

# Can We Forgive ISIS for Raping Kayla Mueller and Beheading Children?

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi leads an organization that has murdered more than 3,000 people in the last year. ISIS recently crucified 74 children for not fasting properly during Ramadan. It has beheaded victims, drowned others in cages and burned others alive. According to *The New York Times*, the group has enslaved and sold thousands of women as sex slaves. All under al-Baghdadi's leadership.

And now he is in the news for his personal, heinous immorality as well. Kayla Mueller was a humanitarian aid worker captured in August 2013 while leaving a hospital in Syria. She was in ISIS custody for 18 months, and was killed earlier this year. Now we have learned that she was repeatedly raped by al-Baghdadi, who made her his personal sex slave.

What must her parents be feeling? Her family and friends? What about the families of the women still being held by al-Baghdadi's group? When I see this criminal's face or name in the news, I feel a deep revulsion towards him. Don't you?

I know the Bible repeatedly tells me to forgive my enemies. Jesus taught us to "love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). But if Kayla Mueller were my daughter, how could I possibly forgive the man who did such horrifically unspeakable things to her?

Think of a person whose unrepented sin has harmed you. You know you should forgive. You know that harboring anger hurts you more than it hurts the person who hurt you. It's like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. But still, it seems so unfair. This person hurt you, and now it's

your responsibility to forgive actions or words that wounded you.

Actually, it's not.

In reading Craig Denison's First15 yesterday, I was struck by the title: "Forgive the Person Not Their Actions." His devotional sent me down a philosophical trail I had not trod before. I realized that forgiveness is a relational construct that requires an object appropriate to its nature. In other words, I cannot forgive a chair, even if I break my ankle tripping over it. In the same way, I cannot forgive a word, even if it hurts my feelings. I cannot forgive a physical action, even if it breaks my nose. I can only forgive the person who speaks the word and commits the action.

I find this insight to be enormously helpful. God does not ask us to forgive horrific sins such as those perpetrated by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He doesn't forgive sins, either. Rather, forgive the sinner. When Stephen was being stoned to death, he forgave the men, not their actions (Acts 7:60). Jesus did the same from the cross (Luke 23:34).

Forgiveness does not mean Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi should not face justice for his horrifying crimes. He should, without question. But it does mean that we can trust vengeance to God's justice enacted through humans and through divine judgment (Rom. 12:19). We can ask God to help us forgive not crimes, but criminals.

And we can work to heal a world of criminals. Before she was captured, Kayla Mueller wrote a letter to her family in which she said, "Some people find God in love; I find God in suffering. I've known for some time what my life's work is, using my hands as tools to relieve suffering."

Forgiveness is a tool to relieve suffering. How will you use it today?

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