

Grace Is More

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

These words from the Lord's Prayer remind us, one of the most important matters in God's eyes is forgiveness. God greatly desires to be merciful to us and forgive us. God greatly desires us to be merciful to each other and forgive each other.

Yet forgiveness is not always easy for us. Take a look at every side of American political discourse right now, or the arguments taking place on the streets of American cities. We have become so good at yelling at each other, intentionally hurting each other, and at choosing sides. Are we not on the same side?

Furthermore, there is little room for conversations which seek understanding, and certainly no room for grace and forgiveness.

OK, so forgiveness is hard for us. I don't mean overlooking the small slights we do to each other either. What I mean are the things people do to each other that are truly hurtful, and yet for some reason they will not take responsibility, or apologize. In such cases, we are wounded, and forgiveness is a challenge.

So, then we have this Gospel lesson today from Matthew, in which Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone. Peter rather proudly suggests to Jesus, that maybe forgiving someone 7 times would be generous. However, Jesus responds that 7 times is not enough, and that really, he should forgive someone 77 times. Wow, that certainly seems like a lot of times to forgive someone for sinning against us.

Still, it is the parable Jesus tells about forgiveness that is hardest to digest. The parable contrasts how one person is shown great mercy, and is forgiven, and then turns around and is unmerciful to another person, and he will not forgive him.

This first person, a servant of a king, owed his king the equivalent of 130 pounds of silver. It would have taken him 150,000 years to pay this debt back, if he earned what was the regular daily wage of the time. When he could not pay his king back, the king was going to sell all his possessions, including his family, to make a payment on the debt. But he begged his king to show him mercy, and the king did show him mercy. He forgave the entire debt. The king's grace was more than his servant's debt.

Yet even more unbelievable, this same forgiven servant met a friend who owed him 100 denarii, which would have taken only 100 days to pay back, if he earned what was the regular daily wage of the time. When this friend could not pay this tiny debt, he asked for mercy. But the first servant, though he had been

forgiven a ridiculously greater debt by his king, would not show even a little mercy. Instead, he had his friend thrown into prison.

Well, when the word of his unmerciful behavior got back to the king, the king called in the unmerciful servant to question him. The question is almost painful to hear, "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" The king was so angry, he had him punished. Then Jesus adds, if we are unmerciful like this, then we can expect to be punished by God as well. I think this a really wonderful, yet hard parable. It's wonderful because the king is so forgiving, and it's hard because it is not always so easy for us to forgive.

So, we ask the hard question, can we forgive like this king forgives? Well, maybe that is not what Jesus is asking. Because we are not the king in this parable. God is the king. God is the merciful, generous, gracious, and forgiving king. We are the servant, who has a massive debt (our sin) which God (our king) has forgiven. Right? Which means our first job is not to forgive people incalculable debts, but to marvel at the unbelievable forgiveness, grace, and mercy we have received from God.

Such mercy is meant to be life-changing grace. In Jesus Christ, and through his cross, we receive as free gift the forgiveness of all our sins. This means our lives have changed, simply because God has chosen to be merciful and forgive us. Your life has changed because God forgives you all your sin. So, when you, when we, re-enter the world, fully forgiven, we are called by this same God, we are called by Jesus, to also be merciful and forgiving.

If we read the Bible closely, we realize one of God's favorite things to do is forgive us, when we are unforgivable, love us when are unlovable, and make things right for us, even when we are so persistently wrong. If God is for us in this way, do we really need to fear punishment? As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8, if God is for us, who can be against us?

I think what we are meant to learn in this parable, is that God does not want to punish us, but forgive us. So, let us be reminded, that when God forgives us, we are free from the fear of judgement and punishment, so that we can in turn forgive, love and care for the people who are around us. Is it not true, that forgiveness is first God's gift to us, and not God's demand from us? Yet, it is also true, I think, that after we receive God's great gift of forgiveness, after we roll around in it for a while and enjoy it, that we are finally able to turn in mercy and grace to forgive each other.

Now, if forgiving someone else is a struggle for us, let us remember the act of the king, and simply marvel that his grace was more than his servant's debt,

and that such forgiveness and grace is possible. Yet even when such forgiveness doesn't seem very possible for us, because, yes, forgiveness is sometimes hard, we must remember Jesus died to save us from our unmerciful moods too. In such moments, we simply speak with Jesus about our struggle to forgive, and ask him to help us.

Indeed, our king, God, the Lord Jesus Christ, forgives us. He is unbelievably and inconceivably merciful and gracious to us. God's grace is always more than our sin, so let us pray God's amazing grace profoundly changes us to be merciful to others. And let us pray that God's forgiveness will heal us in such way, that when we receive his forgiveness, we serve others by forgiving them. Only then, might our political discourse and conversations in the streets be fruitful, and lead to some kind of mutual understanding.

A man visited me and told me he had cancer. He asked me to pray for him, and we did. We prayed a lot throughout his treatments for him to be healed from this cancer. Yet, the cancer spread, and he became frustrated with prayer and with God.

Then one day, this man's son showed up unexpectedly. They had not spoken for years because of some misunderstanding. This father and son had 3 weeks together before the man died. They were glorious weeks full of reconciliation and mercy, forgiveness and grace. A week before he died, the man said this to me: I prayed for God to heal me, and he did. It wasn't the healing I was praying for, but it was better. I have my son back.

Indeed, when God forgives us, when God heals us, all things are possible. Even forgiveness is possible – forgiveness in families, and churches, neighborhoods and cities, and finally, forgiveness in our nation and the world.

Amen.