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Can We Reconcile Justice and Forgiveness? | Rachael Denhollander

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The Veritas Forum

Last Thursday at the Veritas Forum at Harvard, we were fortunate enough to host Rachael Denhollander, the first woman to publicly accuse Larry Nasser of sexual abuse. Her story is one of immense courage, guided by an unwavering pursuit of justice and a hope in a God that will one day make all things right.

Transcript

We can see and we can feel the damage and the pain and the evil because there is good. We can see the darkness because there is light. We do not have to be consumed by a world that is filled with just darkness because there is not just darkness.

There is hope and there is goodness. Last week at the Veritas Forum at Harvard, we were fortunate enough to host Rachel Denhollander, the first woman to publicly accuse Larry Nasser of sexual abuse. Her story is one of immense courage, guided by an unwavering pursuit of justice and a hope in a God that will one day make all things right.

Thank you, Michelle, for that introduction. Good evening. So Rachel Denhollander needs no introduction.

She is a former gymnast and coach. She's an advocate and educator who has become known internationally as the first woman to file a police report and to speak publicly against Larry Nasser, one of the most prolific sexual abusers in recorded history. As a result of her activism, over 250 women came forward as survivors of Nasser's abuse leading to his life imprisonment.

Rachel holds a juris doctorate from Oakbrook College of Law and as a member of the California Bar Association. Prior to beginning her work as an advocate and educator, she worked in public policy. She performed research and writing for human rights organizations.

And she spoke in a variety of capacities, including testifying before state judicial committees. She has taught in legislative action days and authored and taught summer camp courses on appellate advocacy and judicial philosophy to talented high school students. She has appeared on CNN, ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News, BBC, and NPR.

I think I got all the letters of the alphabet there. In addition, she has appeared in national and international print media, including *Dar Speigal*, *The Washington Post* and the *Associate Press*, and is a *New York Times* op ed contributor. She has been active in spearheading legislative reform at the state level.

Rachel continues to educate on issues of abuse through supporting and speaking at local organizations that advocate for victims of sexual and domestic abuse, lecturing at universities and teaching at abuse prevention conferences. Rachel is the recipient of the Heart Ambassadors Lifetime Achievement Award for contributing to social justice and has been a panelist on the United Nations Peace Messenger organization at the UN's 60 second commission on the status of women. She, along with her husband Jacob, live in Louisville, Kentucky with their three, but soon to be four young children.

It is a pleasure and an honor to welcome her to our campus and to hear her story. Join me in welcoming Rachel Den Hollander. [applause] Good evening.

I am honored to be here at Harvard with y'all tonight. The history and traditions of this university are vibrant and rich, and I trust that our discussion will be in keeping with that heritage tonight. I am genuinely very excited for our topic this evening.

The relationship between justice and forgiveness is something I find frankly fascinating on an academic and philosophic level. But these are also vital concepts for me personally, and really vital concepts for all of us, because all of us in this room at one level or another have been wounded or victims. All of us have to wrestle with what we do with that hurt and with that grief.

How do we respond to wounds? What do we do with the pain? Is there freedom and hope to be found after suffering, especially suffering so deeply? And perhaps just as importantly, there is no one in this room myself included who is not at one time or another harmed someone else and also needs forgiveness. So concepts of justice and forgiveness, both for the wrongs done to us and for the wrongs we may have done to others, are intensely personal concepts with massive implications for our own healing and our own growth. Most of you are likely aware of my story, but for those who aren't, the reason that these concepts became so intensely personal for me was because of suffering violation at an intensely personal level, sexual assault.

My first experience with sexual abuse actually happened when I was late seven, early eight years old, with a pedophile at the church that I attended at the time. I was very fortunate that there were adults in the congregation who had skills and a psychology

background and recognized a lot of the warning signs and were able to warn my parents before the abuse became too extreme, but it doesn't take very much to cause a lot of damage. And in my case, that damage was really compounded because when these adults warned my parents and my parents took protective measures, many people in the church viewed that as an attack on the pedophile.

I had not verbalized the abuse at that time. I had merely said I was afraid of this person. And so these warnings by the other adults were not enough to motivate the adults in my church to protect me.

They were enough to motivate the adults in my church to ostracize not only my parents, but myself and my younger siblings. Many of my parents, closest friends and the adults that I had grown up with that really formed my concepts of love and security and trust and faith became very icy and distant. And at that age, I could not understand why this was happening, why I was losing everything that felt familiar and secure and safe.

And I felt the reality of that betrayal at a level far more deep than I could process at eight years old. When I was around 12, I started to disclose some of what had happened to my parents and asked enough questions that I started to understand those dynamics. As the pieces fell into place, the message that I heard very loud and clear was because if you can't prove your abuse, stay silent, because if you speak up, you will lose everything that you value the most.

I internalized that message and I didn't even realize it like so much of the trauma that comes from sexual assault, but it really laid the stage for what would happen just a few years later when I was a competitive gymnast. At around 15 years old, shortly after just after my 15th birthday, I went to see the famed doctor of osteopathy, Larry Nassar. He was supposed to be the best in the world for treating gymnasts.

He was the medical coordinator for USAGR elite and Olympic programs. He was the team physician for our Olympians. He was the team doctor for Michigan State University's gymnastics program, the medical coordinator for one of the most prominent gyms in the country.

What I didn't know was that Larry by 2000 was a hardened and skilled sexual predator. That he had been abusing children under the guise of medical treatment for around nine years by the time that I saw him. I didn't know that he had already been reported at least four times to MSU authority figures who had all assured the young victims that they were receiving legitimate medical care and had been sent back for continued abuse.

So that day, I became one of what is likely thousands of Larry Nassar's victims of childhood sexual assault. I was shocked at his treatment. I felt embarrassed.

I felt humiliated. I had all of the emotions that went with sexual violation. But that

message that I had internalized at eight years old, if you can't prove it, don't speak up, was so strong that it caused me to question everything, including my own judgment.

I thought the problem had to be me, surely at least one adult who had heard what Larry was doing, who was close to him, would have protected the children if there was anything wrong with his treatment. And since he was treating me, that must mean that what he was doing was fine. The problem must be me.

I also had the added disadvantage of knowing that there were legitimate pelvic floor techniques, but did not know that what Larry was doing were absolutely no resemblance to those techniques. And so the cycle of guilt and shame and blame and a new level of betrayal by every adult that should have been protecting me was born. And a new level of betrayal, even by the adults that had betrayed me at eight years old, new damage from that first round of abuse really began all over again.

Eventually Larry would cross a line that even I could not rationalize away, but by the time that happened I had already been abused for about a year, between 10 and 13 times. And as I started to come to grips with what had happened, I couldn't even verbalize it, and I had no idea what to do with it. How would I even begin to pursue justice? Who would listen to a 16-year-old no-name gymnast? Eventually I told my parents about a year later, but again we had no idea what to do with this.

I was certain an anonymous voice would never be powerful enough to overcome the prestige that Larry had in the community, to overcome the two powerful institutions that were backing him. And at barely 17 I had no way of generating the necessary media coverage that it wasn't my voice alone, and if I could do that I was terrified of what it would mean for me, because I knew it couldn't be done anonymously. Most of you probably know where the story goes.

After 16 years of waiting and watching, a local newspaper at the Indianapolis Star broke a huge investigative piece about USA Gymnastics and the culture of covering up sexual assault in that organization. Larry wasn't mentioned, they were examining the issue with the coaches, but I saw that news article, and the first thought that crossed my mind was "This is it." I don't think I will ever forget seeing that pop up. At the time I had three children, they were ages four, two, and one, so I wasn't on the computer very much during the day because there just wasn't a lot of time.

And my one-year-old was teething hardcore, so I had her strapped to my back and I was in my kitchen and I had to send an email to someone for something, so I opened my computer up and there it was. And I read that story and I said "This is it, this is the one chance and if it doesn't happen now it's not going to happen." And so I emailed the indie star and I told them what had happened and I said "I will do whatever I can if you can make this come to light." And over the next two weeks as I began to research Michigan law, I discovered that I had the ability to still file a police report. There had been a legal

change that lifted the statute of limitations and I could file that report.

So I compiled my evidence, spoke with medical experts, consulted a local prosecutor, put together a file of evidence for the police, and within two weeks we had traveled up to Michigan and everything was started. The process was in place. The fallout when that interview went public that I did with the indie star was every bit as nasty as I expected it to be.

And I'll be honest that the process these last 18 months has been absolutely hellish. But the result has been incredible. Over the next 16 months Larry was charged federally with possessing thousands of images of child porn.

He was charged for sexual crimes against myself and nine other women. He eventually pled guilty to the child porn charges and accounts of sexual assault against myself and these other victims. Over 256 women have come forward publicly.

The police are still taking reports from victims who are speaking up. He has been sentenced to consecutive and federal state prison sentences that ensure he will never see the light of day again. And in the sentencing hearing something happened that has never before happened in history.

256 women stood up and gave victim impact statements, most of them shutting anonymity. Their statements were broadcast around the world and the impact has been truly global. But the real impact and the real story isn't just what happened but how it happened.

What made it possible for this to happen? And those are some of the dynamics that I really want to explore with you this evening. When Jacob and I told pastors at our former church in Michigan when we traveled up for the police report and told them what we were doing, one of the pastors asked me an incredibly insightful question. He said, "Is there anything you are personally hoping to get out of this besides seeing Larry stopped?" And the reason this question was so vital for me was because the truth is if my identity, if my success, if my value, if my healing was dependent on what 12 people in a jury box might say, or what the societal response was going to be and I didn't succeed, the result to me would be absolutely devastating.

I had to reach a place coming forward so publicly and being able to handle the trauma of coming forward so publicly that I had to know that my truth and my healing were found in something else other than the societal response to what I was about to do. And I was at that place when I reported Larry, but getting to that place took years of wrestling with what had happened, wrestling with ideas of justice and forgiveness, whether I would ever see justice, what it should even look like if I did see it, grappling with what it meant to forgive. Our culture so minimizes the reality and the impact of sexual assault that honestly the very thought of forgiving made me angry because I felt that forgiveness

would mean acting like what happened to me wasn't vile and wasn't wrong, that if I forgave I knew there would be people that would use that as an excuse to minimize what had happened, to ignore it, to downplay it.

And I had already experienced so much minimization, so much denial from people I trusted so deeply with both instances of my abuse, that the idea of providing someone more ammunition to act like this wasn't evil and devastating was almost unthinkable. By the time I reported Larry, I had found beautiful answers to those questions, and those answers provided a framework for experiencing real healing. That process and those concepts are what I'd like to walk through with you tonight, because frankly concepts of justice and forgiveness are very often misunderstood in society, and when we don't understand something well, we do not apply it well.

And when you are dealing with abuse, with wounds that are that devastating and you don't apply truth well, the result is incredibly damaging to the survivor. So I would like to do two things tonight. First, I'd like to properly define the terms justice and forgiveness so that we have an accurate idea of what we're working with.

And then secondly, look at how those two ideas intersect, how they can both be compatible with each other. Now as we do that, it will become obvious to you if it isn't already that I am working within a worldview that is distinctly Christian in nature. That is, I believe that there is a God who is sovereign, that this God is the God of the Bible, and that he has revealed in Judeo-Christian scriptures.

But I am not alone in operating from a worldview, because the reality is that all of us operate from some form of worldview, whether we are atheistic, agnostic, pantheistic, all of us have a framework through which we view life. And if we're honest, all of our frameworks entail certain faith components, mine included. I do believe that the Christian worldview is the one that is most internally and externally consistent, and we'll be dealing with some of the reasons why I believe that.

But because we can't discuss deep philosophical concepts, no matter how practically they're applied, without acknowledging we come from a worldview, I think it's best to be upfront about it. So I am operating from a Christian worldview, and you are more than welcome to ask questions about that when we open up. So again, to road map quickly, we're going to look at two things.

Defining the terms justice and forgiveness so we can correctly utilize those concepts and then looking at how they intersect with each other. So first, properly defining justice. Miriam Webster's Dictionary defines justice in reference to that, which is just.

So we have to look at what just means, and there are five basic components to it. Just. Having a basis in or conforming to fact or reason.

Conforming to a standard of correctness. Faithful to an original. Acting or being in conformity with what is morally upright or good.

And being what is merited or deserved. Does anyone see a common thread through these definitions? All of these require an appeal to a standard. Each definition requires a firm standard against which something is measured.

Having a basis in or conforming to fact or reason. The standard of fact or reason. Conforming to a standard of correctness.

That which is correct. Faithful to an original. Acting or being in conformity with what is morally upright or good.

And being what is merited or deserved. So justice is comparing something, some event, some idea, some action against a firm and moveable standard and seeing how that measures up. This means two things.

First, that standard exists. And second, if we lose that standard, we lose the ability to have justice. If there is not some standard by which we measure actions or events or ideas, there is no such thing as justice.

C.S. Lewis perhaps said it best in his book, "Mirror Christianity." In a quote that has become central to me throughout this process. And he said this. "My argument against God was that the universe deemed so cruel and unjust.

But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?" Now Lewis then devotes the remainder of his book for evidence is why he believes the Judeo-Christian God is the true God who defines what is straight, allowing us to recognize what is crooked. For those of you that wish to explore that dynamic, I highly commend that book to you.

But for now, I want to expand on the conclusions that come from this, that are particularly relevant to our discussion. And the first is this. Because the straight line exists, there is goodness.

There is righteousness. There is truth. There is what is right.

There is a standard that someone who has ultimate authority has set. The standard of what is good and right, and that straight line is not a matter of mere human opinion. Now there are certainly many things in life that are matters of mere opinion.

But if something is going to be truly evil, truly unjust, that requires a standard beyond human perception, beyond human opinion. If everything in life is based on nothing more than human opinion, there is no real standard by which we can deem something truly

unjust or truly wrong. Even standards that attempt to appeal to universal ideas, for example, the idea that wrong is whatever harms the collective good, are still appealing to some sort of moral standard.

Who defines harm? Who defines collective good? How much collective good do we have to have? Who set up the standard, that harm is whatever hurts the collective good? There is always an appeal to some sort of standard. And without this, there is no such thing as justice. But if there is a moral law giver, who has set a standard by which we can measure, set whether something is just, this means that goodness does exist.

And so does evil. And there are some very healing truths that flow from this realization. The first is, if there is goodness, there is hope.

We can see and we can feel the damage and the pain and the evil because there is good. We can see the darkness because there is light. We do not have to be consumed by a world that is filled with just darkness because there is not just darkness.

There is hope and there is goodness. This also means I can speak the truth about what happened to me without minimizing, without ignoring, and without downplaying. I do not have to pretend it is as bad as it was.

I am not dependent on society's response. I am not dependent on what twelve people on a jury say. I can name and acknowledge the evil because evil does exist.

It is not dependent on human perception and goodness and righteousness can be found. This also means I can grieve the damage, even if others minimize it or excuse it. Being able to speak the truth and grieve the way the damage in ways that are non-destructive is really the first step to healing.

It is really the ultimate definition of healing. Healing does not mean that you become the way you were before you were wounded because the scars are there and there are times that those scars are going to hurt but healing means that you know what to do when that pain comes. And knowing that the straight line exists allows me to grieve that damage and to not have to minimize it or downplay it or ignore it.

So again, to recap, the first thing we see when we properly define justice is that it requires a standard of right and wrong. Goodness and evil exist. We can discuss this and speak the truth about what was done without minimizing and without being dependent on society's response for validation and for healing.

The second implication that flows from this is this. The moral law-giver who defines goodness cares about justice and evil. In the Christian faith, right and wrong flow, not from some capricious decision that God makes, but from the very goodness and holiness found in the character of God.

The reason we feel evil and injustice so keenly is because it is such an aberration from that good standard. The God who defines the straight line cares about that straight line. And because goodness and evil exist in opposites, in contrast to each other, the more one understands good, the better they are able to understand evil.

This means that God as the ultimate standard of what is good recognizes the evil even more fully than I do. The injustice of abuse is even more clear to God than it is to me, and he cares and it matters. So to apply a proper definition of justice to abuse would look like this.

Conforming to a standard of correctness. The standard of correctness set by God strongly condemns abuse. In fact, in the scripture, it refers to rape as being like the murder of the innocent.

Abuse therefore is unjust. Faithful to an original. The original idea of safety, security, love, sexuality that God has set is the exact opposite of sexual assault.

Sexual abuse therefore is unjust. Acting or being in conformity with what is morally upright or good. Again, the moral law giver defines what is good.

Sexual abuse is defined in scripture as evil. Sexual abuse is therefore unjust. And finally, being what is merited or deserved.

Justice is, in a positive form, my abuser getting what he deserves. And this is where we start to feel that tension between justice and forgiveness. Because if we accept that justice is conformity to a good God-given standard, and conformity to that standard means my abuser gets what he deserves, oftentimes that feels like there's tension.

Justice is held out as a good thing in scripture, and yet so is forgiveness. The idea of wanting someone to get what they deserve is often categorized into bitterness or vengeance. It's assumed to be antithetical to forgiveness.

And forgiveness and justice are both held out in the Christian faith as deriving from the character of God. As being a noble goal, even for society in general. So how can both be good? Can we pursue both? To examine that, we need to first properly define the term forgiveness.

Forgiveness, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is to give up resentment or a claim to retribution. Retribution, of course, is defined as retaliation, the idea of wanting to get back at someone. So forgiveness is giving up resentment and a claim to retaliation.

There are two key things about this definition that will help us discover how forgiveness and justice intersect. In the definition of forgiveness, notice that the things being released are personal to me. That is, if I forgive, I am giving up my own personal resentment, my own personal bitterness.

I am giving up my personal desire to retaliate. But justice is conformity to an outward standard. Justice is conformity to a standard that exists outside of my response.

That standard of rightness does not go away if I release my resentment. That standard does not go away if I release my personal retaliation. Forgiveness is my personal, internal response to my abuser.

So the first thing to realize is that justice is not dependent one way or another on how I respond, because it is an outward standard that is followed. Justice is not dependent on my response. This means I can be bitter and retaliatory and still never see justice done, because that outward standard is never met.

Conversely, I can release personal resentment and I can extend forgiveness, and the truth about what happened to me does not change. The need to conform to that standard of rightness does not go away. Releasing personal resentment does not minimize, it does not excuse, and it does not downplay what happened.

The second dynamic is that because there is a moral law giver and there is that straight line, there is someone higher than me, who is capable of meeting out full justice. And this higher authority, being the source of goodness, understands the evil better than I do, and cares even more about justice than I do. And this is one of the areas where I believe Christian faith portrays the most beautiful and true picture of both forgiveness and justice.

See, the Christian faith teaches that not only does God love, but because he loves, he is just, that he pours out wrath on what is evil because he cares and it matters to him. That evil is seen even more glaringly than we can see it. Very often the idea of God punishing and wrath is seen as something negative and vengeful.

But what I want you to understand tonight is that punishment for evil, justice, does not happen because God doesn't love, but because he does. When my innocence was stolen as a young child, and again as a young teen, God saw that damage and said this is evil and it matters. He said that before a jury said it, before my abuser was convicted, before societal response turned in my favor, God saw it first.

And that bringing of justice is a demonstration of his love. God promises justice because he knows even more than I, how horrific the damage from abuse is. And if you really think about it, would you want it any other way? Would a God who saw what is evil and did not care be trustworthy? Would he be loving? I want you to think back to one of the other quintessential sexual assault cases we saw in the media, the Brock Turner case.

And with the judge handed down Brock Turner sentence, and it was a mere few months compared to the lifetime of damage that his victim has suffered, what was your response to that judge? Did you say what a loving thing for that judge to do? We need more

judges who are as loving as this judge. Or did you realize that minimizing the evil that happened to that victim was the most unloving thing that judge could have possibly done? We intrinsically know that a judge who does not see evil as truly evil does not care about the damage and is not a good judge, is not loving and is not trustworthy. In the same way, when the ultimate moral law-giver God brings justice down by pouring out his wrath and giving deserving punishment, he does it because he loves.

Because he sees evil for what it truly is, he cares about the damage. He is a good and loving and trustworthy judge, and he has promised to bring that justice. Forgiveness, my giving up of my personal resentment and vengeance does not change the external, permanent standard of right and wrong and justice that is set by God.

Because I can trust that God will bring justice because he created that standard and understands it even more fully than I do, I am free to release my personal retaliation. I am free to release my personal bitterness and my vengeance. And I do not have to sacrifice justice to do it.

In fact, I can release that retaliation, I can release that vengeance knowing that pursuing the standard of justice that God has set is still a good thing, that it does not originate in me and it is not dependent on my response. And then Christianity goes one step further because the Christian faith adds to justice through an additional measure of incredible love. God offering to take that justice upon himself in sacrifice for us.

The Christian faith teaches that God's love does require justice because evil is real and damage matters and saying I am sorry does not wipe out those consequences and it does not mean that the devastation goes away. But it also teaches that God in his love and mercy gave himself to allow the justice that evil doers should receive to be poured out on him instead. This is what is referred to in Christianity as the atonement, the idea that Christ took the punishment took the justice for evil doers in his place.

Because of this, those who repent and turn from evil and place their faith in Christ will no longer receive what they deserve. But not because justice wasn't done. They don't receive what they deserve because Christ took that justice for them.

But either way, justice is done because it matters to God. In the Christian faith, evil is real and it matters and justice happens either to the evil doer or to a willing savior who takes our place. Only in the Christian faith do we have a God who unfailingly loves enough to always bring justice and also unfailingly loves enough to take that justice upon those who repent.

Only in Christianity is evil never minimized, never outweighed by other good things someone does as if the abuser doing good things could change the evil that was already committed. Only in Christianity do I have the ability to release personal vengeance and trust that justice will be done apart from my personal response. Because I can trust God

to bring that justice on my behalf and to bring it perfectly, I can release my desire to retaliate.

And I can pursue that good standard of justice without bitterness and without anger knowing that that pursuit is also a reflection of God's truth and God's character. And even further, because I have been the recipient of that incredible love that stood in my place, a love that is limitless, I can hope for my abuser to repent. I can know that if he were to repent, what he did to me is not minimized and it's not wiped away and it's not forgotten.

And I also know that I am loved with that same strength. One of the most difficult things after suffering abuse is learning where it is safe to trust again. And if my God is strong enough to love someone like Larry Nassar, he is strong enough to love me.

And I can trust that. And that is the surest repository. When everyone else fails, I can trust him because I have seen his demonstration of love and his demonstration of justice.

Justice, therefore, is not in opposition to forgiveness. Rather, justice is the foundation for forgiveness. If justice did not exist, true forgiveness could not exist either.

And if God could not be trusted to bring justice, I would have no reason to release my personal desire to retaliate. So pursuing justice, pursuing conformity to the standard of rightness, that straight line is a right and a good thing. It is found in the character of God and it is something I can pursue.

At the same time, because justice and that straight line is not dependent on how society or friends or jury responds, I can pursue it knowing that my value and my healing and my identity are not dependent on what other people think. The truth, the straight line exists apart from the societal response. And I can trust that law giver who loves what is good and right and hates what is evil more fully than I do.

I can utilize the means he has provided here on earth for bringing justice, our criminal and civil court system, and I can do that in good conscience knowing that when I speak the truth about evil, that is conformity also to the standard of Christ. That is conformity also to what is good and right and just. And I can know through it that I am loved by the same depth of love, a love that is far stronger and far deeper than I can comprehend.

And in those things, the ability to release retaliation, the ability to pursue and speak the truth about what is good and right to pursue justice, and resting and knowing that I am loved with that same depth of love, in those things there is freedom and hope and healing to be found. And this is why I frequently echo two of C.S. Lewis's other sentiments. And with this I will close and open it up for questions.

Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, it is of infinite importance, the one

thing it cannot be is moderately important. These concepts are vital for us. You can deny them or you can accept them, but there is no real middle ground.

And finally, I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else. Thank you. [Applause]

[Music]

[Music]

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