

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS
(4) FORGIVING THE UNFORGIVABLE

Luke 23:34 NRSV
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SCRIPTURE

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. {34} Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. {35} And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" {36} The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, {37} and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" {38} There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews" (Luke 23:33-38 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

In recent weeks we have been engaged in a series entitled, "Conversations About Forgiveness." So far we have examined the nature forgiveness, the practical benefits of forgiveness and the steps needed to learn how to forgive. But sometimes the situation is so disturbing that it makes it a challenge to even think about forgiveness.

1. FORGIVENESS OF SELF

One of the most difficult persons to forgive is the one we see in the mirror each morning.

If we have done something wrong we need to acknowledge that and seek to make amends. But many Christians suffer from what is called neurotic guilt. This is because we tend to reject self-love and foster ridiculous standards of perfection.

In any case, if we do not learn to forgive ourselves then we have a double problem. Our inability to forgive ourselves makes it harder to forgive others. Our inability to forgive ourselves also means we get trapped in an immobilizing circle of blame, shame, guilt and fear.

What we need is a healthy, biblically informed self-image. The first step is to have an accurate image of ourselves. This is not just a suggestion. It is a command.

"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment" (Romans 12:3).

Many of us have a false image of who we are. We either like or dislike this image. If we like it then we become conceited. If we dislike it then we experience self-judgment. If we experience self-judgment we either reject ourselves in self-hatred or we overcompensate and become arrogant. Much arrogance, pride and boastfulness come from people who do not like themselves. In any case, having a false image of one's self is not healthy. We need an undistorted self-concept.

The late comedian, Rodney "I don't get no respect" Dangerfield, made a career out of saying things like:

“Doctor, every morning when I get up and look in the mirror I feel like being sick. What’s wrong with me?” He said, “I don’t know, but your vision is perfect.”

Rodney Dangerfield notwithstanding, it is almost impossible to gain a true vision of ourselves without the aid of others. It is too easy to fool ourselves. The “old nature” seeks to deceive. We need trusted friends and observers to help us gain a more accurate picture.

What if you have an accurate self-image but do not like it? What do you do? Frankly, I do not know what people who do not know God can do. Christians, on the other hand, have the opportunity to experience the transforming power of God’s love. By the grace of God we can accept ourselves as we are.

John has written:

“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

God’s love for us is not based on appearance or performance. It is an unearned gift. It flows from his grace. Such love in turn leads us to self-acceptance and a healthy self-love.

The Bible clearly teaches that even as Christians we will continue to struggle with sin. The fact of this struggle often leads us into self-judgment. But we must remember that though the struggle will remain a part of this life, the final outcome is assured. Christ is victorious over sin and death!

Corrie ten Boom survived a concentration camp during the WWII and afterwards she spoke often about forgiveness. One day she said:

“When I bring my sins to the Lord Jesus, He casts them into the depths of the sea—forgiven and forgotten. He also puts up a sign, “No Fishing Allowed!”

2. FORGIVENESS AS A RESPONSE TO DARK HORROR

What happens when you face an offense of such enormity that you feel it is impossible to forgive? How do you forgive the unforgivable?

Events like the holocaust, Rwandan genocide, and 9/11 have horrific repercussions that affect so many lives beyond those directly involved. Specific crimes such as murder, human trafficking and sexual assault, produce great pain and ongoing suffering. Such events and crimes are situations that make it incredibly difficult to think rationally about even the possibility of forgiveness.

Simon Wiesenthal was a survivor from the Nazi concentration camps of WWII. After the war he devoted most of his life to tracking down fugitive Nazis in order to bring them to justice. But thirty years after the end of the war, in a somewhat ironic twist, he wrote a book entitled, “The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness.” He writes of an experience in one of the camps where a dying SS soldier, guilty of a terrible crime, asked him for forgiveness. Wiesenthal then asks religious leaders, scholars, and others to put themselves in his shoes and answer the question, “What would I have done?”

The book (in its current form) contains fifty-three responses. They are well thought out and complex. They explore whether there are limits to forgiveness and if so, is there redemption from the darkest part of our souls?

One answer that especially got me thinking was from Hans Habe, a writer, reporter, and news editor. He said:

“One of the worst crimes of the [Nazi] regime was that it made it so hard for us to forgive. It led us into the labyrinth of our souls. We must find a way out of the labyrinth—not for the murderers’ sake, but for our own.”¹

I have previously mentioned Corrie ten Boom. After the war, she spent her time helping the people of Holland and Germany, teaching about love and forgiveness. But one day, after a church service, she met one of the jailors who had stood guard at her shower room in Ravensbruck. It was a traumatic moment that would test her faith. She says:

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. “How

¹Wiesenthal, Simon. *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1997), p. 98 and *Conversations about Forgiveness* Facilitator Guide, p. 23.

grateful I am for your message Fräulein”, 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.”²

3. FORGIVENESS FROM THE CROSS

When dealing with issues in life where we struggle to forgive, we need to look to the cross.

Unfortunately, many Christians, including those from the 1st Century, have had difficulty accepting the fact that Jesus was so willing to forgive those who tortured and killed him. Some early copyists of the New Testament had so much trouble with this that they were willing to violate their pledge to accuracy by deliberately omitted Jesus’ prayer from Luke’s Gospel, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (23:34). But we have plenty of other reliable manuscripts that indicate that Jesus did indeed offer this prayer. And by doing so he was modeling what he had taught:

“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:44-45a NRSV).

The concern behind this teaching is this: your behavior shows to whom you belong. If you behave like those who hurt you then they own you. Not only have they hurt you but you have allowed them to pull your soul down into a dark abyss. But if you behave like Jesus then you show that you belong to God and your soul is free.

²See Corrie ten Boom’s, *The Hiding Place*, book and film.

Jesus would have been expected to pray an entirely different prayer. Those who were about to be executed were supposed to say, “May my death atone for all my sins.” But unlike the rest of us, Jesus had no sins of his own to atone for. Instead he confesses the sin of those who had wrongly condemned him.

Christ’s prayer from the cross points to the ultimate basis for forgiveness. Darrell L. Bock describes it this way:

Jesus offers himself here in service to others. He prays for the forgiveness of his enemies and accepts one of the criminals into his kingdom. He represents us as he unjustly bears the penalty for our sin in his love. The most important consideration we can give to the cross is to embrace its meaning with a responsive heart that is filled with the forgiveness, love, and humility Jesus so eloquently displays here. The only action that does the cross of Christ justice is to welcome its work with an all-embracing faith.

CONCLUSION

B.B. Baxter was walking through a cemetery and came across an unusual marker. There was no name, age or date, just a single word. The word was “Forgiven.” We do not know who that person was but based on the epitaph this person had a profound experience of being restored to God.

Forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian Faith. If you have never been hurt, never done anything wrong, never brought grief to a loved one, never screwed up your relationship with God, never wished you could turn back the clock then this teaching will mean nothing to you. If, on the other hand, you are like the rest of us and you know what it is like to despair of sin or you know first hand what it feels like to be hurt or betrayed, then there is no more important news for you to hear than the message that God is a forgiving God.