

ITS FORGIVABLE

Transforming Truths

Article - 8



ITS FORGIVABLE

When our family goes travelling, we select a book and my wife reads to us during the driving portions of the trip. For a recent trip, our son requested that my wife read the third book. In Brother Eugene Burns ALIVE AGAIN series that III is entitled FINGERS STAINED WITH EVIL. The book begins with the raising to life of Tomas de Torquemada, who lived from 1420 to 1498. And during the Spanish Inquisition of the late 14th century, he served as the Grand Inquisitor of Spain from 1443 until his death. He put hundreds of people to death by burning, or hanging for heresy. He confiscated all of the property of the families of those he executed, resulting in the death of many spouses and children from homelessness and starvation. And in Brother Eugene Burns story about the resurrection, Torquemada meets several of his victims, who tell them that what he did to them and their families was unforgivable.

In recent years as victims of serious crimes have been given the opportunity to speak at sentencing hearings of those who have been convicted of the crime, we often hear them say that what was done to them was unforgivable. And I think we can all grasp why victims or the family of victims would feel that way. But there are notable exceptions to this pattern. Some victims, some families of victims instead choose to describe the awful impacts the crime has had upon them, and then tell the offender that they forgive him or her. These exceptions are powerful testimonies to the transforming power, of love and its expression through forgiveness. And as Christians, we know how important and central the concept of forgiveness is to God's plan of ransom, and restitution. We know how much we have been forgiven. And we clearly know that learning to forgive others is an absolutely essential element of our character, if the doors of heaven are to be open to us. Someone has written, "Jesus paid a debt he did not owe because we owed a debt we could not pay." In Matthew 18, Jesus gives us a parable about two servants who had debts that they could not pay. The lesson is that his Heavenly Father has forgiven us a debt we could not pay, but in turn requires us to forgive others the debts they owe us. The lesson in the parable is inflexible. We must forgive from our heart everyone who owes a debt to us. We must release the resentment that we hold toward anyone who has injured us or committed an offence against us. Jesus previously had given us this lesson in His Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6, verses 14 and 15, we read "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your father will not forgive your sins." The lesson is unmistakable. But are there some things that are unforgivable? The pages of human history are filled with stories of unbelievable violence against one another, accompanied with unbelievable suffering. Humanity has social and political history is replete with stories of betrayal, oppression, neglect, and hatred. Well, despite the magnitude of these injustices, I do not believe God regards anything humans have done as unforgivable. Our challenge as Christians is to take God's perspective in such matters, and then act accordingly. It matters not whether the offence was done by someone within our spiritual family, within our fellowship, or someone in the world around us. Our Lord Jesus used stories parables to convey lessons about how we should live honourably as his disciples. He did this for several reasons. But one of them was the fact that his audiences were attracted to pay attention to stories about other people. I think we can all appreciate that. When I consider the challenge of forgiveness that sometimes faces me, I find inspiration in some contemporary stories of people who have found it possible to forgive terrible deeds. Perhaps you will find it too because I want to share five stories, five contemporary stories of forgiveness, and you may be familiar with some of them.

FIRST STORY

The first story I want to share is the story of a tragic school shooting in the rural Amish community of nickel mines, Pennsylvania. A movie entitled Amish Grace was produced in 2010. To

tell that story, I'm going to share a brief version of that. Some names of people involved were changed in the movie. The Amish Grace tells a story of the shooting of 10 girls, ages six to 13. At a one room Amish schoolhouse on October 2 2006, five of the girls died. What was so remarkable was the spirit of love and forgiveness exhibited by the Amish community. The man who carried out the shooting, Charlie Roberts, was a man well known to the Amish community. He drove a milk truck that collected the milk from the Amish dairy farms. After shooting the 10 Girls, he took his own life. But he left a note saying that he did this because he was mad at God over the death of his infant daughter, who died the same day she was born in 1997. Well, of course the police and the news media descended upon the scene. And one of the one family the gravers learns that their daughter Mary Beth is among the deceased. That same day, the elders of the Amish community decide they need to go and visit Mrs. Roberts. The Amish elders tell Mrs. Roberts, we forgive Charlie. But Amy is incredulous. She can't understand how they could possibly forgive what her husband had just done. The elders explain and tell her we are sorry for your loss to you lost a husband. Your children have lost their father. We grieve for you as well. They display the ability to look beyond their own grief, their own hurts, and see things from the perspective of others. Well, the local community rallies around the Amish to help them through this tragedy. And since the Amish do not have cars, people in the community volunteer to drive the Amish wherever they need to go such as to hospitals. Amy Roberts decides to volunteer to Rachel, the mother of one girl who died and also Rebecca who is in a coma as her friend Ida Graber, the mother of Mary Beth who died to go with her to the hospital. When volunteer driver shows up, it is Amy Roberts. Ida at first gets in the car with Rachel, and they start out for the hospital, but soon Ida asked me to pull over and let her out. Rachel gets out too and asked Ida what she is doing. Ida tells her she will not accept a ride from the wife of the man who has just murdered her daughter. Rachel responds and says: "I lost a daughter too. But I will not make my heart a battleground between love and hate. It hurts too much. We must choose love." Eventually, Ida Graber and her husband Gideon, go to the local firehouse for a grief counselling session at which Amy Roberts will be present. Again, Amy says that she cannot understand how they could forgive her husband Charlie. Gideon tells me our forgiveness isn't about Charlie. Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting. It doesn't even mean a pardon. But we also know that if we hold on to our anger and resentment, then it is only ourselves who are being punished. Should. Rachel comes to the firehouse and ask Gideon and Ida to go with her to the hospital because Rebecca her other daughter has awakened from her coma and wants to tell them something.

At the hospital, Rebecca tells them that their daughter, Mary Beth, offered to pray for Charlie Roberts, just before he shot all the girls. It melts away it is pain and anger. Ida realizes her daughter had love in her heart for Charlie Roberts, even when he was about to kill her.

Well, a few days later, Charlie Roberts is being buried. Only his wife and children are at the cemetery. None of the members of their church or the wider community attend. But then, suddenly, a large contingent from the Amish community shows up to support Amy Roberts and her children as portrayed in the movie. In his graveside remarks, the minister says: "when we do not seek vengeance for our pain, when we open our hearts to the healing light of forgiveness, then the darkness is vanished and evil is no more." This powerful story helps show me that forgiveness is possible, even in situations that I would have previously thought were unforgivable. It helped me understand that forgiveness is a choice that we make to manage how tragic or hurtful events affect our mind and our heart. Forgiveness is primarily a choice we make for our own benefit. It is not dependent on an apology, or the repentance of an offender.

SECOND STORY

Another tragic school shooting took place on the morning of December 14, 2012. I'm sure you'll recall it the 20year old man entered Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Armed with a semi automatic rifle and two pistols. He murdered 20 children ages six and seven, as well as the school principal, to teachers and three other staff members. How would parents who have lost a young daughter or son react to such a horrific crime. Robbie Parker and his wife lost their sixyear old daughter, Emily in the attack. And on the night of the following day, he was the first parent to speak out publicly with tears in his eyes. This is what he said to the news media from his front porch: *"We offer our deepest condolences to the families affected by this shooting. It is a horrific tragedy. And we want everybody to know that our hearts and prayers go out to them. This includes the family of the shooter. I can't imagine how hard this experience must be for you. And I want you to know that our family's love and support go out to you as well. My daughter Emily would be one of the first ones to be standing and giving her love and support to all those victims because that's the type of person she is not because of any parenting my wife and I could have done. But because those are the gifts that were given to her by her Heavenly Father. As the deep pain settled begins to settle into our hearts, we find comfort and reflecting on the incredible person that Emily was and how many lives she was able to touch, in her short time here on Earth. Emily was bright, creative and very loving. She always had something kind to say about anybody. Free agency is given to all of us to act and to choose to do whatever we want. And God can't take that away from us. And I know that's something that the shooter was given. And that's what he chose to do with it. I'm not mad, because I have my free agency to make sure that I use this event to do whatever I can to make sure that my family and my wife my daughters are taken care of. And that if there's anything I can do to help others at anytime, anywhere. That is what I'd be willing to do."* He went on and said *"as we move on from what happened here, what happened to so many people let it not turn into something that defines us, but something that inspires us to be better, to be more compassionate and more humble people."* Robbie Parker's amazing statement demonstrates that healing and being able to forgive comes from seeing the matter from God's perspective from the perspective of having free moral agency, and the permission of evil, and by seeing the tragedy that has also happened in the life of the perpetrator and his or her family, being able to look beyond our own injury, and pain. In serious and devastating offences, this can be very hard to do. It will help us if we remind ourselves of what Jesus experienced during His ministry, and at the end of his earthly life.

THIRD STORY

I read another story of the personal loss in a book entitled **Vanishing Grace: Whatever Happened To The Good News?** by Philip Yancey a well known American Christian author, and this is what he wrote:

As the year 2013 came to a close, Malcolm Gladwell, a staff writer for The New Yorker magazine, spoke out publicly about his own rediscovery of faith. He credits a visit with a Mennonite couple in Winnipeg, Canada, who lost their daughter to a sexual predator.

After the largest manhunt in the city's history, police officers found a teenager's body in a shed frozen, her hands and feet bound.

At a news conference just after the funeral, the father said "we would like to know the person or persons who the person or persons are, so that we could share hopefully, a love that seems to be missing in these people's lives. The mother said, I can't say at this point, I forgive this person, stressing the phrase at this point. She went on and said, we have all done something dreadful in our lives or we have felt the urge to."

The response of this couple so different from a normal response of rage and revenge, pulled a Malcolm Gladwell back toward his own Mennonite CHRISTIAN FAITH roots. As he said, something happened to me when I sat WITH CLIFF AND Wilma Dirksen. It is one thing to read in a history book about people empowered by their faith. But it is quite another to meet an otherwise very ordinary person in the backyard of a very ordinary house, who has managed to do something utterly extraordinary. Their daughter was murdered. And the first thing that Dirksen did was to stand up at the press conference, and talk about the path to forgiveness. He adds, "Maybe we have difficulty seeing the weapons of the spirit because we don't know where to look, or because we are distracted by the louder claims of material advantage. But I've seen them now, and I will never be the same."

As the peoples of this world have become more divided on many levels, racially, economically, politically, religiously, we must remember that as individuals following Christian principles, we can rise above and bridge those divides by following the pathway of love and forgiveness.

FORTH STORY

In the early 1990s, South Africa Trent dismantled the **APARTHEID SYSTEM** of racial discrimination, and transition to majority rule through free elections. A black President Nelson Mandela was elected. Everyone anticipated violence.

In a speech given at the University of Toronto in February 2000, Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa described what happened, in a speech he entitled, **Let South Africa Show The World How To Forgive**. Here's part of what he said....

If you asked even the most sober students of South African affairs what they thought was going to happen to South Africa a few years ago, almost universally they predicted that the most ghastly catastrophe would befall us; that as sure as anything, we would be devastated by a comprehensive bloodbath.

It did not happen. Instead, the world watched with amazement, indeed awe, at the long lines of South Africans of all races, snaking their way to their polling booths on April 27, 1994. And they thrilled as they witnessed Nelson Mandela being inaugurated as the first democratically elected president of South Africa on May 10, 1994.

Nearly everyone described what they were witnessing—a virtually bloodless, reasonably peaceful transition from injustice and oppression to freedom and democracy—as a miracle.

When the disaster did not overtake us, there were those who said, "Wait until a black-led government takes over. Then these blacks who have suffered so grievously in the past will engage in the most fearful orgy of revenge and retribution against the whites."

*Well, that prediction too was not fulfilled. Instead the world saw something quite unprecedented. They saw the process of the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission**, when perpetrators of some of the most gruesome atrocities were given amnesty in exchange for a full disclosure of the facts of the offense. Instead of revenge and retribution, this new nation chose to tread the difficult path of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation.*

*The daughter of one of four **African National Congress** activists from the police ambushed and then killed gruesomely. Their mutilated bodies were found in their burntout car. This daughter came to tell her story. She said the police were still harassing her mother and her children, even after their father had died.*

When she finished, she was asked whether she would be able to forgive those who had done this. She replied, We would like to forgive. We just want to know whom to forgive.

Our country did not go the way of Nuremberg after World War Two to bring the perpetrators of such crimes to trial.

Our country also rejected the other extreme of a blanket amnesty. Our country chose a middle way of individual amnesty for truth.

Some would say what about justice? And we say retributive justice is not the only kind of justice. There is also restorative justice. That's the end of the quote.

Brother our God's justice is restorative, not retributive. His plan entire plan for humanity is designed to bring about a restoration of the relationship he wishes to have with his creation, and a restoration of the relationships he intended people to have with each other. The most powerful part of that plan is the forgiveness of sins, hurts, and offences made possible by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

FIFTH STORY

I want to share one more story I read several years ago, that illustrates how far forgiving and reconciliation can and should go. It was about a couple who lost their 18year old son, when a drunk driver had swerved into the lane of their son's oncoming automobile, resulting in a head on collision. The drunk driver escaped with only minor injuries. The mother was a Christian person, believing firmly that we are to love all persons. But strong feelings of hatred toward that drunk driver began to build inside her. When she saw him in court at the preliminary hearing, her feelings of hatred increased. When the case came before the court, he was only sentenced to five years of probation. Only if he violated the conditions of his probation, would he go to prison. The mother was personally determined to see that he did not get away with the slightest infraction of those conditions.

But one afternoon, attending a Mothers Against Drunk Driving meeting, she was surprised as the young man who killed her son stepped up to the podium to tell about the night he had brought tragedy and sorrow to a family. He cried and said he really belonged in prison. The mother was surprised. Could it be that he was not the monster she thought he was. Suddenly, she found herself beginning to feel compassion for him. After the meeting, she went up and talked with him. Later she even visited him at his home. He was still drinking though. She knew he needed direction in his life, and offered to send him some Bible study materials. He gladly accepted.

Sometime later, he violated a condition of his probation and was sent to prison. The woman was on subtle by the news. And she went to visit him. When she saw him in prison, she felt a flood of compassion for him. Though she knew that, considering what he had done such feelings made no sense to her at all. At least no sense in this world's way of thinking. As they talked, he asked for her forgiveness. And she began to see him not as a murderer or her son, but as a person in need of love and guidance. She expressed her forgiveness. But then to his surprise, she asked for his forgiveness. Why, yes. For hating you, she said. And he forgave her. She remembered that Jesus said not only to forgive others, even our enemies, but to also do good to them. She kept going back to the prison, determined to help him rebuild his life.

She said: "alcohol has wiped out one life. Please don't let it ruin yours." She and her husband arranged for the court to let them take him to church each Sunday, and spend a day in their custody.

At the time I read the story, he was out on probation again. His life was turned around. And he was an intimate family friend.

What a powerful story brother. I hope I could do the same if faced with a similar situation. But it shows what the power of Christ can do if we try to follow the principles he has taught us. As we seek to live godly lives, we should be gaining a perspective of others and ourselves like God's perspective. We cannot be satisfied with looking at others the way the world looks at them, or judging others as the world judges them. We must have that higher perspective that sees human dignity of every individual amidst their failings. A perspective that looks beyond those sins and failings of their human nature, a condition we share with them. And then we must live our lives in accordance with this higher perspective. We must forgive ourselves and others for not being perfect. Returning to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says in Matthew 5:7, Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. How much we each need God's mercy. American author Max Lucado wrote.... "relationships don't thrive because the guilty are punished, but because the innocent are merciful." Forgiving an offender, releasing resentment we may have toward that person is an act of mercy. It benefits you primarily, but also the offender. Jesus also said blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. I liked the message paraphrase of this verse, which says: You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family. The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 12:18, "if it is possible, as far as it depends on you live at peace with everyone." As far as it depends on us. How far are we willing to go to live peacefully with others? Are we willing to forgive them any and all offences they have committed toward us or others? God demonstrated his willingness to forgive, his desire to reestablish peace with humanity by giving the life of his son. What perspectives can help us find the strength to forgive others, even when the harm that they have done to us is great. Well, I think I have six or seven things.

First, we should acknowledge our own imperfections and refuse to make comparisons between ourselves and the offender. The apostle Paul confessed that he was not aware of any accusations that could be made against him but quickly acknowledged that that didn't mean he was perfect. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:4, "My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent." He also wrote that all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. That's Romans 3:23.

Second, we should consider how much God has forgiven us. And he did it before we even asked for it. Jesus came and paid the penalty. Romans 5:8 says, God demonstrates His own love for us in this While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Third, we must separate the sin from the sinner in our mind, to the best of our ability. We should try to think about the positive value the offender may have as a person now, or at least the person he or she can become, in God's kingdom. Separate that image in our minds from the words or actions that have injured or offended us. Noted attorney Bryan Stevenson has a helpful saying along this line that I like to remember he wrote... "each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done."

Fourth, remember, Jesus died to save the offender to ask yourself, can I hate or resent someone whom Christ died to save? Just as he did for me.

Fifth, remember, Jesus prayed for God to forgive those who were crucifying Him. And Steven also asked God to forgive those who were stoning him. It is hard to harbour hatred and resentment toward someone, if we are sincerely asking for God to forgive and guide them.

Sixth, remember the permission of evil is part of God's plan. This helps us place the harmful words or actions of others into a context that we understand the permission of evil is an essential part of God's plan to teach mankind the exceeding sinfulness of sin.

Seventh, realize what the offender did was not about you; even if it was directed at you, What they did was about him or her, their feelings, their anger, their emotions, their needs, as perverse or evil as those may have been. Jesus warned us that at the end of the age, because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold. Matthew 24:12. When we are insulted or hurt, we can choose to respond with grace and forgiveness. Someone wrote: "Grace is when somebody hurts you, and you try to understand their situation, instead of trying to hurt them back."

Are there some things that are unforgivable? I don't think so. Louis B. Smedes, an American author of many books on Christian living, including two books about forgiving wrote this... "If we say that monsters that is people who do terrible evil, are beyond forgiving. We give them a power they should never have. They are given the power to keep their evil alive in the hearts of those who suffered most. We give them power to condemn their victims to live forever with the hurting memory of their painful past."

Brethren, forgiving is primarily something we do for ourselves for our own mental and spiritual well being, although truly repentant, offenders sometimes need to hear our forgiveness, to heal from their own guilt and shame. But forgiving is something we do so that our lives are not tied to the injuries and pain of past experiences. Let us follow the advice of our Lord Jesus we have already read and this advice from the Apostle Paul in Ephesians, 4:31 and 32 ...Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another tender hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. And Colossians 3:12 to 14... "Therefore, as God's chosen people holy and dearly beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." May the Lord help us all to become more forgiving.

Amen!!

Bro. Tom Gilbert

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