

Can You Forgive Michael Vick?

Public reaction to football star Michael Vick's confession and apology for dog fighting has been passionate and polarized. Was he sincere? Or was it just a last resort when cornered by the law, a PR move to help rehabilitate his image and financial future?

The crimes were abhorrent. Underperforming canines were executed by hanging and drowning. This sickening stuff hits many folks in their guts, hard and deep.

He faces legal consequences. But should you and I forgive him?

Genuine Contrition?

Vick says, "Dog fighting is a terrible thing, and I did reject it. I'm upset with myself through this situation I found Jesus and asked him for forgiveness and turned my life over to God."[^{\[1\]}](#)

Smooth but not convincing, cry some. It's just a show. He's a disgusting person and a terrible role model. Off with his head! Others quote English poet Alexander Pope, "To err is human, to forgive divine."

Perhaps time will tell how sincere he was. Some wonder, Michael Vick didn't do anything to me, so *for what* could I forgive him? True, he may not have harmed you personally. But he did violate society's laws and many people's sense of decency. Public figures' actions can have wide social impact. The fact that lots of kids looked up to him compounds the anger many feel when they indicate they could never accept his apology or forgive him for the harm he's done.

Indeed, negative feelings expressed toward Vick sometimes sound visceral, as if the speakers themselves had been injured. Frederic Luskin, former director of the Stanford

Forgiveness Project, says, "Our bodies react as if we're in real danger right now to a story of how someone hurt us seven years ago. You're feeling anger, your heart rhythm changes breathing, gets shallow."[\[2\]](#)

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Consider a wise woman who wrestled with similar feelings. Corrie ten Boom and her Dutch family hid Jews from the Nazis during World War II. For this she endured Ravensbruck, a concentration camp. Her inspiring story became a famous book and film, *The Hiding Place*.

Chilling Memories

In 1947 in a Munich church, she told a German audience that God forgives.[\[3\]](#) When we confess our sins, she explained, God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. After her presentation, she recognized a man approaching her, a guard from Ravensbruck, before whom she had had to walk naked. Chilling memories flooded back.

A fine message, *Fraulein!* said the man. How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea! He extended his hand in greeting.

Corrie recalled, "I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me. . . But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze."

The man continued: "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk.... I was a guard there. But since that time I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well, *Fraulein*." He extended his hand again. "Will you forgive me?"

Forgive Him?

Corrie stood there, unable to forgive. As anger and vengeful thoughts raged inside her, she remembered Jesus' death for this man. Of His executioners He said, "Father, forgive these people, because they don't know what they are doing." {4}

How could she refuse? But she lacked the strength. She silently asked God to forgive her and help her forgive him. As she took his hand, she felt a healing warmth flooding her body. "I forgive you, brother!" she cried, "With all my heart."

And so, Corrie later recalled, "I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on [God's]. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself."

If Corrie could forgive one who did her such harm, should we be willing to consider forgiving a public figure whose actions harm society? Could what Corrie found in faith help manage overwhelming anger and rage?

Will you and I forgive Michael Vick?

Notes

1. Text of Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick's statement, USA Today, August 27, 2007, www.usatoday.com/sports/football/2007-08-27-2672656486_x.htm
2. "Peace Work," Stanford Magazine, Joan O'C. Hamilton, 2001, <http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2001/mayjun/features/forgiveness.html>.
3. Corrie ten Boom, "Death Camp Revisited," Worldwide Challenge, July/August 1994, 35-36.
4. [Luke 23:34](#) NLT.

Mel Gibson's Passion Film Ignites Passions

The storm of controversy surrounding Mel Gibson's film about Jesus death has had many facets. Is the movie anti-Semitic? Too violent for kids? Would Gibsons Jesus get married?

Representatives of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League and the Simon Wiesenthal Center feared provocation of anti-Jewish feelings and violence. Prerelease screenings found warm response from leaders including Vatican officials and Billy Graham. Others remained skeptical.

Much of the controversy centers on two questions about the film and the history it depicts: Were Jewish people responsible for Jesus death? And, if so, are all Jewish people thereby Christ killers? Anti-Semitism's ugly stains make certain fears understandable.

Raised as a Gentile in Miami, I had many Jewish friends. Miamis Jewish population exceeds that of many cities of Israel. My classmates talked of Hebrew school, synagogue, and bar mitzvahs. In school we sang Hanukah songs and Christmas carols. My parents taught and modeled respect and tolerance. Anti-Semitism makes my blood boil.

After finding faith as a university student, I explored concerns about anti-Semitism in biblical accounts of Jesus death. Jesus was Jewish, as were his early followers. Jewish people who opposed him aligned against Jewish people who supported him. This was essentially a Jewish-Jewish conflict. One faction pressured Pilate, a Roman ruler, into executing Jesus.

Jewish leaders did not physically hang him on a cross; Roman executioners did that. But some Jewish people were part of the mix.

Should all Jewish people bear the guilt for Jesus execution? Of course not. Neither should all Germans bear guilt for the Holocaust nor all Christians for racism or anti-Semitism, pedophilia, corruption, or other outrageous acts of Christians. We all bear responsibility for our own decisions.

But there is another facet to the guilt question. After I spoke in a University of Miami anthropology class, one student asked if Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus. Absolutely, I replied. Jews are responsible for Jesus death. And so are Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, atheists and agnostics.

Jesus said he came to help plug people into God, to give his life as a ransom for many. He believed his death would pay the price necessary to provide forgiveness for all who would accept it, becoming a bridge linking them to eternity.

According to this perspective, we – all of us – and our flaws are the reason Jesus went to the cross. Are we guilty of physically executing him? No. Was it because of us that he suffered? By his reasoning, yes.

Gibson's film is significant. Of course, I brought my own biases to the screening. I left impressed with the terrible pain Jesus endured, especially poignant because I believe he endured it for me.

Rembrandt, the famous Dutch artist, painted a memorable depiction of the crucifixion. In it, several people help to raise the cross to which Jesus is nailed. Light emphasizes one particular face among the cross-raisers. The face is Rembrandt's, a self-portrait. The painter believed he himself was part of the reason Jesus died.

Gibson told the Associated Press, "I came to a difficult point in my life and meditating on Christ's sufferings, on his passion, got me through it." The Passion film and story are worth considering and discussing among friends of any faith or of no faith.

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