

When You Believe in God but Won't Forgive

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we continue in our series based on the book, The Christian Atheist, which is based on this idea that it's possible to say that we believe in God, but live as though God didn't exist.

And our theme today is a particularly challenging one, when we claim to believe in God, but won't forgive others. The founder of the organisation Care for the Family, Rob Parsons, is a brilliant storyteller.

He's just this year published a book, a collection of his favourite stories that he tells. One of my favourites is a story that he tells of how he was on holiday with his family, and his son was in his early teens.

And his son was pleading with him to take him fishing. They had never been fishing before. There was a lake there, and they could see lots of very expert-looking fishermen.

He pleaded and pleaded and pleaded, and in the end, Rob Parsons said that he said to his son, all right, let's go, but we haven't got any equipment, we'll have to improvise. So they found the straightest stick that they could find, and a piece of string and a safety pin, and I don't know what they did for bait, but they set off.

[1 : 2 3] And they realised that it wasn't that long before the other fishermen, who had all the proper gear, were laughing. Well, they stood there, sat there, waited and waited and waited, and were catching nothing, and were getting quite fed up of these other fishermen laughing at them.

So, anyway, Rob Parsons said he came up with a plan, and he said to his son that there's a shop over there where they actually sell fish. Not living ones, those that have already been caught.

Pretty big ones, actually. He said, if I just go and buy one, I'm sure that we can somehow fake it. So, his son, to his surprise, actually agreed to this plan.

So he went off, and he bought the biggest fish, I don't know what type it was, but the biggest, most beautiful looking fish that he could find. Somehow smuggled it back to where his son was, and as discreetly as they were able to, he got the safety pin and fixed this fish to the end of the piece of string, and somehow tried to sort of nudge it out into the water, and then waited and pretended to be fishing properly, until there were as many people sort of in the area as possible to be able to see it.

And then he gave his son a nudge and said, right, now. So they then pulled this fish out of the water, and it swung across the water and back to where they were standing.

[2 : 5 5] And people started to laugh even more. And those that were gathering had stopped to watch what was going on, just walked away. And Rob Parson said he turned around and saw his own son was collapsed on the floor on his back, reeling in laughter.

He said to his son, what's so funny? He said, well, two things, Dad. Firstly, you could have at least made some effort to pretend that the fish was already dead.

You could have just sort of moved the string a little bit, but not just pulled it out like that. But secondly, you kind of gave the game away when you put the safety pin through the fish's tail.

Giving the game away. Letting on what's really going on inside. That's what this whole series, The Christian Atheist, is about.

You see, it's one thing for us to sort of put on the outward signs of what it is to be a Christian believer. It's one thing for us to come to church, to be part of church activity, to do Christianity outwardly.

[4 : 10] And yet, that doesn't necessarily correspond exactly with what is going on on the inside of us. And that's why this is a really, really challenging series.

It's a really, the book on which it's based, is a really challenging read. Because it really brings us face to face with many of the core things that we claim to believe as Christians, that we purport to be about.

And forgiveness is surely one of the biggest challenges. You see, we claim to stand for forgiveness. The gospel is about forgiveness.

It's about the fact that each one of us, whatever we have done, have been forgiven by God. And therefore, we are called, we are invited, we are challenged to be a people of forgiveness.

To forgive others as we have been forgiven. And yet, I know that you know what I'm talking about when I say that that can be really hard.

[5 : 10] Really hard. Let's just get this out on the table a little bit more. Let's just think about why forgiving people is such a tough challenge, or can be such a difficult thing to do.

You see, I think one of the reasons why forgiving people can be so difficult is because there's something deep inside of us that tells us instinctively that somehow there's something right about not forgiving somebody.

There's something deep within us. When we're introduced to that theme of forgiveness, not in the abstract sense, but when we think of that particular person, that I've got to be careful how I point here, it's a hypothetical point, okay, that that particular person out there that has offended us, that, yes, we've somehow got to forgive what they've done.

That means we've got to let go of it. Because something tells us that we're somehow morally right to withhold that forgiveness.

To forgive that person when they've done something wrong seems to go against the fabric with which the moral universe is constructed. Now, it's perhaps a bit different if there's some sense of remorse in that person.

[6 : 37] If they're sorry about what they've done and they own what they've done, then it may still be hard work, but it probably makes a lot of difference.

But I'm thinking about those situations when somebody's done something wrong and they won't accept it. And they will not own it in any way whatsoever. There is zero remorse. There's something in those situations that somehow makes us feel inwardly that we would be doing something wrong if we were to just sort of let that go.

Because it would seem to be a denial of the reality of what they have done. And so something deep inside of us is just telling us, but, you know, you ought not really to let that go.

But also, I think the other thing that can make forgiveness so challenging and so difficult is that it might not be just us that has been offended by the actions of the other person.

For example, it may not be us that's been wronged at all. It might be somebody else that we know that has been on the receiving end of what that person has done wrong. And so for us to forgive them can present that question, well, what right have I got to forgive that person for what they've done to that other person?

[7 : 57] I don't have the right to give that gift of forgiveness to them. Who am I to forgive them? So it's hard and it's tough.

And before we go any further, I want to say that God's word recognises this and it understands it. See, like many things that we read about in the Bible, we need to remember that the whole reason why it is in the Bible is because it is a difficult thing.

So, when we read of Jesus' teaching which commands us to forgive others, when we read of Paul's writing here in Ephesians which talks of the importance of forgiveness, we need to remember that there's a reason why it's there.

If there were no issues, if forgiveness was easy, then why would God ever bother to put it in the Bible? The easy stuff ain't there because it doesn't need to be there.

You don't need to be told the stuff that you just do automatically. The only stuff we do need to be told is precisely that stuff because it is so difficult. So when we read challenging verses in Scripture, don't be put off by it.

[9 : 08] Don't be made to feel small by it. Remember, it's not because there's something weird or unusual about you that finds it's difficult. The reason it's there is it's God's word for the whole of the human race, throughout the whole of history, which means the issues that it talks about very often affect absolutely every single human being that has ever lived.

So yes, it's difficult. Yes, it's challenging. And that is why it's there because it is so hard and it's so challenging. So where do we go with it then?

Well, first thing I want to say, and it has to do with this sense that inside of us we may feel deeply that there's something right about holding on to what's been done that we don't want to let go of.

Let's remember that the command to forgive does not sidestep the issue that wrong has been done. forgiveness is not about downplaying the reality of what's been done wrong.

It's not about sweeping it under the carpet. It's not about denying the gravity of the hurt that has taken place. In Ephesians chapter 4, which we just read, in verse 26, it says, in your anger do not sin.

[10 : 28] Now just think about what Paul might be saying there. He's saying something that's happened to you that has made you angry, don't sin in your anger.

In other words, there are two separate entities there. There's the anger and there's the sin. And what Paul is saying that we need to be careful of is the sin.

The anger itself is not inherently sinful. In other words, there is such a thing as feeling angry, as being angry, but is not sinful.

If you've been the receiving end of something and you find it hard to forgive and you're feeling angry, that itself is not wrong. Which is why Paul says, in your anger do not sin.

The question is not whether we feel angry or not, the question is what do we do with that anger? What takes place with that anger? Because there is such a thing as anger that is not sinful.

[11 : 36] So let's just stay with this because this is so important. The danger is that we misunderstand what forgiveness is about. Forgiveness is not about changing the objectivity of the wrong that has taken place.

One of my favourite, probably in fact, if I was asked to say, which part of scripture do I feel sums up the Christian gospel more than anything else, I would go to Luke chapter 15 and especially the story that Jesus tells, as recorded in Luke 15, of the prodigal son.

The story where he says there's two sons, one of them turns to his father and says, Dad, I want my share of my inheritance now.

One day you're not going to be here. I'd like my half of it now. His father sells half of what he has and he gives it to his son.

And he goes off and he blows it on reckless living. Eventually, that son has spent everything and he's in a place of desperation. He has nothing left. His friends have deserted him.

[12 : 41] And a turning point comes where he decides he's going to go back to his father and he's going to plead for forgiveness and he's going to ask him to be accepted back not as a son but at least taken on as a paid worker.

So he rehearses his speech. He goes back to his father. He goes back to his father and the story is told that while he was still a long way off from home, the father who's been looking out for him sees him returning across the fields.

He runs out to him, he throws his arms around him and he gives instructions for a party to be thrown because this son who was lost has come back home.

He is found, he is saved, he is rescued. It's a brilliant story which talks of how the loving father welcomes every single one of us back home. But the story doesn't end there, does it?

There's more to it and I think it's there for a reason because one of the things about that story that I love so much is the elder brother. The older brother who's been home all this time faithfully working with his dad.

[13 : 53] Now don't misunderstand it, if you ever tend to think well I'm that older brother, well there's a bit of both brothers in all of us because the gospel is for all of us. We all need to come home to the father because we all go wrong at some point.

But there's a lot of that older brother in all of us I think. Where we can relate to that experience. Well hang on a second because the story goes that the older brother goes up to his dad and he says look I've been faithful to you for years and yet you've never thrown a feast in my honour yet this son of yours, this other son who's taken it all and squandered it all comes back and you throw a great big party.

What's going on dad? It's not fair. I can relate to that can't you? He's speaking a lot of sense. He's angry. Now I might be reading too much in, I don't know, I'm going to take the risk.

But I love it when the father goes up to the son, puts his arm around him and he says son, he doesn't say half of what I have here will one day be yours.

He says son, everything I have is yours. Think about that. Everything that's left is still his.

[15 : 16] He's not going to do that thing where he breaks up what is left and carves off half again to his brother. No, nothing has changed as far as the objectivity of the situation is concerned.

The other son has not lost his inheritance. Now, as I say, I might be reading in more than is there, but why is that bit of the story there at all if it's not to say something important to us?

And I think that what important message is in that is that the message of God's forgiveness and grace does not undermine or undercut the objectivity of wrong that has been done.

So if we're ever tempted to feel that there's something inwardly wrong about forgiving somebody because to do so would be to sort of upset the moral equilibrium of the universe, that there's actually something inherently intrinsically bad about giving forgiveness because it undercuts the gravity of what's being done.

Well, we don't find that in scripture. scripture doesn't, when it talks about forgiveness and grace and mercy, does not deny the reality of what has been done wrong. It gives us a fresh start.

[16 : 38] Now, the issue of where the offender, the person that has upset you, the issue of where they are at with God and where they stand with God, well, that's between them and God.

It's none of your business, it's none of my business, it's their business. But what is your business is the grip that unforgiveness can have on you.

You see, when we refuse to let go of something, when we hold on to it, it eats away at us inwardly.

And resentment and pain and bitterness leads to our own self-destruction. There is a Chinese proverb that says, he who plots revenge on another person should dig two grapes.

You see, if we refuse to let go, if we refuse to even attempt to let go, if we hold that sense of resentment to us, it won't just stay the same size.

[17 : 55] It will linger. And as it lingers, it will grow. And I can guarantee you this, the one person that will suffer more than anybody else through refusing to forgive will be the person that refuses to forgive.

It hurts, it lingers, it grows, it hurts, it lingers, it grows some more. It hurts, it lingers, it grows even more.

And so with it, all of the pain and the self-destruction that goes with it. You see, this call, this challenge to forgive is actually for our own benefit.

God knows the damage that we do ourselves when we refuse to even try to let go of the hurt that others have done to us. Christian Corrie ten room painted a very, very helpful picture, I think, of what this is about.

Because forgiveness, forgiveness can be a process. Sometimes God can just step in and change things around inside us to the extent that we're able somehow to just immediately let go of something.

[19 : 09] But more often than not, I would suggest that perhaps it's more of a process. forgiveness may be that the pain hasn't kind of gone straight away, but it's rather about agreeing to resolve to that process whereby we commit ourselves and say, okay, I'm going to try to forget this person.

I'm going to try to forgive this person. I'm going to embark on that journey, on that process of letting go. Back to this picture of Corrie Ten Boones.

She said, I want you to imagine that you walk into an old church and there's hardly anybody in there, but you hear a bell being rung and as you walk in, you see in the porchway, there's a rope hanging down from the bell tower and there's a man there who's pulling on this bell, making it clang.

You walk into the church and there's actually nobody else in there at all. You make your way to the front and you sit down and all you can hear is the sound of the bell clanging away.

After a few moments you hear footsteps coming up the aisle and they're footsteps of somebody who then turns and walks in front of you and sits down beside you.

[20 : 36] You turn, you face them and you see that it's the person that was ringing the bell. Yet the bell is still ringing. You can still hear it. And you think to yourself, how on earth can that bell still be ringing?

Because the bell ringer is right here. And so you turn around and you see what has happened. The bell ringer has let go of that rope.

The bell hasn't stopped because it's still swinging. ringing. You sit and you wait for a very, very, very long time. And as you wait, so the swinging slows down.

The momentum is lost. The sound quietens out. The sounds of the bell become less frequent until eventually it fades completely.

To the extent that it's hard to actually pinpoint the exact moment in time where the bell stopped making a sound. Forgiveness, says Corey Ten Boom, works rather like that.

[21 : 58] That it can be a process, but in order for that process to start, you've got to let go of the rope. And it won't be immediately obvious, perhaps, at first, but in time it will.

And with God's help and with God's strength, over the course of time, that pain, that bitterness, that resentment, gradually fades to the extent that perhaps we may not be able to tell exactly what point in time it stops completely, but eventually it will.

But in order for it to happen, we've just got to do the one thing, let go. through a hand, he can get what