

Finding Our Way to Forgiveness 4-12-15 Chuck Carlson

Micah 7:18-19; Romans 3:21-6; Matthew 7:12

Following the Rodney King verdict years ago in L.A., a man named Reginald Denny is dragged from his truck by a gang and is viciously beaten. Later, after a painful rehabilitation, he meets face to face with his attackers. He shakes hands with them and tells them that he forgives them.

A reporter who is present, overhearing Denny, comments, “It is said that Mr. Denny is suffering from brain damage” (Willimon and Hauerwas, “Lord, Teach Us”, p.78).

Jesus’ invitation for us to “forgive our debtors” is received with mixed reviews. Some would call it impractical in a world that works out of the values of power, control, and violence. It appears naïve.

Does Jesus really know what he is asking of us in this petition?

The first part of the petition directs us to ask God for forgiveness. There is an assumption of a debt on our part that we owe to God. We can’t pay it no matter how hard we might try. No apple is going to make the teacher give us the grade we want. We are not in control. We are debtors, dependent upon God’s grace and character to cover our debt.

Paul speaks to the nature of this debt found on God’s account ledger. “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). How could we even entertain the notion that we might settle that account? It is obviously a debt that only God could pay on our behalf. The scriptures assume that you and I are debtors before God.

Our sin has consequences. The nature of our sin impacts every area of life. Everywhere we look we see sin’s effects, experiencing them as well in the disharmony within ourselves, with God, with others, and the environment.

Rowen Williams, in a speech entitled “The Climate Crisis: Fashioning a Christian Response”, offers an insight into the nature of sin’s effects. “The nature of (the climate) crisis could be summed up by saying that it is a loss of a sense of what life is. I don’t mean ‘the meaning of life’ in the normal way we use that phrase. I mean a sense of life as a web of interactions, mutual givings and receivings that make up the world we inhabit. Seeing this more clearly helps us dismantle the strange fictions we create about ourselves as human beings. We are disconnected and need to be reintroduced to life” (Homiletics, March-April, ’15, Address given at Southwark Cathedral, October 13, 2009, p.73).

It is the life of God that we are disconnected from which in turn disconnects us from everything around us. Jesus understands this. We’ve turned it all upside down. We are the creature, not the Creator. As

debtors to God, the only way we can get out of the trap of our destructive patterns is to pray, "Forgive us our debts..." In the image of God we were created and it is that image lost which begs to be restored.

So God takes the initiative. We are characters in God's story of redemption. Might it surprise you this morning that you are really not in control of your own life's story? Perhaps that is the source of that strange fiction we create about ourselves. Willimon and Hauerwas point out that it is my sinful desire to be the sole author of my life that creates my debts (p.81).

God's forgiveness and our choice to receive the love behind that forgiveness is the key unlocking the door to our freedom. Think about it. Obsessions we can have with past sins, the shame and guilt we may feel, the inability to forgive and nurse feelings of revenge and anger, all emerge out of our egos. Have you ever had moments of such self-absorption? The three letters, e-g-o, is an acronym for "Easing God Out".

Albert Haase, a Franciscan, points out that our egos become judge and prison guard, putting us "behind the prison of shame in the dark, dark cell of our memories....This is the death camp of the ego. Focused on 'me', the ego can be excruciatingly more demanding than God as it demands nothing less than perfect contrition evidenced in external behavior that never measures up" (Haase, 'Living the Lord's Prayer', p. 191).

To humble ourselves before God, own our need for forgiveness, and receive what is freely given, is to open the door to freedom from our false self-attachments. Paul describes this prison as compliance to the law and the sin nature holding us in its power.

Then he slips in the good news. "For now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed....the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, for all who believe...they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:21-6).

It really is a big step for us to own our need for forgiveness. We devise all kinds of creative ways around it. One way to get at it is to ask ourselves, "Over what sins of my past do I continue to obsess? Why? Why do I struggle to believe in God's forgiveness?"

Thomas Merton told a group of pastors, "Don't set limits to the mercy of God. Don't imagine that because you are not pleasing to yourself, you are not pleasing to God. God loves us not because we are good but because God is good" (Haase, p.161).

Jesus puts a human face on forgiveness and demonstrates the unconditional love underscoring this petition. We can't understand this petition apart from the embodiment of God's love that we witness in how Jesus treats and loves people. During Holy Week Jesus gives the new commandment to "love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). This love drives both the gift and the response of forgiveness God invites us to receive and participate in.

We watch Jesus forgive a woman caught in adultery, challenging those without sin to cast the first stone (John 8:2-11).

In Jericho Jesus sees Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector. He is very wealthy. Climbing a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus, Jesus catches his eye. With no judgment or reproof, Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner. In the presence of Jesus' love, he receives the forgiveness already operating in Jesus' eyes. Moved by that love he, aware of his sins and transgressions, tells Jesus, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much". Jesus looks at him and simply says, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:1-10).

God's forgiveness offered in the petition sets the standard for us. It is the basis of the petition "as we also forgive our debtors". In the Hebrew Scripture, the primary verb, 'selah', 'to forgive', is used only of God; forgiveness is therefore a divine prerogative reserved exclusively to God. A synonym for this verb, 'nasa', means 'to bear, remove, or to carry away'. When God forgives, God 'carries away the sin'. And not only that: the divine mercy also removes the straightjacket of debilitating guilt that the ego forces us to wear (Haase, p.157).

Like Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, God's love draws us out and sets us free. In God's eyes sin is never written in indelible ink. The prodigal son comes home in shame looking for condemnation. What does he receive? The eyes of his father bathed in love with no demand for acts or words of contrition. That was already there in the meeting of the eye.

We might ask ourselves, "How do I set limits on the mercy of God in my life and in the life of others?"

And so the second petition invites us to forgive others as God has forgiven and loved us. We are praying for the grace to share with others what God has given to us. I want to emphasize that we pray for the grace to forgive. God forgives others through me. I am not God and cannot assume to forgive another as only God can. But I can be a willing vehicle of God's love and forgiveness to another.

Some of you may have seen the film 'Unbroken', directed by Angela Jolie. It is the story of Louis Zamperini. An Olympic athlete in 1936 in Munich, Germany, he joins the army during WWII. His plane crashes in the Pacific and he spends 47 days with two others on a raft in shark infested waters. Rescued by the Japanese he spends the rest of the war in prison camps where he is beaten every day, especially by a guard known as the 'Bird'.

He survives, returns home, and marries. They have two children. Suffering from PTSD, he experiences nightmares every night and medicates with alcohol. Attempts at rehabilitation are not successful. The marriage is near broken. Louis is given an ultimatum. His son, Luke, describes the story not told in the film:

His life spiraling out of control, my mother was getting ready to file for divorce when a young couple living in their apartment building invited them to a Billy Graham crusade in a 1949 revival in LA. My father would have nothing to do with it. My mom went, coming home experiencing a newfound joy in God's forgiving love. She told my dad that because of that joy she would not seek a divorce, but said she wanted him to go the next night to hear Graham preach.

Louis agreed to go, but added a stipulation. I'll go, but when Graham gets to the point he's talking about how we are all sinners, I'm out of here. And he was.

When it got to that point in Graham's sermon he grabbed his wife's hand and left. However, she convinced him to return the next night. When Graham started to reach the point that agitated Louis, he got up for the third time and started out.

But before he got to the end of the aisle, he heard Graham say, "When people get to the lowest part of their rope with nowhere to turn, that's when they turn to God". That reminded my dad of his prayer on the life raft and in prison camp asking God to save him. He felt like God had taken care of his end of the bargain, but he had not.

That night he went forward to the altar and prayed with a counselor. He later told Luke when he got up off of his knees, he had forgiven his prison guards, including the 'Bird'. He was a changed person. He had allowed the love of God's forgiveness to pour through him and reshape his mind, heart, and spirit.

God's love moved him to go to Japan where he sought out his prison guards and personally forgave each one of them. The 'Bird' was the only one who would not meet with him. The rest of his life was lived in that spirit of forgiveness serving others.

What is it that we pray? "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors". They cannot be disconnected. The ripples of God's forgiving love flowing through us, fleshed out in acts of mercy, compassion, and grace, is what will change the world. And it is all from God.