

# Forgiveness For Sinners

## *The Meaning Of The Cross*

The 1986 movie "The Mission" is a story set in the mid 1700's in the jungles of South America. Robert De Niro stars as the central character, Rodrigo Mendoza. Mendoza is a brutal, tough, slave trading mercenary, who murders his own brother in a fight over a woman. He cannot forgive himself for his wickedness, and is weighed down by guilt. This tough man withdraws into himself, until a Jesuit Missionary challenges him to go back to the tribe of people that he had been capturing as slaves, and ask for their forgiveness. As a means of working off his guilt, Mendoza is given a penance. He is required to drag his armour and weapons behind him through the jungle. The effort nearly kills him, and when he can't move any further, the priests cut him free from his burden. But something interesting happens. Watch (*FIRST VIDEO CLIP – Mendoza drags his burden & Mendoza slides down the mudslide*)

Even though he has been set free from his burden, Mendoza is not free inside. He goes back to his bundle of armour and ties it on himself again. He may be free from the load, but he's not free from the guilt. There is something within Mendoza that tells him that his sins are so great, he has to pay for them. And as far as he is concerned, the tougher the penalty, the better. That's why the Catholic doctrine of penance has been so attractive over the years. The idea of having to pay for our sins fits with what we know to be true – that someone has to pay for the wrong we have done. Something has to be done to make up for our guilt. Ignoring it doesn't make it go away. Someone has to pay. As far as Mendoza is concerned, he is the one who has to pay for his wrongdoing. The first part of the movie follows his progress as he drags this terrible burden through the jungle, even climbing vertical waterfalls with this huge load tied to him.

Further on in the movie, Mendoza reaches his destination. He arrives at the village of the tribe that he has been killing and enslaving. These people have had Jesuits living amongst them for years, and many of them have become Christians. What will they do with this man who has been killing and enslaving them? Watch again (*SECOND VIDEO CLIP – The Missionaries arrive - Mendoza drags his burden. Mendoza weeps, and is hugged by the Priest*)

This act of forgiveness absolutely transforms Mendoza's life, and he lives with the tribe in the jungle, eventually becoming a Jesuit Priest. As Mendoza's life demonstrates, until someone cuts us free from the burden of our sin, we can never find the freedom that we need. Forgiveness has the ability to transform us in a way that nothing else does. When we are forgiven, our wrong is sliced away from us. That's what we need more than anything, for the wrong that we have done is so much a part of us, we have no idea what sort of people we would be if we were separated from it. When we are separated from our sin by an act of forgiveness, we then are set free to be new people. Forgiveness is something we don't deserve and cannot earn. It breaks the cycle of blame and loosens the stranglehold of guilt. Forgiveness actually puts the forgiver on the same side as the person who did the wrong.

That's what Jesus did for us when he died on the Cross to forgive all our sins. He came to earth and lived as a man, and died on the Cross to put himself in our place, the people who have done the wrong.

When someone has hurt us deeply, we go through several stages on the road to forgiveness.

### **Stage One – Rediscovering Humanity.**

The first stage is that we have to rediscover the humanity of the person who has hurt us or offended us. If a woman has been raped, or a businessman has been ripped off, or a marriage partner has been deeply scarred by the one they once loved, the natural reaction is to dehumanise that person. We will often use language like "he's a pig", or "he's an animal". Forgiveness can't take place until we acknowledge that the person who has hurt us is also made in the image of God, even though they may have been badly scarred by sin.

That's what Jesus did for you and me. He came down to earth to live amongst us. He felt our humanity. He lived in our sinful world and saw it close up. He put himself on our side. In living among us Jesus is able to sympathise with us in the corrosive effect sin has had on us. The writer to the Hebrews says this;

***"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin." (Hebrews 4:15)***

### **Stage Two – Surrendering The Right To Get Even.**

If we are going to forgive someone, we have to let go of the right to get even. Every one of us finds this incredibly difficult to do, because there is something within us that says "You now have the pleasure of being able to retaliate." There is always a huge cost in forgiveness, and the cost has to be borne by the person doing the forgiving if forgiveness is ever going to be real.

Corrie Ten Boom shares this true story in her book, "The Hiding Place":

"It was a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing centre at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there -- the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face. He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein," he said. "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!" His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness. As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself."

When Jesus died on the Cross for your sin and my sin, that's what God was doing. He was choosing to bear the cost of forgiveness in his own body. Whenever there is forgiveness, there is a price to be paid, and on the Cross, God chose to pay the price himself.

### **Stage Three – Seeing The Divine Image Restored**

The final stage in forgiveness is choosing to see the person, not as they are, but as God means them to be. That's what Jesus did for us on the Cross. When the Roman soldiers were crucifying him, and the religious leaders were mocking him, and his closest friends were running away, Jesus prayed from the Cross "**Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**" How was it that Jesus could pray like that? It was because he could see those Roman soldiers, those religious leaders, those disciples – he could see you and me – not as we are – scarred and twisted by sin – but as we are going to be – fully restored to the image of God. When God looks upon you and me, he doesn't see sinners, but saints. He sees us as his precious adopted children.

God is not against us for our sins. He is for us against our sins. He has chosen to come down to our earth and sit with us in the mess of our lives. He has chosen to take our penalty on the Cross and die so that we could be forgiven. God has voluntarily surrendered His right to get even and has instead chosen to bear the cost of your forgiveness in his own body. Why has he done all this? Because he can see in you what you can't see in yourself. He sees all that you can be if you will only let Him have his way with you.

I began this talk showing you movie clips of a man carrying a huge load that was killing him. When it was cut free from him, he found the incredible joy of being forgiven. Some of you that are carrying a load of sin from the past need to be cut free. If you would like someone to pray for you, people will be available at the end of the service.

**Prayer.**

*David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland*