

Forgiveness, Punishment, and Erika Kirk

“That man . . . that young man . . .”

Perhaps you watched it, or heard someone referring to it. Erika Kirk’s speech at her husband’s memorial was profound and memorable. But there was a section of it that received the most attention:

“My husband Charlie . . . he wanted to save young men, just like the one who took his life.” (pause as she looks up, then whispers) “That young man . . .” (more resolute now) “That young man . . . on the cross, our Savior said, ‘Forgive them, for they not know what they do.’ That man, that young man . . . I forgive him (tears now, then a sob) I forgive him because it was what Christ did, and is what Charlie would have done.”

I have watched this more than once, and more than a few people have asked me about Erika’s incredible act of forgiveness. “Could I do this?” I’ve asked myself. Would I be willing? Let us consider what Erika Kirk is drawing from, that is, the scene from the cross, where Jesus says from His throne of torture and glory the words cited above. Looking at the Scriptures, we can then seek to apply their meaning and consider our Lord’s words over and against God’s desire for justice, that evil is punished in this world. Then, we consider a hypothetical happening that shows us just how radical the forgiveness of Christ actually is.

The Words from the Cross: Luke 23:34

The words Mrs. Kirk cited are from St. Luke. They are one of seven statements the Gospels record Jesus saying from the cross. This is one of the earlier ones in the crucifixion. I give the fuller context:

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.” (Luke 23:32-38, ESV)

Jesus intercedes to His Father to forgive them. A note on the text itself from the Greek. The verb “said” is an imperfect, which may be rendered in several ways. One is as an ongoing (durative) statement, which could be translated, “Jesus *kept on saying* . . .” The point—this may not be a punctiliar statement but *an ongoing prayer*. Jesus keeps on interceding and asking His Father to offer forgiveness.

This raises a question: forgiveness for whom? Who is the “them”? If I may put it this way, who was Jesus looking at or thinking about? The soldiers who put Him on the cross? The Jewish leaders who were scoffing at him? Pontius Pilate who gave the order? The Sanhedrin who condemned Him as deserving death? His disciples for leaving Him? Judas and Peter? The two thieves on the cross, whom Mark tells us also reviled Jesus (Mark 15:32b)? Who are the referents of this pronoun? For whom is Jesus asking forgiveness?

The key is revealed in the clause, “For they know not what they do.” We might think of the soldiers who were just following orders, or Pilate, who had no real idea Who Jesus was. But when we read the lead-up to the crucifixion, it is clear that the disciples also lacked a clear understanding of Jesus until the resurrection. The Jewish leaders, who had the Scriptures, failed to recognize the fulfillment of the promises and prophecy given in them. The crowds who saw many of the things that Jesus did and said, yet failed to believe in Him. The clause, instead of narrowing things down, serves *to broaden the referent out*. For “they know not what they do” refers to all, to any, who have rejected Jesus. It refers to all of sinful, fallen humanity.

In Acts chapter two, Peter gives the first sermon of the Christian Church. He speaks boldly about the resurrected Christ, the Son of David, Son of God, Who fulfilled all the promises God had made to save His people. He concludes this sermon with the following: Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus *whom you crucified*. The “you” is plural, referring to the ones who put Jesus on the cross. But undoubtedly many, if not most of the Jews there that day had nothing to do with the crucifixion event. Most were from the surrounding nations from the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern area! What this shows is that those who are guilty of putting Jesus on the cross is all people. *It is us*.

Jesus, then, continually pleads to the Father from His cross, that forgiveness is given to all the ones who put Him there, for all those who have sinned, knowingly or unknowingly, who have been separated from the Father due to sin. His plea for forgiveness points not just to the immediate onlookers, or those who had abandoned Him, but those who have inherited the sin of Adam. Jesus asks for this forgiveness as He Himself is paying the ransom price for all sin, for all people, of every age, ethnicity, status, and station of life. Mrs. Kirk’s words then lead us to consider that the forgiveness of Jesus is truly for all people, for Jesus died for all people, even if they hate Him and His followers. But her words were personal, that is, she said she forgives “that young man” who took Charlie’s life. In what way is this forgiveness to be understood and applied?

The Meaning of Forgiveness and Its Application

It’s important that we have a good definition of forgiveness and how it is to be applied in the Christian life. To forgive is to remove something, to pardon, to cancel, *to remit a debt*. We have talked of the forgiveness that Jesus won on the cross. To remove the debt of sin is something only God does in Christ. So, Erika’s forgiveness does not square that young man with God. *Only faith in Christ can do that*. What she was doing, what is so powerful, is that she is applying Jesus’

own remittance, His own willingness to remove guilt, to her own situation. For she knows nothing about the heart of the young man who killed her husband; she knows nothing of the potential future of his standing before the Judge. She knows what he reportedly did and why. Mrs. Kirk is not “playing God,” but being a disciple of Jesus.

Jesus says repeatedly that we are to forgive those who sin against us. In Matthew 18:15-20, He actually lays out a sort of “process” for seeking restoration with a brother who sins against us. This could properly be seen to apply to those *within the Church*. Peter seeks to clarify how often we are to do this—seven times? Jesus says, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy seven times.” To withhold forgiveness of a brother who seeks restoration can lead to a separation between God and us, “of every one of you who does not forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matt 18:35) Surely this does not apply to someone who does not believe in or follow Jesus? In the prayer our Lord has taught us, we are to clearly pray: *forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us*. Jesus puts a finer point on it, “For if you forgive their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matt 6:14-15) Notice here that Jesus is not making the distinction of brother and “non” brother.

This means that we are to have the heart to forgive those who sin against us, and actually live it out. That is, we are to remove, remit or pardon the other person, even if they do not seek it. Even if they don’t believe in Jesus. And this is where this teaching of Jesus is hard. Because, in the case of Erika Kirk, we are not talking of someone who cut her off in traffic, or maliciously gossiped about her online. This young man murdered her husband in cold blood. But Erika sought and seeks to follow her Lord’s example and her Lord’s commands. It took incredible strength to publicly do this; this was evident in her body language, the pacing of her words, and facial expressions. But she felt as a Christian that she had no choice but to forgive this young man, the way her Lord forgives her. She loves (not hates) because He first loved her.

Does this mean that she and this young man are now fine? That she is no longer angry and deeply grieving and will forget what happened that fateful day? Of course not. This is where there is a nuance in forgiving someone (letting sin go) and human relationships. Between man and God, true forgiveness is won and given by only God Himself. He keeps both sides. He pays for sin, and gives us His free grace and mercy. We receive this mercy by faith. We trust in God’s promises and work in Jesus. We might call this God’s “vertical” forgiveness. We then are to extend that mercy out to those who sin against us. Call this “horizontal” forgiveness. But between person to person, reconciliation *can only truly happen if both parties desire it*. So, relationships only get repaired if sin is confessed and contrition shown, and both seek to be restored. This (as far as I know) is not the case between Erika Kirk and the young man who murdered her husband. To my knowledge, he is not sorry and does not seek reconciliation. So, Erika’s forgiveness of him does not simply wipe out the chasm that stands between them. There can be no true reconciliation unless he were to seek it—truly sorry for his grievous sin and truly, trusting in the mercy of Jesus, seeking to be restored to her.

We know this from our own lives. There are many times when people wrong us, sin against us, and perhaps over time, we forgive them—we stop holding it against them and let that sin go from our heart. We pray that God would forgive them, that is, on account of Jesus, they would be reconciled to Him and that they might receive His mercy. For our part, we do not want to be consumed with hatred and desire vengeance. We forgive them, let their sin go, in part that anger and bitterness not eat us alive. But we also know that many times in human relationships (which are highly complex and sin-laden), we cannot truly be restored to the other person unless they too desire it. This takes an act of the Spirit to convict the heart, soften the resolve and remove the hate that gets built up. It is the work of the Spirit that leads a person to confess their sin so that we may truly be reconciled. We know that many times, this human reconciliation never comes. And we live with regret and sorrow over things that have been said and done, knowing we have no power to truly be restored if the other party has no desire for it. In this case, forgiveness only can happen if both parties are willing to make amends and be reconciled in the name of Jesus.

Earthly Punishment for Sin

Let's say that "vertical" and "horizontal" forgiveness happens—God forgives based on Jesus' death and resurrection and the human relationship is repaired. Does this mean that there is to be no punishment for the sin, no earthly or civil consequence for what someone has done? This is where we must make a distinction between God's will for eternal salvation for all people, and God's will that His perfect justice happen on earth. But God very often doesn't give that duty—corporate and civil punishment—to the victim of a crime. He raises up authorities on earth to "wield the sword of justice."

In an interview with the NY Times, given a few days before the memorial, Mrs. Kirk said, "I've had so many people ask, 'Do you feel anger toward this man? Like, do you want to seek the death penalty?' I'll be honest. I told our lawyer, I want the government to decide this. I do not want that man's blood on my ledger." Erika Kirk forgave that young man. She does not want his blood on her hands, meaning, it's not for her to decide his just punishment. But God appoints authorities to administer His justice. We see this throughout the Bible. Sometimes flawed men, even wicked ones, men who don't believe in God, are appointed that justice might be done.

St. Paul gives us the best articulation of this in the New Testament. I cite it in length:

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. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. 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. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. (Rom 13:1-5)

Note well that Paul speaks of the Roman Emperor here . . . the same “office” that will put him to death a decade or so later. He speaks of the ideal role of the government—*to be a terror to bad conduct, an avenger of God’s wrath*. This means that we make a distinction between forgiveness and just punishment for earthly sin. In other words, *Erika Kirk is not calling for the release of this young man, even as she forgives him*. For there are some sins that cannot be easily atoned for (humanly speaking) and leave behind consequences. Sometimes these consequences are making restitution through time or money, other times the just consequences involve the taking of a life. It may mean a police officer draws and fires his weapon on a man who is intent on killing innocent people (as we saw this past Sunday in Michigan). Other times it may be a special forces team thwarting a terrorist plot, the goal of which is to kill thousands. Yet other times, it may be the execution of one convicted of murder of a defenseless man in a crowd of thousands. But God requires that earthly punishment be made justly, that His creation operates according to His will and not ours. For our God is a God of order and not of chaos. He is a God of peace, and not mayhem. Thy will be done, O Lord, on earth as it is in heaven.

Most everyone knows the story of the thief on the cross who rebukes the other thief reviling Jesus, then turns to Jesus and says, “Remember me, when you come into your kingdom.” And we know what Jesus says—*today, you will be with me in paradise*. Beautiful gospel. That thief turned to his Lord for salvation and received his eternal reward. But notice what does *not* happen. Jesus does not use His divine power to take that man off of his cross (the same divine power Jesus undoubtably had to take Himself down). That thief was there (unlike Jesus) because he was likely guilty of gross earthly crimes, such as murder and insurrection. Jesus, though, doesn’t commute his earthly punishment just because he grants forgiveness to that thief. He gives him His promise, but the punishment was carried out. God’s will was done in two ways. That thief turned to Christ for salvation. Justice was done.

As we know, the execution of God’s order and justice is very often disrupted or not carried out according to His will. We can cite many examples of people not having to pay earthly punishments for things they have done, or people being wrongly punished for crimes they didn’t commit. But the corruption of a good thing does not negate the good thing. The corruption shows we live in a fallen world with fallen institutions that don’t always live up to God’s standard. But St. Peter says, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.” (1 Pet 2:13-15)

The Glorious Hypothetical, the Stark Reality, and the Promise of Christ

At the close, I seek to bring together the threads of the above in a glorious hypothetical. This would, I believe, be God’s will lived out and done, and applied to the murder of Charlie Kirk, the forgiveness granted by his wife, and then God’s perfect justice meted out.

Let us presume that this young man, Tyler Robinson, is indeed guilty of murder. All the evidence seems to suggest this. Let us say that he hears of Erika's forgiveness of him. He is moved by her compassion. His heart softens. He begins to reflect on what he has done. He calls for a chaplain, and truly confesses his sins and pleads for the mercy of Christ. That pastor proclaims to him the forgiveness of Jesus, which was won on the cross for all people. He speaks that Word to that young man. After a time, he feels the weight of guilt remaining, and seeks to speak to Erika Kirk. Remember that she has forgiven him, but he has yet to seek reconciliation with her. Through intermediaries, he arranges to meet with her. During that meeting, he sincerely confesses to her that he has sinned, that God forgives him in His Son, and won't she please accept his plea, that she once more, forgive him? This is different than the forgiveness that she spoke of at the memorial. He is looking to be reconciled *to her*. She now looks at him and says, "Yes, Tyler. I do forgive you. I can never forget what you did, but I don't hold it against you now, because I follow Christ. But I am reconciled to you, and based on your asking, I forgive you in the name of Jesus." Can you imagine something like this happening?

Even if it did, the stark reality is, if convicted and sentenced, this young man would be executed for his crimes. Even if he turned to Christ for mercy, even if he was reconciled with Erika, even if he was at peace because his sins are forgiven (vertically and horizontally) . . . what remains is to suffer a just punishment for this particular earthly, evil act. The promise of Christ is certain and sure. And He gives us so many earthly blessings, so many second chances, so many near misses . . . we all have things we've done that we deeply regret. Many times, we are able to make good to others we've hurt, and pay the price for what we've done. Forgiveness, though, (in certain cases) doesn't negate the need for earthly punishment. That's the stark reality of living with sin and the consequences of it. But the promise of Christ's prayer, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" reverberates down to us. No matter what we've done, Jesus paid for all sin. That payment is received by trusting in His promise.

In the book and movie *Lonesome Dove*, one of the main characters, Jake Spoon, falls in with a band of murderers and horse thieves, meeting them on the trail to Montana. He participates in their heinous crimes. When captured by his old friends Gus McCrae and Woodrow Call, he pleads with them to let him off, "for old times' sake." But Gus is firm. "You know how it works Jake. You ride with an outlaw, you die with an outlaw." Jake is to be hanged with the rest of the bandits. He eventually reconciles with his friends, but the punishment remains. Jake was hanged for his crimes, for crossing a line he couldn't cross back. What stands at the center of this scene is the juxtaposition between forgiveness and punishment. This is how God operates. No matter what we do, His open arms of forgiveness are always extended to us on account of Jesus. At the same time, there are earthly punishments that must be meted out. For that too is the will of God. But the promise remains, and is given to all who grasp it by faith. Let us hope that young man comes to know Jesus and receives His forgiveness.

