

TITLE: When I Cannot Forgive

TEXT: Galatians 5:16-18

PREACHED AT: Castine 8-12-21

MAIN POINT: The power of the flesh (I cannot forgive) and the power of the Spirit to help us walk into pain, through pain, and find freedom.

Sermon Series: Forgiveness

INTRODUCTION

1. We begin today with a testimony by Amy Kramer.
2. When I began our series on forgiveness, I mentioned that this topic might touch some of your soul pain. While trying to be sensitive, I cannot always avoid this pain because healing requires removing the infection, in this case, the sin of unforgiveness. If you believe that I was not sensitive, please know this was not my intention. Also, please don't confuse things I say with the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the One who leads you through the pain to healing, and I am just the messenger.
3. I am also aware of the many challenging situations that this message will encounter. For example, what if someone from the tragedy in Florida were listing online? Does that change God's message? No, it does not. Although, of course, these people need exceptional support and may not be ready to hear it nevertheless, at some point, if they want total healing, they too must deal with God's truth about forgiveness. So here is what I am referring to that happened one week ago today.

Police have captured a former United States Marine Corps sharpshooter who allegedly broke into a pair of homes while high on methamphetamine in Tampa, Florida, and killed four people, including a three-month-old baby. "Prior to this morning, this guy was a war hero. He fought for his country in Afghanistan and Iraq," Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd told reporters. "And this morning he's a cold-blooded killer." The suspect, Bryan Riley, 33, had no apparent connection to the victims, but had become increasingly erratic in the weeks leading up to the shooting and told his girlfriend he was speaking directly to God.

Here's what we know about the shooting: What happened? Early on Sunday morning, deputies in Lakeland, Florida heard gunfire and rushed to the scene. When they arrived, they found a truck in flames and a trail of glowsticks leading to a property. There, they reportedly encountered Riley kitted out in camouflage clothing, before he fled inside a home, and officers reported hearing a "woman scream and a baby whimper." Officers and Riley exchanged "dozens if not hundreds" of rounds. A helicopter unit on the scene eventually alerted responders that Riley, now wearing full body armour, was exiting the home to surrender. Unsure if Riley was the lone gunman or had laid traps inside the home, police sent in a remote control robot to clear the scene. Once in custody, Riley, who had been shot during the encounter with officers, was taken to hospital, where police said he tried to take a gun from an officer, after which point he was tied down and medicated.

Who are the victims? Four people were killed in the shooting, including a three-year-old baby, the child's 33-year-old mother and 62-year-old grandmother, as well as a 40-year-old man named Justice Gleason. The family dog, Diogi, was also shot. An 11-year-old girl was also shot multiple times and airlifted to Tampa General Hospital for surgery. She's expected to survive, and was in stable condition on Monday.

Who is the shooter? Riley served in the Marines for four years and was honourably discharged after a 2008 tour in Iraq, a 2009/2010 tour in Afghanistan, and three more years in the reserves. He confessed to being high on methamphetamines during the shooting, according to police. Riley's girlfriend told authorities he had PTSD and had been acting strangely, stockpiling \$1,000

worth of cigars and saying after working security at a church the previous week that he could speak directly with God. “We’re not dealing with a traditional criminal here,” Sheriff Judd said. What we’re dealing with is someone who obviously had mental health issues at least this last week, had PTSD.”

Riley told officers he had committed the shooting “because I’m a sick guy,” and that he wants to “confess to all of it and be sent to jail,” according to police.

He was employed by a company called ESS Global Corporation working as security and a bodyguard, and has a concealed weapon’s licence and no criminal history. He also told deputies he was a “survivalist,” a subculture that prepares for a post-apocalypse.

What was his motive? Riley lives in Brandon, Florida, 45 minutes away from the scene of the shooting, and has no apparent connection to the victims. “The big question that all of us has is, ‘Why?’” State Attorney Brian Haas told The Associated Press. “We will not know today or maybe ever.” The day before the shooting, Riley showed up at the same house, telling those inside he was sent to stop someone named Amber from dying by suicide, even though no one named Amber lived there. Residents threatened to call the police and Riley fled.

What comes next? Riley has been charged with four counts of first degree murder, as well as attempted murder, arson, armed burglary, and shooting into a building. He has been appointed a public defender for legal representation, who did not respond to a request for comment from *The Independent*. He appeared in court on Monday and is being held without bond pending a trial. <https://news.yahoo.com/everything-know-florida-shooting-saw-200204459.html>

4. Because words sometimes cannot fully describe the emotional pain that comes from such evil actions, it is understandable why some claim, “I cannot forgive.” Yet, when we do not forgive, hatred grows, and in some cases, controls our lives, and we live in bondage, not freedom.
 - 4.1. I am currently reading the book titled *The Long Walk*, which tells the story of Slavomir Rawicz, held in a Russian gulag in Siberia. Here is an excerpt of what happens when you do not forgive.
 - 4.1.1. “The great stone fortress prison of Kharkov opened its grim gates to me in April 1940. . . .Here the phenomenal genius of an N.K.V.D. [soviet secret police]major nicknamed The Bull flourished. . . .He took his job as chief interrogator with deadly seriousness. He hated with frightening thoroughness the prisoner who failed to capitulate. He certainly hated me. **And I, even now, would kill him, without compunction and with abounding happiness.**” (Rawicz, Slavomir. *Long Walk* (p. 6). Lyons Press. Kindle Edition.)
5. How we deal with forgiveness has significant consequences for the health of our souls, relationships with others, and life enjoyment.
6. Today, I want to finish our forgiveness series by speaking to persons who believe they cannot forgive.

DISCUSSION

1. Galatians 5:16-18, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”

- 1.1. When the New Testament uses “flesh,” it uses it in at least three distinct ways.
 - 1.1.1. The New Testament uses “flesh” to describe our natural bodies.
 - 1.1.2. The New Testament uses “flesh” to describe our weakness to live out spiritual principles.
 - 1.1.3. The New Testament uses “flesh” to describe our participation in the natural realm.
 - 1.1.4. Jesus described it well when He said, “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Mark 14:38)
2. Because “the flesh is weak,” all followers of Jesus must rely on the Holy Spirit to help us do what naturally we can never do.
 - 2.1. Zechariah 4:6, “Then he said to me, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.”
 - 2.2. John 15:5, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, it is he that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”
 - 2.3. Ephesians 5:18, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.”
3. Corrie Ten Boom shares one of the best life stories I know about the power of the Holy Spirit to help someone forgive what they could never forgive with only human effort. (Cornelia Arnolda Johanna “Corrie” ten Boom (15 April 1892[1] – 15 April 1983) was a Dutch Christian watchmaker and later a writer who worked with her father, Casper ten Boom, her sister Betsie ten Boom and other family members to help many Jewish people escape from the Nazis during the Holocaust in World War II by hiding them in her home. She believed her actions were following the will of God. They were caught, and she was arrested and sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Her most famous book, *The Hiding Place*, is a biography that recounts the story of her family’s efforts and how she found and shared hope in God while she was imprisoned at the concentration camp.)

Corrie was speaking on the subject of forgiveness in Munich, Germany. Following the service, a man approached her. The following is what she shares about that event:

“I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister’s frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath her skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

The place was Ravensbruck, and the man making his way forward had been a guard--one of the most cruel guards. Now he was in front of me with his hand thrust out: ‘A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!’

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take his hand. Of course, he would not remember me; how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? 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.

‘You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,’ he was saying. ‘I was a guard there.’ No, he did not remember me. ‘But since that time,’ he went on, ‘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 from your lips as well. Fraulein,'-- again the hand came out-- 'will you forgive me?'

And I stood there--I whose sins had again and again been forgiven--and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place--could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there--hand held out--but to me, it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it--I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. 'If you do not forgive men their trespasses,' Jesus says, 'neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.'

I knew it not only as a commandment of God but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war, I had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were also able to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and horrible as that.

Yet, still, I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion--I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperatures of the heart. '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 realized it was not my love. I had tried and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Romans 5:5 ' . . . because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us.'" (From *When God Doesn't Make Sense*, pages 239-42)