Forgiving ignorance

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Perhaps it's irreverent to admit it, but we all have a list of sayings we wish Jesus had thought twice about before he uttered them. Of course, we also have a list of sayings for which we are especially glad. Some of Jesus' sayings – like "The poor you have always with you" – might appear on either list, depending on one's political philosophy.

There are two sayings about forgiveness that probably appear on almost every Christian's lists, and we are almost unanimous on which list each belongs.

"But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin" (Mark 3:29).
"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Take the saying about the unforgivable sin (please). Granted, we sometimes want to feel that cursing someone to eternal damnation is perfectly appropriate. You don't have to work with Amnesty International to suppose that people who torture others, especially those who do it gleefully, are doing something for which forgiveness is simply morally inappropriate. Richard Queen, the first hostage freed by Iranians, was said by *Newsweek* to bear surprising few grudges, but he was quoted as saying of that very small minority of his captors who delighted in causing suffering, "There are some that I damn to hell." And at one level we understand that.

Still, we know that some people have repented of incredibly evil deeds and been converted to doing good (slavetrader-turned-hymnwriter John Newton comes to mind). The category of the absolutely unforgivable ignores the fact that people can change, that they have futures as well as pasts, possibilities as well as actualities. Of course Jesus made his remark in response to some scribes who charged that he was the devil's tool, and they certainly were not showing any signs of repentance. But then, unlike the people who crucified Jesus, the scribes were not torturing anybody either; they were simply being very stiffheaded about Jesus' ministry and perversely misinterpreting the source of his power. And if uncharitable misinterpretations and biased perceptions are unforgivable, we are all in trouble.

Is it not the worry about just who is in trouble that leads to the difficulty with the first saying? We have heard about too many deeply religious people who torture themselves to the point of insanity thinking they have committed the unforgivable sin. So we are troubled by this saying of Jesus, perhaps uttered when, once too often, he encountered irrationally stubborn opposition to what was his clearly good work. (In the passages that have Jesus talking about the unforgivable sin, not only are his enemies calling him a tool of the devil, but his friends and relatives are defending him by saying

that he is merely out of his mind. This would put a lot of pressure on a young teacher.) At any rate, this saying is not what we think of when we sing about our Beautiful Savior. Rather, the beauty of our Savior is most typified in the second saying: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Would it not be nice if there were genuine doubt as to whether Jesus in fact uttered the saying about the unforgivable sin? Suppose the saying were found in only one gospel, and suppose that half of the most important, most accurate, and earliest manuscripts of that gospel omitted the saying. Then we might have it both ways. We could use the saying whenever we wanted to show how hard-nosed Christianity can be, but when its implications became problematic or even ugly, we could point out that it might have been injected into the tradition by some well-meaning but theologically short-sighted copier.

Well, one of our two sayings has precisely that ambiguous manuscript status – but it's the wrong one. Many people are surprised to learn that the saying which *The Interpreter's Bible* calls "one of the most typically 'Christian' utterances credited to Jesus in the Gospel tradition," has a somewhat shaky status in that tradition. It is found only in Luke, and roughly half of the most important and earliest manuscripts – the ones we use to establish the authentic text – do not have Jesus saying "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Of course, the question is whether it was left out of some manuscripts or injected into others. The consensus among New Testament scholars seems to be that it is an authentic saying and those manuscripts in which it does not appear left it out incorrectly. Without going into all the arguments, we should notice a few reasons why some copier might have second-guessed the original text and omitted it.

First, notice that Jesus predicates forgiveness on the ignorance of those making the mistake – "Forgive, *for* they know not what they do." Suppose they did know what they were doing; would that make their sin unforgivable? Does this saying collapse the category of forgivable sins into that of honest mistakes? Is Jesus really a Buddhist, teaching that what people need is not salvation from their evil but enlightenment from their ignorance? If knowingly doing what is wrong is not forgivable, if we can be saved only from our ignorant mistakes, then there seems to be little home for any of us, and what little salvation there is would seem to be a matter of insight rather than forgiveness.

Moreover, one can wonder whether the category of ignorance is even compatible with that of forgiveness. If people make what is really an honest mistake, shouldn't they, strictly speaking, be *excused* rather than *forgiven*? One can be a firm believer in original and subsequent sin, and still distinguish perverse sin from honest mistakes. In his autobiography the contemporary English philosopher A. J. Ayer recalls giving a radio talk about the later philosophy of his colleague Ludwig Wittgenstein. He outlined a fairly charitable interpretation of Wittgenstein, an interpretation that was and still is widely accepted. Hearing about the talk Wittgenstein sent Ayer a very angry letter, accusing him of dishonorable motivations and malicious insinuations. Ayer, stunned and

saddened, replied with a letter that carefully explained what he said and why he said it, and pointed out that if he was wrong it was a perfectly honest mistake. It was with very mixed feelings that he read Wittgenstein's new response, which said, in effect, that Ayer's apology was accepted and he was forgiven. Ever the refined Englishman, Ayer let it go at that, but he observes that he thought he had explained and justified, not apologized, and that the most he needed was to be excused, not forgiven.

The point is that, given what forgiveness means – that you are blameworthy – sometimes the only thing worse than not being forgiven for something you are guilty of is to be forgiven for something you are not guilty of. Only a pedant would worry about deciding between "Excuse me" and "Forgive me" after stepping on your toe, but all of us insist on the distinction sometimes. In particular, if you do something that any reasonable person might do in a given situation, then even if 20-20 hindsight reveals an honest mistake, you would rightfully be offended to be told that your *sin* is forgiven. Even if you feel some shame at your innocent mistake, and would like to be excused for it, you may insist that you have not acquired any guilt, and therefore forgiveness is inappropriate.

Related to these conceptual problems is the first question of whom Jesus was asking God to forgive. Was it the Roman soldiers who were the immediate causes of his pain? But to the extent that these were only executioners carrying out their unpleasant duty, they were simply cogs in wheels of injustice, no more guilty of Jesus' death than of the deaths of the two real criminals killed along with Jesus. They could not be condemned, and therefore not forgiven, for mistakes in the earlier judicial process. Of course, if they knew that Jesus was innocent, they were guilty of participating in the unjust execution of an innocent man. But then one could not predicate forgiving them on their ignorance: they would be guilty (and therefore require forgiveness) precisely because of what they knew. Similarly, if they were guilty of torturing Jesus beyond what was required for a legal execution, they knew about that aspect of what they were doing, and therefore couldn't be forgiven for it on the basis that they did not know. Much the same reasoning applies to Pilate and other "rulers of the age" of whom St. Paul says "If they had understood, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8).

So perhaps Jesus was referring to those of his countrymen (the priests, the Pharisees, and so forth) who had condemned him and set up his death. But why this sudden leniency? These people not only made the same terrible misinterpretation of Jesus' work that the earlier scribes had made, they went beyond the misinterpretation and had him tortured and killed for it. The killing itself was something they knew they were doing, so ignorance cannot be the basis of forgiving it. And the misinterpretation that motivated the killing was no less than the misattribution of the spirit motivating Jesus which elicited the earlier warning about the unforgivable sin.

So it is understandable that some early manuscript copier might have decided that our two sayings do not harmonize very well. Since the earlier warning about the unforgivable sin has impeccable manuscript credentials in all three synoptic gospels, I suspect that early in the Christian era some philosophically inclined copier, who preferred

consistency over accuracy, decided to delete the problematic saying found in only one gospel which seemed to contradict the robust saying found in all three.

If so, I think the solution was more drastic than the problem. Recall that so far we have two categories of errors: committing honest and innocent mistakes, which is excusable but not a sin needing forgiveness, and willingly doing what one knows to be wrong, which in wickedness whose possible forgiveness would have to be predicated on something other than ignorance—repentance, for example.

But Jesus' Hebrew view of knowledge and ignorance calls for a third category—rather like what our legal system calls "culpable ignorance." Unlike the Greeks, who thought that knowing something is like passively contemplating what is external to the self, the Hebrews believed the knowledge gained is a function of the will, of what one wants to know as much as of what is "out there" to be known. Therefore, ignorance may not be merely cognitive failure; it sometimes involves guilt because one's desires, one's refusal to revise comfortable prejudices—including prejudices that might undergird one's power, authority, wealth, or world-view—makes one recalcitrant and blind to what one ought, intellectually and morally, know.

I think ignorance involves guilt just when we refuse to be teachable. Unfortunately, unteachability is not restricted to scribes and Pharisees. It's so common we even joke about it. While growing up in Grand Rapids, I heard the saying, "You can always tell the Dutch, but you can't tell them much." I've since seen plaques in Minnesota gift shops applying this saying, without rhyme but with reason, to almost every other nationality. Everyone seems to prefer teaching to being teachable. Some of us even make a profession of it. Granted, a little bit of this closed-minded refusal to be teachable can be an endearing trait that makes people interesting. But a lot of it, or certain types of it, can cause great harm, both to oneself and to others. We end up choosing our interpretations and even our perceptions of other groups and other persons and what they say and do. We see and hear them through the filter of our sometimes comfortable, often self-serving, always deep-seated, but rarely shaken prejudices.

There is a poignant example of this in and essay "Why I Left the Church," by surgeon-writer Richard Selzer. As a young boy, Selzer once visited the high-liturgy St. Peter's Church. Awe-struck at the majestic sacredness of it all, he suddenly noticed a jarring blasphemy—a fly in the holy water. Being a helpful and reverent boy, he cleansed the temple by removing the fly as unobtrusively as possible. But this act was noticed by Father Donahue, who knew that sometimes pious worshipers put coins into the holy water. "What are you doing there?" shouted Father Donahue.

> "There was a fly in the holy water. . . . I took it out," I said, and waited for the gates of Heaven to swing open, for the grateful multitude of the blessed to welcome me in.
>
> "Oh," said Father Donahue, with that long rising note of sarcasm, "a fly is it? Sure, and it's a fly. Anybody can see that. A fly that looks like a *penny*." The last word boomed.
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> I looked again at that which I pinched. It wasn't a penny. It *was* a fly. For the first time, I realized that a person sees only what he wants to see, what he expects to see, what he needs to see" (*Confessions of a Knife*; New York, 1979).

Poor Father Donahue will be remembered for the sort of biased misperception, the guilty ignorance, that infects us all.

I think Jesus believed that it was this kind of ignorance which infected those who condemned him to death. They did not know what they were doing, but it was their own fault for not knowing. Their own prejudices blinded them to what they were really doing.

Notice that if guilty, or culpable, ignorance is forgivable, its forgiveness cannot always be predicated on repentance. It is real ignorance, after all, and sometimes people remain ignorant. I believe it may have been this culpable ignorance that Jesus was asking God to forgive. In other words, one insightful way to understand the saying on the cross is: "Father, forgive them for not knowing what they do." (George Mavrodes suggested this phrasing of my interpretation.)

Thus we should excuse each other for innocent mistakes, forgive each other for wickedness that is repented of, and also forgive those sins committed in culpabl ignorance. Would all this forgiveness turn true Christendom into what Nietzsche scorned: a sick herd of whining incompetents, spinelessly forgiving each other our mutual mediocrity?

I doubt it. For one thing, being too quick to forgive has not been a noticeable problem in Christendom. More important, our central symbol is on the cross, which reminds us not only of forgiveness but also of the cruel suffering that even forgivable ignorance can cause. The cross reminds us that requiring forgiveness is a poor substitute for avoiding the arrogantly unteachable pride which confidently and ignorantly marches into disaster.

And on this point we see the freshness and importance of Paul's imperative in Romans 12 that we be "transformed by the renewing of our minds." (The importance of this passage was brought to my attention by Claude Regan's perceptive article "Perceptual Processes and Christian Commitment," *RJ*, May 1981.) Paul is giving this advice to believers, so he is not simply referring to a one-time conversion; born-again Christians still need a renewing of the mind. Indeed, in 2 Corinthians 4:16, Paul speaks of *daily* renewing. This was a new kind of newness that Paul had in mind, and some scholars think that he coined a new verb to describe the process. Paul saw this renewal as involving all dimensions of a Christian's life, but notice especially that it is a renewal of the *mind*, affecting one's intellect and perceptions. I think Paul is saying that we must strive to be teachable, to be willing to revise our prejudices, remove our mental blocks, and let God's Spirit enable us to perceive things and people in a new way.

The Bible has many startling examples of this. Recall Jonah's renewing of mind concerning Nineveh. It wasn't easy; sometimes the Spirit has to hit us with a two-by-four just to get our attention. Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan is another example of transforming perceptions. Then there is the story of the vision in which God told Peter to eat unclean foods and his resulting new perception of the Gentiles. We should not forget how very difficult it must have been for Peter to be teachable on the issue of selecting food and friends. A lifetime of deep-seated, all-pervasive enculturalization had to be overcome. Even Paul, not noted for his open-mindedness (he explicitly admits he does

not always practice what he preaches), was teachable on the road to Damascus and spent the rest of his life working out he implications of his new perception of Jesus.

Paul does not think that teachability, which is the essence of true humility, means that one cannot have strong convictions. In fact, the passage associates the transforming renewal of mind with *not conforming* to this world. Teachability is compatible with strong convictions about what is right and wrong. A common confusion here is the belief that to be *teachable* one must be *taught* by anybody and everybody. The latter is impossible, of course, because people teach contradictory things. To be *teachable* is not necessarily to be *taught*; it is to be *open* to being taught, to be willing to listen, at least for a time, to suspend judgment long enough to understand what the other is saying, or to see that the other is pinching flies rather than pennies. Yet people sometimes do steal pennies, or spout nonsense, or worse; and to give them the benefit of the doubt is compatible with judging them wrong. I think Paul's injunction, like St. John's, is that we try the spirits, including our own, to see whether they be of God or of someone's self-interest or comfortable prejudices, including our own.

This brings us back to the unforgivable sin, the sin against the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a rich symbol in New Testament theology; it refers, among other things, to the presence and work of God in the renewing of our minds. Notice that what Jesus issues in this saying is a *warning*. Although it fudges a bit on the Greek text, the Kings James Version gets the Aramaic phrase Jesus probably used by speaking of people being "*in danger* of eternal judgment." Also, Jesus never says that scribes have actually put themselves in this position; he warns them against putting themselves in it.

What is this position? From what we have said, it follows that Jesus is warning us not to go out of our way to be unteachable by God's spirit, not to erect a barrier of self-serving prejudice and comfortable assumptions that blind us to what is really going on. It also follows that those who *worry* about committing this sin are the last who could have committed it. They might have problems; in particular, they might suffer to an intense degree the terrible incapacity to accept themselves as forgiven—they see their sins as scarlet and cannot quite believe it is reasonable that they can be as white as snow—but they clearly don't have the problem of making themselves otherwise unteachable. The warning clearly applies to those who never repent of their culpable blindness, thus creating their own hell of unforgiveness. So Jesus is giving us a somber warning against automatically thinking that it's the other person or group who must turn back and forswear foolish ways, a warning against consciously and spiritually arrogantly refusing ever to ask "Is it perhaps *I* or *us* who must turn back and forswear foolish ways?"

So Jesus' saying on the cross reminds us that there is a lot to forgive and be forgiven for. In particular, ignorance and blindness are forgivable. But Jesus' other saying, along with Paul's advice, calls us to the humility of teachability.