

Forgiveness That Transcends

How—and why—God calls you to a forgiveness that overcomes evil, tragedy and anything else thrown your way

Forgiveness lies at the heart of God's project to set right a world gone wrong. Ours is a gospel of forgiveness: a gospel intended for the healing of the nations. Until forgiveness is embraced as part of the fundamental equation for redressing the ills of our world, we will inevitably find ourselves enacting or endorsing the tired practice of violent retaliation that has caused human history to be written in the genre of "tragedy."

God's solution to the perpetuation of violence and vengeance is the startling introduction of forgiveness.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,'" Jesus said during the Sermon on the Mount. "But I say to you, 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, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

"For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:43-48, NKJV, emphasis added).

Jesus calls us to be a perfect imitation of our Father in heaven, while linking this to how we treat our enemies, how we relate to those who are genuinely evil. If we surrender to the status quo by loving our neighbors and hating our enemies, by praying for our friends and hating our adversaries, by

blessing the good guys and hating the bad guys, then we are refusing to bear the image of our Father—we are refusing to live as His sons and daughters.

Returning good for good and evil for evil is the way the world has always operated. And it is why the world remains a violent and angry place. Jesus calls us to become sons and daughters of our Father through a mature imitation of the His love and kindness—which He extends to friend and foe, good and bad alike.

Real-World Forgiveness

Jesus did not present His ethic of enemy-love in the quiet and safe confines of American suburbia. It will be helpful to keep in mind that He lived in a violent world where His homeland was occupied by foreign troops.

When He was a small child, an armed Jewish revolt against the Roman occupiers broke out in Sepphoris—an important Galilean city just four miles from Nazareth. The Roman general Varus brutally crushed the rebellion and lined the road to Sepphoris with 2,000 crucified Galilean rebels (yes, 2,000). The grisly scenes of brutal execution were part of Rome's psychological warfare—they were meant to deter future protestors.

It's impossible to imagine that events like this did not have an enormous impact on the young Jesus. The mass crucifixion undoubtedly shaped Jesus' concept of words such as cross and enemy.

We speak of "taking up our cross" in a culture where extremely few people have seen a real execution. Jesus spoke of taking up the cross in a world where crucifixions were common—and public. And Jesus spoke of enemy-love in a world where real and potentially violent enemies were as present as the nearest Roman garrison.

The historical context of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount makes His

words all the more astonishing. Jesus and His hearers knew about real crosses and real enemies.

The Cross Says It All

Only forgiveness has the capacity to rescue human society from the destructive vortex of violence and vengeance and give us a healing alternative. Only forgiveness can create the world of peace of which the prophets dared to dream.

Forgiveness is how God saves the sinner. The practice of forgiveness is how God heals the world. Forgiveness is the miracle cure. Not the cheap forgiveness that turns a blind eye to the reality of evil, but the costly forgiveness of the cross.

We who call ourselves Christians are recipients of the forgiveness that flows from the cross. But just as significantly, we are those called to be practitioners of Christ-like forgiveness.

We don't just partake of the forgiveness of the cross; we take up the cross. We too engage in the costly practice of radical forgiveness. We too pray in the midst of our pain, "Father, forgive them." In a broken world framed in revenge, we are to help flood creation with the healing grace of forgiveness.

To be a Christian is to believe that saving forgiveness is found in the cross. But to be a Christian also means to take up the cross in a deliberate imitation of Jesus. Admittedly, Christ's call for us to take up our cross and follow Him is filled with many implications, but the most obvious understanding of this call is that we are to emulate the way He responded to evil as He hung upon the cross—by forgiving transgressors and refusing to be drawn into the cycle of revenge.

Historic Christianity has always understood that salvation comes from what Jesus did at His cross. But we must also

understand that we are called to be ambassadors of that salvation by doing the same thing with our own cross. We too are to forgive the transgressors and refuse to be drawn into the cycle of revenge.

I fully realize this is a Christianity more radical than most bargain for. But perhaps we need to be reminded that the fullness of salvation is not obtained at a bargain; it is obtained by taking up our cross and following Jesus.

The Toxin of Cheap Grace

The bane of the American church is consumer Christianity: comfortable, easy-cheesy, cotton-candy Christianity; the low-grade Christianity of what's in it for me? This diluted Christianity offers a certain solace to the individual but is anemic before the principalities and powers of entrenched evil.

If the essence of our Christianity affects only our Sunday mornings and our afterlife expectations, we are simply embracing a Christianized version of our true religion—self-preservation and self-promotion. This is the religion of the selfish individual and the arrogant empire. This is the religion German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace” and taught about before he was executed for opposing Adolf Hitler during World War II.

“Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our church,” he wrote. “Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. ... [It] is the grace we bestow on ourselves ... grace without the cross.”

A cheap view of grace deceives us into thinking that nothing really has to change. Because we have “received Jesus as our personal Savior,” we now possess our salvation and simply await our transfer to heaven by living a moderately

Christianized version of the status quo. As the bumper-sticker theology goes, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven."

Bumper stickers are a poor place to get your theology. We aren't "just forgiven." We are forgiven that we might become practitioners of radical forgiveness. We are forgiven forgivers.

Jesus does not offer His disciples the cheap grace of being just forgiven. We turn the gospel into cheap grace when we think of the cross only in terms of what Jesus has done for us. The cross is also the way we are called to follow—the way of endless enemy-love.

An honest reading of the Gospels makes an offer of cheap grace impossible. We too are called to love our enemies. We too are called to forgive our transgressors: the bully who has made your life a living hell; the ex-husband who betrayed you; the ex-wife who left you a lonely man; the backstabber who sabotaged your career; the criminal who violated your security; the abuser who violated your dignity; the activist who advocates everything you oppose. And on it goes.

We are called to love, forgive and bless these enemies. The consumer Christianity of self-preservation and self-promotion will never be able to meet the challenge of taking up the cross and forgiving an enemy.

Forgiveness Triumphs

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul says that at the cross, "having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Jesus] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (v. 2:15, NIV).

How does the cross triumph over the principalities and powers—the power structures, both human and demonic, that have kept humanity engaged in the endless cycle of revenge and payback? By absorbing the blow and offering forgiveness.

This is why the final word from the cross is, "It is finished" (John 19:30). The endless cycle of revenge and paybacks was finished at the cross! Now forgiveness would take the stage and begin to remake a world according to the goodness of forgiveness.

As those who believe in the victory of the cross, we need to reclaim the triumph of forgiveness in the realm of imagination. We live in a culture that constantly celebrates and glorifies vengeful and vigilante violence—especially in entertainment. This is partly because it is only through a perverted concept of justice that our culture can justify its obsession with violence.

The early Christians believed violence as entertainment is a sinful affront to human dignity. In Christ they believed violent bloodshed was finished at the cross. They believed that in the new world God is creating in Christ that violence as punitive justice or perverse entertainment has no place.

Without forgiveness, evil is allowed to write the final word—and often that word is retaliation. In this way evil is passed on from generation to generation as a demonic virus, and generations of human lives are ruined while the virus of evil lives on.

Forgiveness changes all that. When the virus of recalcitrant evil encounters the forgiveness of the cross, it is finally overcome. This is the kind of radical forgiveness taught and modeled by Jesus Christ.

Christian forgiveness is neither ignorance nor amnesia. Forgiveness both knows and remembers. Forgiveness does not call us to forget, but to exhaust evil by ending the cycle of revenge.

Forgiveness is not pretending that evil didn't happen or trying to tell ourselves it wasn't really evil. For the Christian whose faith is rooted in Good Friday, the existence

of real evil—both human and demonic—is undeniable. Jesus was crucified, and it was unjust, and it was evil.

But evil does not have the last word. Through absorbing evil in forgiveness without vengeful retaliation, Jesus overcame evil. And His resurrection was the triumph of forgiveness.

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Want more from Brian Zahnd? Then visit to win his book Unconditional?— new this month.