

# “Father, Forgive Them; For They Know Not What They Do”

Covenant Church  
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**Luke 23:33-34 (KJV)** And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.

## I. Introduction

## II. Preparing for—and allowing for—forgiveness

### a. Decision v. Virtue (Preemptory) Ethics—or the Part-and-Whole Problem

#### i. Sister Catherine and an unnamed Cistercian monk

“There will be no repercussions,” [Sister Catherine] declared. “No one is to be held at fault. There will be no medical claims or malpractice suits. I forgive without reservation anyone who may have been in any way responsible for what has happened.”<sup>1</sup>

“If they seize me someday to become a victim of the terrorism which seems to threaten all the foreigners who live in Algeria today...,” wrote the monk, “I would like to have the spark of lucidity that would enable me...all my heart to pardon him who has struck me.”<sup>2</sup>

### b. The Context Problem

## III. Forgiveness as a *Process*

### a. Confrontation—Moral argument—Repentance and forgiveness

### b. The role of anger?

**Eph 4:26 (NRSV) Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,**

Walter Brueggemann. *Praying the Psalms, Second Edition: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*. Cascade Books, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007.

## IV. But *how*, then, to forgive? Towards Empathy

### a. Empathy towards wrongdoers whose sins you have, could, or can imagine committing

**Rom 2:21-23 (NRSV) While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?**

<sup>1</sup> William A. Meninger, *The Process of Forgiveness*. New York: Continuum, 1996: 14.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Michael Henderson, *Forgiveness: Breaking the Chain of Hate*. Wilsonville, OR: BookPartners, 1999: 21.

- b. Empathy towards wrongdoers whose sins you could never imagine committed
  - i. Your sins may be different but you are both sinners

**John 8:2-11 (NRSV) Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”**

“I have to...make sure that each one of these people who have written to me [to come work with her in Calcutta] is able to mediate the experience we mediated it to that woman,” said Mother Teresa, referring to a woman whom she helped to forgive a son who had horribly abused her. “You can’t do that unless you yourself have faced fully your sin and let Jesus deal with it. If you have experienced forgiveness in your own life, you will be equipped.”<sup>3</sup>

- ii. The wrongdoer’s sin may be (just barely?) understandable

Adolfo Perez Esquivel, Nobel Peace Prize winner, was imprisoned by the military dictatorship in Argentina and spent eighteen months in solitary confinement. He felt anger, outrage, and depression but ultimately determined he would not seek revenge and try to kill his oppressors if he were set free. Instead, he would work in bringing a new order into being, where life would be sacred and people would live in peace and dignity. In the months after his release from prison, Perez Esquivel was haunted by Jesus’ words, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” To Perez Esquivel, the words made no sense, for his torturers had known exactly what they are doing, but suddenly it dawned on him: what his torturers did not know, what they were entirely ignorant of, was that humanity is one, that we are brothers and sisters in the family of God. What his torturers did not know was that Perez Esquivel was not an enemy they were torturing, but a brother. Perez Esquivel concluded that the only way he could communicate that truth to them was to forgive them and to love them. And he did.<sup>4</sup>

- c. Miraculous forgiveness

**Mark 9:24 (NRSV) Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!”**

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Henderson, *Forgiveness: Breaking the Chain of Hate*. Wilsonville, OR: BookPartners, 1999: 9 (citation omitted).

<sup>4</sup> Donald J. Shelby, “Forgiveness: The Final Form of Love” in *Reflections on Forgiveness and Spiritual Growth*. Edited by Andrew J. Weaver and Monica Furlong. Nashville: Abingdon, 2000: 67-71, 70-71 (citing B. Cane, *Circles of Hope*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books: 100-101).

**Phil 4:7 (NRSV) 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

V. Conclusion