

Brian Zahnd: 'Unconditional?'

In his book Unconditional?, Brian Zahnd challenges believers with a “radical call of Jesus to forgiveness.” Using stories, historical and theological insights, Zahnd, pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Mo., reminds us of the foundation of Christianity. Although forgiveness is not an easy command to obey, as Christians, we have the grace to do so—no matter what.

Featured in The Buzz is an excerpt from Zahnd’s new insightful book. (Click here to purchase Unconditional?)

What does it mean to be a disciple? If someone were a disciple of the sitar master Ravi Shankar, it would be assumed that they hoped to learn to play the sitar with great skill. If someone were a disciple of a kung fu master, it would be assumed that they hope to eventually master the art of kung fu. So, if we call ourselves disciples of Jesus, what is it we are trying to learn? What is it that Jesus offers to teach us when we heed the call to follow Him? What is Jesus the master of, which we seek to learn? The answer is “Life.” Jesus is the master of living well, living rightly, living truly. Jesus is the master of living a human life as God intended. And at the center of Jesus’ teaching on how we should live is the recurring theme of love and forgiveness.

For those who are serious about being a disciple of Jesus, serious about learning to live the way He taught, the Sermon on the Mount is of supreme importance. This is where Jesus sets forth His radical vision of how we should live. And make no mistake about it; it is radical—so radical that for much of Christian history, the church has occupied theologians in finding ways to get around it. Some theologians have suggested that Jesus never actually expected us to live the Sermon on the Mount; rather it was a disingenuous teaching to “drive us to grace.” As the argument goes, in attempting to live the Sermon on the Mount we would find it simply can’t be done, and then we would look to grace as an alternative to obeying Christ. Not grace to live the Sermon on the Mount, but grace *not* to live it. This interpretation is pretty far-fetched, to say the least, but surprisingly common.

Other theologians have argued that the Sermon on the Mount should be viewed as attitudes of the heart, but not as commandments to be actually obeyed. So that as long as you have the attitude of love in your heart, you don’t have to actually go the second mile or actually turn the other cheek. I suppose this means that when you are treated unkindly you can retaliate like everyone else, but you are to do so with a “kindly attitude” in your heart. Of course this turns Christianity into

nothing more than a nice religion of private piety—something that has been regularly done throughout the centuries. But we should keep in mind that Jesus was not crucified for teaching people to have a cheerful attitude. Jesus was crucified for teaching there was another way to live than adhering to the pharisaical religion of Israel or the brutal empire of Rome. It should be obvious from an honest reading of the Gospels that Jesus expected His disciples to master the lessons he taught and actually live a life centered on love and forgiveness. And Jesus expects His modern-day followers to do the same—to become disciples of love who master the art of forgiveness. Jesus was under no illusion that this is an easy life. In His sermon He called it a narrow and difficult road, but He also called it the road that leads to life.

The most common and vigorous protest against any serious attempt to live the Sermon on the Mount is that it's not "practical."

Not practical? Practical is a very utilitarian (and at times ugly) word. In this case, it is code for complicity with the status quo and accepting the world *as is* as the only legitimate vision for humanity. Before we can even try to live the Sermon on the Mount, we must first experience the liberation of our imagination. If we only listen to the

“practical” men who run the world as it is, we will end up settling for the anemic interpretation that the Sermon on the Mount is about private attitudes of the heart and not about Jesus’ radical vision of love and forgiveness.

We must keep in mind that we are told the Sermon on the Mount is not practical by those who have a deep commitment to (and perhaps a vested interest in) perpetuating the status quo. These practical men seek to control not only the way the world is run but even our imaginations. They tell us, “This is just the way the real world works,” and thus they seek to confine Jesus to a “heavenly” kingdom while they get on with the practical business of running the “real” world. But the Holy Spirit is a liberator of imagination, and we must reject the arrogant pretense of the principalities and powers along with their bloody pragmatism. The church with a Christ-inspired vision and a Holy Spirit-liberated imagination is to be that realm where the followers of Jesus prove the practical men wrong by actually living the Sermon on the Mount. To live the Sermon on the Mount, we first have to rebel against the powers that be. We have to believe that there is another way of being human. We have to believe that Jesus taught and modeled that way.

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Watch Brian Zahnd discuss *Unconditional?*

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The 20th century was one of the bloodiest and most hate filled centuries in human history. It was a century defined by war. As the children who were born at the close of World War II came of age, they began to imagine an alternative to the hate and war that had defined their parents' generation, and so they sang and spoke of "love and peace." The problem was that no one could actually live it. As Larry Norman wryly observed, "Beatles said all you need is love, and then they broke up." The "love and peace" generation of the '60s wasn't wrong in trying to imagine something better than a world filled with hate and war—it was wrong in not finding a better messiah than the Beatles. Jesus didn't just talk about love and peace; *He lived it to the extreme*. When Jesus prayed for His enemies to be forgiven as they drove the nails into His hands, He was living His own sermon and validating His right to preach it. After that, no one could dare claim that Jesus' teaching was not "practical." Jesus had lived it, died for it, and been vindicated by God in resurrection. His call is as vibrant and exciting today as it was 2,000 years ago when He first issued it to Galilean fishermen: "Follow Me." It's an invitation to follow Jesus in His radical way of enemy-love and costly forgiveness. If the only way of responding to the evil of injustice is retaliation and revenge, we conspire

with the powers of darkness to keep the world an ugly place. This is why Jesus (upon His own authority!) dared to countermand the Torah and alter the law of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” with His radical command not to resist the one who is evil and to turn the other cheek. A world in which tit-for-tat retaliation is the rule remains an ugly place where too many people are missing an eye and a tooth. Or, as Mahatma Gandhi observed, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” Jesus’ vision is to end the ugliness of revenge and make the world beautiful through grace. Grace is the distinctly Christian alternative to the tired system of retaliation that perpetuates pain and leaves the whole world blind.

Grace is God’s idea of how the world can be made new. Grace is why Jesus could call the poor and persecuted, the mournful and meek, blessed. Jesus’ entire life and message were the embodiment of the grace that triumphs over the cold pragmatism of a world where the strong dominate the weak. Jesus’ message of love and forgiveness is not rooted in a naïve optimism but in the grace that takes the blame, covers the shame, and removes the stain and the endless cycle of revenge. Grace is the antidote for the Eastern concept of karma. Karma is the ancient idea that what goes around comes around, and there is no escape from it, that retribution always has the final word. But grace travels outside the rules of karma and gives a different final word. Of course, the very basis of

the Christian
gospel is that, because of what Christ accomplished on the
cross, there is a
way for sinners to be saved from the destructive consequences
(karma) of their
sins. But Christians are not just recipients of forgiving
grace; we are also
called to be those who extend the grace of forgiveness to
others. Christians
are to be carriers of grace in a world cursed with karma and
endless cycles of
revenge.

Grace is the great treasure of
the kingdom of God, or as Jesus described it in His parable, a
pearl of great
price. That pearl is the gospel of the kingdom of heaven. It's
the pearl of the
gospel of grace that makes beauty out of ugly things. That's
what grace does. Karma doesn't have the final word, and the
ugliness of vengeance is not the final mark left upon
humanity.

So, ultimately, for the
committed Christ follower, the question of forgiveness is not
a question of
whether forgiveness is possible, but a question of how we can
find the grace to
offer forgiveness. We may discover that
we offer forgiveness to transgressors and offenders the same
way that Jesus
did—amidst great suffering. In our feelings-oriented culture,
it's easy to
equate forgiveness with having certain feelings. Forgiveness
is not a feeling.
Forgiveness is a choice to end the cycle of revenge and leave
justice in the

hands of God. Very often we forgive our enemies by entering into the sufferings of Christ who forgave from the cross. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in *The Cost of Discipleship*, "The call to follow Christ always means a call to share the work of forgiving men their sins. Forgiveness is the Christ-like suffering which it is the Christian's duty to bear." Dietrich Bonhoeffer was no starry-eyed idealist who didn't know about the reality of evil. He wrote these words during the rise of Nazism in Germany and would eventually die at the hands of the Nazis. Bonhoeffer's theology of forgiveness was forged in the crucible of real and costly suffering, but for Bonhoeffer, the cost of discipleship settled the question of forgiveness.

*Click here to purchase
Brian Zahnd's new book.*