

Born to Win

Would You Forgive This Man?

by Ronald L. Dart

“Would you forgive this man?” I was paging through *World* magazine, the May 17th issue; and that title, “Would you forgive this man?”, almost came off the page at me. The reason I was so taken by it is that I keep encountering this question in so *many* of life’s circumstances. For example, a common question I get is, “Do I have to forgive this guy if he hasn’t repented of what he did?” Well, I don’t know exactly, but here’s a statement made by Jesus that bears on the question. And so, if you want to call yourself a Christian—if you want to live by the things Jesus taught—here’s what he said. It’s in Mark 11, verse 24:

Mark 11

AKJV

²⁴ Therefore I say to you, What things soever you desire, when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you shall have them.

²⁵ And [*He didn’t stop there; he kept on.*] when you stand praying, forgive, if you have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

²⁶ But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.

Now, what’s striking about this is the difference between this on the one hand and something he said on another occasion. Matthew records it—Matthew 5, verse 23:

Matthew 5

KJ2000

²³ Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you;

²⁴ Leave there your gift before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Now, in Mark’s account of this, there is no reconciliation, no leaving your gift and going away. You’re standing there praying and, apparently before you budge off the spot, you’re supposed to forgive him if you have anything against anybody. It seems inexorably linked, as well, to your relationship with God and to your prayers being answered. (Maybe we have stumbled onto something that tells us why some of our prayers aren’t answered.) This really sounds like—what Jesus said—like *unconditional forgiveness*, which is something we find hard to do. But it’s worth taking a moment to consider the man that Marvin Olasky was writing about in *World* magazine. “Would you forgive this man?” What man?

The man was a Cambodian. For years, he had been known as a gentle Christian teacher who walked around with a Bible and helped hungry refugee children. Just a good person. Then, in 1999 (he was working for World Vision at the time), a photographer identified him as the master torturer for the Khmer Rouge. You remember those people? They were the people who managed the killing fields in Cambodia; killed nearly 2 million people. Well, it turns out that our man made a profession of Christ in the early 90s and turned his life around. Marvin Olasky draws out the issue regarding this man so you can understand who it is you’re being asked, “Would you forgive this man?”

Kaing Guek Eav, now a frail 66, admits responsibility for 12,000–14,000 deaths. Three decades ago, known as Comrade Duch (pronounced Duke), he ran a Phnom Penh torture center that was the next-to-last stop for “class enemies” who were then murdered in Cambodian communism’s killing fields and buried in mass graves.

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In coming months the trial of Eav is scheduled to begin. The Cambodian government is finally charging some Khmer Rouge leaders with crimes against humanity, and in the process rubbing their noses in the enormity of their evil. Judges, lawyers, and witnesses earlier this year escorted Eav to the scenes of his mass murders. They showed him a tree against which his underlings smashed babies’ heads. They showed him a memorial that displays the skulls of thousands of his victims.

Eav broke down in sobs. But he did more than that. He knelt on the ground and prayed, because during the 1990s the torturer had made a profession of faith in Christ.

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When he was discovered, he confessed...

[...] saying, “It is God’s will that you are here” [*to the man who found him*]. Christopher LaPel, the pastor who had baptized him, said he “was shocked when I found out who he really was, because what he did was so evil.”

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It just seemed to be incompatible with the gentle man that was in front of him.

LaPel had great reason for fierce anger: Eav and his revolutionary colleagues had killed LaPel’s parents, brother, and sister during the 1975–79 Red Terror. But upon reflection LaPel’s reaction changed: “It’s amazing. It’s a miracle. Christianity changes people’s lives. If Jesus can change Eav, he can change anyone.”

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I was struck by that because it *really* is a testimony to the *power* of Jesus Christ and the awareness—once a person comes to him—of what it can do to them. Well, Marvin Olasky went on to say that:

The Cambodian courts will now deal with the issue of punishment. Eav has told reporters, “I have done very bad things in my life. Now it is time to bear the consequences of my actions. I thought that God was very bad. I did not serve God, I served communism. I feel very sorry about the killings. We killed them like chickens...I guess I will go to jail now, but it is OK. The killings must be understood. The truth should be known.”

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So, would you forgive this man?

The truth, indeed, should be known, he said. We already know a lot of it. 1.7 million Cambodians, *one-fourth* of the population of Cambodia, died during the four years that he and his comrades ruled that country. Society doesn't really much want to know the truth. It's just too hard to reconcile the insides of a man who in one year can kill people in their thousands like so many chickens and yet in another year be a humanitarian feeding refugee children—totally changed, a different man. I look at the picture of this frail, little, 66-year-old man in the magazine and he is a *pitiable* creature. How could this man have been a *monster*? It's a question that deserves a lot of thought in its own right; but, for now, if you were a Cambodian whose family had been murdered by the man who came to be known as Comrade Duch, would you—*could you*—forgive this man?

Oddly, Comrade Duch gave us part of the answer when he said, “Now it is time to bear the consequences of my actions.” Forgiveness is one thing; avoiding the *consequences* of your action is another thing altogether. A man can repent, he can know that God has forgiven him, he can hope that the people he has hurt have forgiven him, and *still know* that the consequences are going to be with him from now on. It's striking that this man was almost *relieved* to be discovered. He said it was God's will, and indeed it was. Marvin Olasky went on from there to say that:

The punishment Duch is likely to receive should be distinguished from the forgiveness from Cambodian Christians that he may receive—and this Cambodia saga has parallels to the story told in a famous work, Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* (1970).

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Simon Wiesenthal is known very well for having been a leading hunter of Nazi war criminals after the war, but the story he tells in the book *The Sunflower* is about a Nazi that he encountered. The story is spun out by Marvin Olasky in *World* magazine—the issue I cited. Wiesenthal encountered a Nazi; he was summoned in to him. The man's name was Karl Seidl.

Seidl, an SS member, had asked a nurse to bring him a Jew to whom he could confess his sins against other Jews. The dying man, from his bed, grabbed Wiesenthal's hand and confessed to helping to burn down a house in which more than 150 Jews were trapped.

Wiesenthal makes clear Seidl's deep sincerity, quoting him as saying, “I cannot die...without coming clean. This must be my confession. I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him...I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace.”

Seidl begged for forgiveness, but he apparently did not die in peace: Wiesenthal said nothing and walked out. Over the subsequent two years Wiesenthal told fellow camp mates of this incident, each time asking them, “Was my silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi right or wrong?” He stipulated that Seidl sounded truly repentant, truly haunted by his sins. He noted that Seidl died the next day and left Wiesenthal all his possessions—but he refused to take them.

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If you had learned of this from the man, how would you have answered him? Would you have said, “No, you should have forgiven him”, or, “No, you were right in walking out.” I have a feeling your answer might differ based upon whether you are a Jew or a Christian. But...

Wiesenthal argued that only the victims can truly forgive their perpetrators: The dead cannot offer forgiveness and co-religionists cannot take their place. “Forgetting is something that time alone takes care of, but forgiveness is an act of volition, and only the sufferer is qualified to make the decision,” he wrote.

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And, you know, there’s a great deal of sense in that. How can *I* forgive a man for something he *didn’t do to me*, but to someone else?

Wiesenthal did not forget and did not forgive. One of fewer than 34 survivors out of 149,000 prisoners originally in that camp—89 members of his extended family perished in the Holocaust—he ferreted out information that led to the arrest of over 1,000 Nazi war criminals. He died in 2005 at the age of 96.

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Was he right? Is it true that no one can take the place of either perpetrators or the victims? Is forgiveness an act of volition that *only the sufferer* is qualified to make? And can one do penance for another person who has sinned?

I think about that every time I hear a black activist, for example, inveighing against slavery. He was never a slave, and I never owned a slave. Do I owe *him* an apology? I don’t think so. I don’t think our generation can offer apologies to a previous generation of people for crimes that were done decades, centuries before our time. It’s history. We need to look at it. We need to understand it. We can regret it. We can wish it never had happened, and we can do our best to try to right any wrongs that have been done; but apologize? We can’t offer forgiveness. We can’t.

But I want to return to those two statements of Jesus: What is it that is so different about them? Mark 11, remember, said this:

Mark 11

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²⁴ Therefore I say to you, What things soever you desire, when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you shall have them.

²⁵ And when you stand praying, forgive, if you have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

²⁶ But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.

The implication is that God *may not* if you’re not willing to forgive. In this case, I the prayor have something against somebody else. I have been sinned against. But what about Matthew’s example? It was another occasion, another time, and Jesus says:

Matthew 5

KJ2000

²³ Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you;

²⁴ Leave there your gift before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Now, in this case, it isn't that I have something against my brother; he has something against *me*, and I know it. Therefore, it's up to *me* to be the agent of reconciliation. I've sinned against him; there's something I can *go and do*; and I can apologize, I can ask for forgiveness, I can repent.

And then we are left with a situation we face all too often: We bear a grudge, we *indulge* our hatred, and we find forgiveness of the other person just too hard. Say what you will about Catholics and the Pope, but when Pope John Paul II was shot in an assassination attempt—after he had recovered—he went to see the man who shot him in prison and forgave him. The media, as far as I know, carried no information to the effect that the man had repented; but if John Paul took Jesus seriously, how could he do otherwise? He *had* to forgive. But even though the assassin was forgiven, he stayed in prison. No one suggested he should not bear the *consequences* of his actions.

Now here's my question: Who benefited by this action by Pope John Paul? If you stand praying, and you come to that part of the Lord's Prayer [**Matthew 6, Luke 11**] that says, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us", how can you not forgive at that point? You have to let it go, *irrespective* of the person's repentance or non-repentance. For one thing, you have *no way of knowing* whether he has repented or not; and even if he *appears* to have, maybe he hasn't. Maybe it's all superficial. And if you *can* forgive him, though, who benefits?

Now, I think...I know how hard this can be, but think about this: How hard was it for God to forgive you? Do you think this is something he could just toss off? You're sorry, you've sinned, you've done grievously and you say so; and God says, "Oh, that's okay. Forget about it." Well, we know about John 3:16. It's cited so often in Christian circles most of us have it memorized just from *hearing* it so many times.

John 3

AKJV

¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

¹⁷ For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

Okay, we know that; and we have to realize that the forgiveness that comes our way could not be accomplished without what the son went through. There's a hymn...I've seen it in most hymnals, but I have rarely heard it sung in services. The hymn is *Go to Dark Gethsemane*. It begins:

Go to dark Gethsemane,
You that feel the tempter's power;
Your Redeemer's conflict see,
Watch with Him one bitter hour:
Turn not from His griefs away,
Learn of Jesus Christ to pray.

See him at the judgment-hall,
Beaten, bound, revil'd, arraign'd:
Oh, the wormwood and the gall!
Oh, the pangs His soul sustain'd!
Shun not suff'ring, shame, or loss:
Learn of Christ to bear the cross.

Calv'ry's mournful mountain climb;
There, adoring at His feet,
Mark that miracle of time,

God's own sacrifice complete:
"It is finished!" hear Him cry;
Learn of Jesus Christ to die.

James Montgomery - Go to Dark Gethsemane

Unless you can go in your mind to Gethsemane and understand what Jesus was going through, you may never really understand the obligation he laid on us to forgive others. In that long night, he knew all too well what lay ahead. He feared what was coming and he sweat blood praying it through [**Luke 22:44**]. And not the least of what he suffered was the awareness of a coming separation from his Father. It was a separation that had to happen, you know, because he was about to take all our sins upon him and become a curse for us [**Galatians 3:13**]; and consequently God would *have to* turn away from him. In that long night, he was betrayed by a friend; he was *tormented* by adversaries; he was lied about by false witnesses; he was *beaten, humiliated, spit on*. He carried his cross the next day as far as he could, and then he was *nailed* to it by Roman soldiers driving the nails through his hands and his feet. And among the last things that he had to say was:

Luke 23

AKJV

³⁴ [...] Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. [...]

It's intriguing that the centurion who's in charge of this gang...

Matthew 27

AKJV

⁵⁴ [...] and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God.

And they *knew* what they had done. And they heard his words, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing." So, how hard *was it* for God to forgive you? And do you think you will get much sympathy from God when you complain about how hard it is to forgive those who have harmed you? After all, the beneficiary of this forgiveness is who? It's you.

There's an odd thing about all this that may not be considered as often as it should be: Until you forgive the person, God may not be able to do much with him. He may not be able to touch his life and turn him around as long as *you* are holding a grudge. See, when you forgive him and you ask God to forgive him, you may set in motion a chain of events that will end in either the person's abject repentance or his judgment...or both. When I look at the picture of Comrade Duch in the magazine, I felt *pity* for the little man (he was a very small, frail, little fellow); and it's hard to imagine the *torment* in the soul of a man who has practiced such *deep and profound evil*, and who at last found himself in the presence of Christ, and came to *understand what he had done*. All the years when he was doing those killings, his heart was hardened, he thought he was doing the right thing...who knows what went through his mind during that time, but he was *blinded* to it—he was carried along by the *system* of which he was a part. Now, suddenly, and for the rest of his life and for all eternity, he is a man who killed people in their thousands like so many *chickens*. He *tortured* people, and he *knows it*, and he in his dreams at night can probably hear the screams of those people. He now stands as a witness of the power of God to heal evil *and* of the justice of God that requires consequences for that evil. There's a passage I often cite—Jeremiah chapter 9, verse 23:

Jeremiah 9

KJ2000

²³ Thus says the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches:

²⁴ But let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, says the LORD.

Now, I don't know why it is, but so often people—in reading through the Old Testament, reading the works of God—they judge God as not being a good God because of certain things that he does. The problem is, you're not going to know God unless you know three things about him: his loving-kindness; his righteousness, yes; but also his *judgment*. One of the great classics of the judgment of God emerges from the Exodus story. Why did God have to kill the firstborn of all the Egyptians? Why all these plagues? Isn't God all-powerful; couldn't he have delivered the Israelites without killing all those babies? Well, in the first place, they weren't all babies; they were the firstborn in every family regardless of age. In most societies, the firstborn is the heir and the successor. In the Exodus, the entire heritage of Egypt was wiped out. But the story does not begin with the Exodus; it begins with the enslavement of the Israelites and the killing off of *all* the male babies of the Israelites. Not the firstborn, *all of them*. They took the little fellows by their feet and by their ankles, and swung them around their head, and threw them into the Nile River to the crocodiles. And *all* of Egypt was involved in it [**Exodus 1:22**].

Now, if God says he loves judgment, if he reveals himself as a God of justice, how could he be a God of justice if *no price was paid for that*? So when you are in prayer, and God reminds you of your unforgiving spirit (and he will), you must deal with it right there, right then. You have neither the right nor the ability to judge the other person's repentance for the evil that he has done. He can say he's repented and not changed his heart one little bit. You don't know that. He may have repented at some other place, at some other time, and you don't know that he has repented. You don't know. You *can't* know. But God does, and he will repay. Paul wrote to the Romans—chapter 12, verse 19:

Romans 12

KJ2000

¹⁹ Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.

²⁰ Therefore if your enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts, give him drink: for in so doing you shall heap coals of fire on his head.

²¹ Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

And *don't* complain about how hard it is.

Until next time, I'm Ronald Dart.

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