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.