

A Lesson on Forgiveness

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It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear. It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown. "When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever." The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

And that is when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat: the next, a blue uniform and a visor cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how

thin you were! Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course— how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard in there." No, he did not remember me. "But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein"—again the hand came out— "will you forgive me?" And I stood there— whose sins had every day to be forgiven—and could not. Betsie had died in that place— could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could not have been many seconds

that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses,” Jesus says, “neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.” I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality.

Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that. And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

“Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.” And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. “I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!” For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard, and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.

And having thus learned to forgive in this hardest of situations, I never again had difficulty in forgiving: I wish I could say it! I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they did not. If there is one thing, I have learned at

80 years of age, it’s that I cannot store up good feelings and behavior—but only draw them fresh from God each day. Maybe I am glad it’s that way. For every time I go to Him, He teaches me something else.

I recall the time, some 15 years ago, when some Christian friends whom I loved and trusted did something which hurt me. You would have thought that, having forgiven the Nazi guard, this would have been child’s play. It was not. For weeks I seethed inside. But at last I asked God again to work His miracle in me. And again, it happened: first the cold-blooded decision, then the flood of joy and peace. I had forgiven my friends; I was restored to my Father.

Then, why was I suddenly awake in the middle of the night, hashing over the whole affair again? My friends! I thought. People I loved! If it had been strangers, I would not have minded so. I sat up and switched on the light. “Father, I thought it was all forgiven! Please help me do it!” But the next night I woke up again. They had talked so sweetly too! Never a hint of what they were planning. “Father!” I cried in alarm. “Help me!”

His help came in the form of a kindly Lutheran pastor to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks. “Up in that church tower,” he said, nodding out the window, “is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First ding then dong. Slower and slower until there is a final dong and it stops. “I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive someone, we take our hand off the rope. But if we have been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we must not be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They’re just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down.” And so, it

proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversation. But the force—which was my willingness in the matter—had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at last stopped altogether. And so, I discovered another secret of forgiveness: that we can trust God not only above our emotions, but also above our thoughts.

And still He had more to teach me, even in this single episode. Because many years later, in 1970, an American with whom I had shared the ding-dong principle came to visit me in Holland and met the people involved. “Aren’t those the friends who let you down?” he asked as they left my apartment.

“Yes,” I said a little smugly. “You can see it’s all forgiven.” “By you, yes,” he said. “But what about them? Have they accepted your forgiveness?” “They say there’s nothing to forgive! They deny it ever happened. But I can prove it!” I went eagerly to my desk. “I have it in black and white! I saved all their letters and I can show you where—” “Corrie!” My friend slipped his arm through mine and gently closed the drawer. “Aren’t you the one whose sins are at the bottom of the sea? And are the sins of your friends etched in black and white?” For an anguishing moment I could not find my voice. “Lord Jesus,” I whispered at last, “who takes all my sins away, forgive me for preserving all these years the evidence against others! Give me grace to burn all the blacks and whites as a sweet smelling sacrifice to Your glory.”

I did not go to sleep that night until I had gone through my desk and pulled out those letters—curling now with age—and fed them all into my little coal-burning grate. As the flames leaped and glowed, so did my heart. “Forgive us our trespasses,” Jesus taught us to pray, “as we for-

give those who trespass against us.” In the ashes of those letters I was seeing yet another facet of His mercy. What more He would teach me about forgiveness in the days ahead I did not know, but tonight’s was good news enough. When we bring our sins to Jesus, He not only forgives them, He makes them as if they had never been.

Discussion Questions

- ★ *How does forgiveness play a role in healing?*
- ★ *What do you like about the stories Corrie tells?*
- ★ *Do you find it helpful that while these stories ultimately demonstrate that forgiveness can be achieved, they also depict the challenge it can be to truly embrace it?*
- ★ *Do you find it harder to forgive those you are close to, as Corrie did, than strangers?*
- ★ *What did you think of the analogy of the bell, teaching that sometimes it takes time to let things go once we have decided to forgive? Have you experienced similar feelings?*
- ★ *How does offering and receiving forgiveness free us and increase our ability to “capture the sunshine”?*