

This morning we continue our series on people who lived out their faith in Jesus Christ, and because of that faith made a difference in other people's lives. These are people who were leaders. They led lives that were different from the rest of the world, and inspire people to want to live differently, too. The difference-maker...the thing that sets them apart from others is Jesus. And if you want to lead other people to Jesus...if you want to make an impact on people's lives that outlives you and even extends into eternity, then these are great people to be inspired by. They're not super-human, most of them come from humble families...but they believed the Good News of Jesus Christ with all they had, and they lived it out...their faith was lived out in gritty, tangible, often very challenging kinds of ways...and that set them apart as true leaders and true difference makers.

Corrie Ten Boom was born on April 15, 1892 in Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands (Holland), and grew up in Haarlem, just to the west (circled on the map). She was the youngest of 4 kids. Many people know her and her family's story of hiding Jews in their home during World War 2 – you can read about it in her book called, "The Hiding Place," which was also made into a movie in 1975. Her parents were devout Christians and raised Corrie and her three



relationships with people who would visit.

siblings to know Jesus deeply. There were three aunts who lived with the family as well, and friends and neighbors frequently came over for dinner and Bible study. Her dad was a watchmaker, and he was well known, which led to many of those

At age 28, Corrie began attending the Haarlem Bible School. The following

year, however, her mother passed away, and so Corrie began helping her dad with the business, and she had a knack for it. Corrie took to watch-making herself, and after getting some formal training in Switzerland, she became the first woman in the Netherlands to be licensed as a watchmaker. She and her sister Betsie never married, but stayed at home to help with the family business.

On May 14, of 1940, when she was 48, Hitler ordered “the first large-scale air-borne attack in the history of warfare”¹ on the citizens of Rotterdam, less than 30 miles from her family’s home. 5 days later, the Netherlands surrendered to Germany, and they became an occupied nation. The persecution of Jewish people grew: they were singled out, made to wear a yellow star on their clothes, their shops raided, people arrested, taken away, never to be heard from again. Corrie’s brother began hiding Jews at the start of the occupation. Corrie joined him in November of 1941, working with an architect to create a secret room in the family home in which Jews could hide. And many did – some for just a night or two, others for longer term.

After 18 months of secretly helping Jews escape persecution, Corrie wrote: **The house had become “the center of an underground ring that spread to the farthest corners of Holland [The Netherlands]. Here daily came dozens of workers, reports, appeals...We had to go on, but we knew that disaster could not be long in coming...” (Eric Metaxas, *7 Women...*p. 121, quoting Corrie Ten Boom from *The Hiding Place*).**

On February 28, 1944, disaster did indeed come, as German Gestapo agents showed up at their home late at night. She, her dad, her sister Betsie, and several others who helped in their efforts were gathered on the main floor of the house by the Gestapo. The Jews who were staying at their home had been able to get upstairs and into the secret room before they came into the house. Corrie was identified as the leader, and one of the agents slapped her across the face, demanding to know where they were hiding Jews...where the “Secret room” was. Corrie said she didn’t know what they were talking about. She was slapped again and again. “Where is your secret room?” the agent yelled at her. As Corrie was being beaten, she finally called out, “Lord Jesus, protect me!” The agent’s hand stopped in mid-slap. “If you say that

name again, I'll kill you!" he shouted. But he did not slap her again.ⁱⁱ

Eventually, Corrie and her whole family were taken to Gestapo Holland headquarters and questioned. Then they were taken to a Federal penitentiary. The family was split up by gender, with the three sisters led off. It was the last time Corrie would see her dad, and he would only survive 10 days in prison. Later, she found out that her sister Nollie, and her brother and a nephew had been released. She and Betsie were still in prison, with Corrie in solitary confinement.

In early May of 1944, she was taken into a room for questioning, in an effort to get her to admit to her illegal activities. She never gave in. In fact: **Part way through the questioning, she began to tell the agent about God.** The officer quickly cut her off, but for the next three days he had her taken out of her cell and he asked her to tell him more about what the Bible taught, and about her family, especially her father. He confessed that he could not bear the work that he did at the prison. She was unable to help him any more at that moment, but it was a small victory for her.

Soon after, the Allied forces landed at Normandy and a year before the war would end, Corrie and her sister Betsie were reunited as they boarded a train for a prison camp. It was the first time in 4 months they'd seen each other, after not being separated for 53 years. So, in September of 1944, she, along with 1,000 or so other women, were taken to Ravensbrück, the notorious prison camp, and the same one where Mother Maria, whom we looked at a couple weeks ago, also spent time.

There, they prayed with people, told people about Jesus, they spent time together. It was a gift for the two sisters to be together in the harsh conditions of the prison camp. Betsie even predicted that they would be free from it by January 1 of 1945. But in the fall and early winter of 1944, Betsie's health began to fail, and on December 16, 1944, Betsie passed away, gaining the freedom from the camp that she said would come.

Several miracles and amazing things happened to them while they were in the prison camp, that are completely unexplainable except for God's

intervention in some way. The last of those happened on Christmas eve, 1944, just a few days after her sister's death, when Corrie was called to an administrative office in the prison camp, and was given her "Certificate of Discharge." She was free to go. She had no idea why, though a number of years later she discovered that the prison camp officials had made a clerical error. All the women her age and older were supposed to be killed a week later because of a food shortage. But she was spared.

Soon, she was home with her sister, Nollie. They opened their home up to people who had survived the prison camps or needed to recover from spending years hiding in barns and attics. **Corrie wrote that, "healing is linked to forgiveness." And this message of forgiveness is what she then took out into the world for the next 30 years, until she was 85 years old.** She traveled around the world sharing her story, the story of God's forgiveness, and the need for people to forgive those who had harmed them. She came here to Rose Hill, somewhere in that time, I think in the late 1960's or early 70's [since the sermons, we've been realized it was more likely in the early 1960's], and shared her story right here. Some of you were here for that, though you looked a bit younger then. I could have been here...except I wasn't born yet. ☺ **In a nutshell, the message that she proclaimed everywhere she went was that everyone "had something to forgive, whether it was a neighbor who had turned him in to the Nazi authorities or a vicious camp guard or a brutal soldier" (Eric Metaxas, *7 Women...* page 135).**

Corrie was put the test in regards to that message a couple years after her release. She was speaking at a church in Munich, Germany, in 1947. I want to just read to you what Eric Metaxas writes about this (He quotes directly from Corrie in much of this):

"At the close of the service, a balding man in a gray overcoat stepped forward to greet her. Corrie froze. She knew this man well; he'd been one of the most vicious guards at Ravensbrück, one who had mocked the women prisoners as they showered. "It came back with a rush," she wrote, "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." And now he was pushing his hand out to shake hers, and saying: "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 that hand. He would not remember me, of course—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 Ravensbrück in your talk,” he was saying, “I was a guard there...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 it from your lips as well. Fraulein...will you forgive me?”

And as I stood there—I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven—and could not forgive.

The soldier stood there expectantly, waiting for Corrie to shake his hand. She writes that she “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.” Corrie remembered that forgiveness is an act of the will—not an emotion. And she thrust out her hand. She then writes,

And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, spring into our joined hands. And this feeling of 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 had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit.ⁱⁱⁱ

Corrie lived the last half-dozen years of her life in Southern California, near Anaheim. On her 91st birthday – April 15, 1983 – she passed away, surrounded by birthday flowers and loving friends.

As many of you know: **Forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel message: It’s what the cross of Christ is all about.** And we love to rest in the assurance that God has forgiven us. But then sometimes it gets a little

tougher to accept that God forgives other people – like that former prison camp guard. Our response kind of depends on whether we’re talking about God forgiving our beloved Sunday school teacher or our in-laws, or our family for forgetting it’s mother’s day. But then, the third facet of forgiveness is that we are to forgive those other people, whoever they may be, as well. And so what we really have to wrestle with every now and then is our own forgiveness of other people who have really wronged us. Not just little things like breaking a dinner plate spilling grape juice on the white couch...though forgiveness there is important. I’m not saying it’s not. But: **Sometimes forgiveness is much deeper and more difficult, like the forgiveness that Corrie extended to that former prison camp guard.** That depth of forgiveness is “a few times in a life-time” kind of thing: like forgiving the person who was driving drunk and killed your family member? Or forgiving the doctor who made a mistake in the operating room that led to a death or permanent disability...or forgiving whomever you might want to hold responsible for the injury or death of a loved one in a war...or forgiving your spouse for breaking the marital vows? Those are much more difficult.

But that’s exactly what the Bible teaches us to do. Jesus teaches it in the passage we read earlier which is part of his teaching on prayer. We prayed it a few minutes ago: forgive us of our debts (sins) as we forgive others. And Jesus teaches on this elsewhere too, such as when Peter asks Jesus, “Up to how many times should we forgive someone who sins against me – 7 times?” as if that’s quite a bit. And Jesus says, “No; 77 times,” or some translations read “No, 7 times 70 times.” In other words: a lot. I don’t think any biblical scholar believes Jesus is actually putting a number on it. **He’s saying that you just keep doing it. Why? Because of God’s forgiveness for us that does the same.** Don’t raise your hand on this, although every hand would go up if we did...How many of us have committed the same sin over and over and over and over again – not just 77 times or 490 times but more than that? Lust, greed, idolatry of things, idolatry of self, pride...the list goes on and on of ways we’ve hurt God, ourselves, and others, many, many times. And God forgives us every single time.

And we are to do the same. I think Paul puts it great when he simply writes, **“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a**

grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13). “Bear with one another.” There are going to be things that need forgiveness. There are going to be challenges and difficulties. A lot of these things are unintentional...and yet forgiveness is still needed. Someone will rub you the wrong way by what they say or do. Your spouse will do something or say something that will tick you off. A co-worker will mess something up. Forgiveness is needed in life in order for relationships to stay in tack.

There was another guy that Corrie forgave that teaches us another element of forgiveness, and that was Jan Vogel, the man who tipped off the Germans that she and her family were hiding people in their home. After she forgave the former guard, she learned that Jan was convicted of war crimes for conspiring with the Nazis and was on death row. She wrote a letter to him, told him she forgave him, and told him about the forgiveness of Jesus. He didn’t ask for her forgiveness...but she did it anyway. And so what we see is that: **Sometimes we have to forgive people even when they haven’t asked for it.** Maybe without their even knowing you’ve forgiven them, though she was able to let him know, and went out of her way to tell him. But sometimes we can’t even do that. For instance, maybe some of us need to forgive a parent or a grandparent or an aunt or an uncle, who has passed away.

So why should we forgive? Not because you’ll have a warm tingly sensation all over like Corrie did. That was a pretty amazing experience, I’m sure. But even that sensation faded away for her – it probably only lasted a few brief seconds. So there are a couple reasons why we should forgive – beyond the fact that Jesus commands us to forgive. That’s the first reason...so other than that. **First, we set ourselves free from the spiritual and emotional grip they (the person we’re forgiving) may have on us.** Usually, we think of the beneficiary of forgiveness being the person whose sin is being forgiven. That’s certainly the emphasis of the cross: we benefit from God’s forgiveness for our sins. But when it comes to us forgiving others, when we do that, the one doing the forgiving also benefits. We’re freed up from the weight. We’re released from what can be all-consuming thoughts about how someone has wronged us, and it opens up doors for ministry and relational wholeness and health. **Second of all, we’re being Christ-like and can help others to know**

Jesus, too. Forgiving others is a profoundly spiritual experience – the cross tells us as much – and forgiveness forms us and shapes us to be more like Jesus. This is true in the act of forgiving, but then also if we follow in Corrie’s footsteps and let people know why we forgive, we shape them spiritually; it’s an opportunity to open a door to the gospel, to God’s forgiveness.

I don’t know who in your life you need to forgive...but you probably do: A co-worker, a family member, the person next to you this morning, a neighbor...or maybe it’s someone you don’t really know or interact with much, or who has even passed away. Maybe there’s something that someone did or said that you’ve been holding onto ever since...and it’s holding you back from following Jesus and living into the freedom that he offers. Let Jesus be your foundation for forgiving, and let Corrie be your inspiration for forgiving. If Corrie can make that difficult decision to forgive those men, so can you forgive the people in your life. And just like her, you’ll be glad you did. Let’s pray...Amen.

ⁱ Eric Metaxas, *7 Women and the Secret of Their Greatness*, p. 116.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 122.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 135-136