

“I Forgive Him”: The Potency of Forgiveness

By Jim Elliff



The wife of Charlie Kirk, Erika, said with much emotion that she forgives her husband's assassin. “I forgive him” were words which powerfully impacted the thousands in the arena and millions streaming during the memorial service for her husband.

She meant, surely, that she would not personally avenge herself of her husband's blood. That would be God's business. Likely the following passage of Scripture was in her mind:

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17-21 ESV)

I am sure that she also knew that she could not do what the government was designed by God to do — bring criminals to justice.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. ... But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. (Romans 13:1-4)

Erika was speaking for herself. One might make the case that you cannot forgive someone if they do not ask for it. I doubt that she was blind to that either. But to have love, you have to deal with it ahead of time. She had already forgiven in her heart, regardless of whether he would ask or not.

This was a remarkable sentence. At the memorial, as she quietly and emotionally spoke the words, “I forgive him,” it rolled over the crowd like a tsunami. The story of the hundred-thousand hearing it in the room, and millions streaming it, was palpable and the appreciation and love for her and for Jesus was overwhelming. Her example will live on.

Just now, while I am writing this at a coffeeshop, a young lady overhearing a discussion I was having with a new acquaintance told me that she came to the coffeeshop to order a mint tea (like Charlie drank) and to say, “I am Charlie,” the way of identifying with Kirk and this powerful wave of interest in Christ seen prominently in Erika's forgiveness. She was impacted as so many were with the power of forgiveness. She told me so. I could see that some kind of transformation was happening to this young lady. We talked about Christ, her need, his promise. I recommended a church I know in her town. I doubt she will ever be the same. Forgiveness makes its imprint.

How powerful is your forgiveness of others? You will not know the full impact until the next world. Your child will see it however, and may carry it through his or her life. Your work associates or college friends can see the difference in you, but they may never tell you. But do not underestimate its power.

Corrie Ten Boom suffered as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. Some time later, she encountered a former prison guard that she recognized. He did not remember her. But she heard him say that since those days, he had become a Christian and had been forgiven of his awful sins. Here is something of her encounter:

“Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then. And having thus learned to forgive in this hardest of situations, I never again had difficulty in forgiving: I wish I could say it! I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. *But they didn't.* If there's one thing I've learned at 80 years of age, it's that I can't store up good feelings and behavior — but only draw them fresh from God each day.

There is a great lesson in this experience. You too can forgive, from the heart.

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