveness means the realization that the abuser and the non-offending but silently complicit parent could never repay the debt they owe you. They replaced trust with betrayal, confusion, disgust, and a hunger for true love. It means accepting the fact that only God can cancel their debt and pay you in full. The people that scarred you may since have accepted the saving grace of Jesus Christ. In this case they will try to make amends. If not, then continuing to hate will only gnaw at your soul and keep you in chains.

Lastly there is a derivative of forgiveness. Officially you have forgiven this person, but cannot let it go completely. How much should we "forget" and how much should we "reconcile"? In

regard to the former, C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) remarked: “To forgive for the moment is not difficult, but to go on forgiving, to forgive the same offense every time it recurs to the memory—that’s the real tussle.”<sup>i</sup>

Does the **Lewis Syndrome** mean that one has not given total forgiveness? It is a fact that reconciliation will dissolve many of the pangs associated with forgiveness, but is reconciliation necessary?

### c) **Reconciliation**

The 12 apostles forgave Paul his persecuting of Christians after he was born again. Barnabas was instrumental in persuading the other eleven (Acts 9:26). But later, there was a falling out between Paul and his two missionary companions. Apparently Paul was compatible with either Barnabas or Barnabas’ cousin John Mark (Col 4:10), but not both together. As is typical with trios, two can countermand the authority of the third. John Mark was sent home during his first mission (Acts 13:13) and not allowed to join the second (Acts 15:36-41). John Mark is spoken of in a good light later (2 Tim 4:11; Col 4:10), but nothing is said of Barnabas. Apparently there was forgiveness, but no reconciliation regarding joint missionary assignments.

I once was a member of a church where two successive married pastors fell from grace by having affairs with another woman, who in both cases was a secretary. After a spate of secret meetings that nearly tore the church apart, both made confessions and apologies in their own time. Both wives of the pastors contemplated divorce. I don’t remember if either pastor asked for forgiveness in their commencement addresses, but neither was given a position within the church and both left for new territory. There was no reconciliation as far as teaching within that church. In life, there are many instances in which you are not allowed a second chance. In the U.S. Navy, a captain who loses his ship is not given a second chance. This does not mean that life if over, just that it will be different from here on out. Maybe that is what God wants.

In the case of child abuse with a parent that is an unbeliever, there may never be reconciliation. You could try simple acts of love, suggest counseling, or try confrontation. Regardless of the approach, you know that the perpetrator cannot repay what is owed you. Only God can pay that.

When you grant forgiveness, what follows is not necessarily a family feast, round of backslapping, and songs around a campfire. If the person forgiven was not previously invited to family gatherings, he probably will not be invited to such gatherings in the future. If he failed to fulfill a chartered responsibility within the organization, he will probably be reassigned after forgiveness. There is no guarantee that life will be the same as though nothing had happened or that everyone had “forgotten” the incident. The person granting forgiveness must not live in dread that he restored too many responsibilities otherwise he will have the Lewis Syndrome.

For the Believer, it is always better for someone to ask forgiveness than not. Even though the person asking for forgiveness may be emotionally immature and have a short memory, the

occasion for forgiveness is a golden moment. Two things should never be forgotten regarding forgiveness:

1) It is Biblically mandated: *And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, "I repent," forgive him* (Lk 17:4).

2) Scripture guarantees that our decision to forgive will be beneficial: *And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose* (Romans 8:28).

Both of the syndromes mentioned above are combated by the above two verses from Scripture. The Wiesenthal Syndrome will not occur because the Christian must forgive those who ask for forgiveness; and the Lewis Syndrome will not cause forgivers remorse because the forgiver knows that his act will ultimately work out to his own good.

Forgiveness is granted when we determine the immediate sincerity (*I repent!*) of the perpetrator. But how about the person without discipline and a short memory? If a portion of a loan is forgiven, you can demand that the remaining amount be paid on regular intervals, and that if payment suddenly stops without a call to explain the extenuating circumstances, then penalties will ensue. If your child has been killed accidentally, you can ask that an annual remembrance such as a card, flowers, or attendance at some function be instated. This will not bring back your child, and it should not be an arrow to you if the cards stop after five years, but it will remind the perpetrator that he no longer cares, and it will tell you that he needs your prayers.

Yes, life is fraught with difficulties. After all, we have been promised "*Thorns and Thistles*" twice in Scripture (Ge 3:18; Is 34:13). Only during the Millennium will *Thorns and Thistles* be converted to *Cypress and Myrtle*:

*Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up,  
And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up,  
And it will be a memorial to the LORD,  
For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off* (Isaiah 55:13).

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*, San Diego: Harcourt, 1991