

Waiting and Hoping for Grace 2023
 Matthew 18:21-33 Romans 14:1-4, 7-12

Matthew 18:21-33 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’

Romans 14:1-4, 7-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Earlier this week Kathy and I went to dinner with some good friends,
 and when the waiter brought our food we bowed our heads for prayer.

After a few moments of silence I asked,
 “Are we waiting for me to say grace?”

Waiting for somebody to say grace.

What an appropriate description of our world and culture today.
 Waiting and hoping that someone will proclaim God’s grace,
 that someone will show mercy, forbearance and compassion.

I believe that describes one of the greatest needs of our world,
 that rather than seeking revenge or demanding their own desires,
 for someone to choose to make room for God’s healing purpose
 by offering understanding, forgiveness and reconciliation.

**We along with all the world, long to hear grace spoken into our lives,
to receive grace - it is a deepest hunger that all humanity shares.**

Can you remember a time when you heard grace spoken to you?

A time when someone had just the exact gentle and healing word
and so touched you with good and grace, kindness and compassion
offering hope, acceptance and concern in just the right way?

Or perhaps when someone that you had wronged, harmed or offended
chose not to exercise their rightful revenge, anger and payback?

My observation is that our culture, especially politics and media,
have **and are** becoming angrier and more harsh, vicious and bitter,
and that we are no longer stunned or even taken back
when horrible things are said or done to someone.

If you follow the news or social media, much of it is grim & hateful,
and it's not just that we disagree or see some things differently,
but it's become a take-no-prisoners & crush them rancor
that gets expressed as **contentious polarized hatred.**

Through grace, Jesus made us his own beloved and precious people,
who are to live-out **a counter-cultural alternative view**
by being a people and place of justice, mercy and healing,
with a new attitude of hope and gratitude and forgiveness.

That is the chief business, the purpose and mission of the Church,
i.e. to reflect and share with others **the same love and grace,**
hope and healing that we ourselves have so freely received.

But it's not always easy to live up to that Christian ideal,
for even in the New Testament the churches struggled
with conflict, misunderstanding and divisive issues.

One of the major issues that led to conflict in the early church,
was the question of whether or not Christians should eat meat,
which Paul addresses in both 1st Corinthians and Romans.

That was a difficult & fundamental issue to those early Christians,
and Paul's solution was less emphasis on the issues themselves,
and way more focus on our unity as Christians through Christ.

**Paul's perspective was that the issues dividing them were far less
important than the greater sin of damaging the body of Christ.**

As Paul wrote in Romans 14, vs. 2-4

Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. **Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?**

**Paul's point is that there was far more at stake here
than just having the church doctrine and theology.**

We can be absolutely right factually and theologically correct,
yet by our actions and treatment of others, **be totally in the wrong.**

The fellow-believers on both sides of that issue and conflict

were in fact, **all** God's own beloved and precious children,
each one called, healed & saved by grace through Jesus Christ...

...which means, if we are truly living-out God's grace and compassion,
then of course we will extend that same grace and compassion,
especially in our dealings with others of Christ's Body.

I believe that it comes down to this:

do I trust God's power, sovereignty, wisdom and judgment
enough to wait and be patient, and let God work it out?,
or do I insist that **I must** defend, and that **I must** attack & condemn
as if the Lord isn't able to fulfill the divine purpose and will?

We are all sinners saved by God's grace alone through faith,
so **it's all about God: who God is and what God has done for us.**
So my focus, is it on God, on building-up the body of Christ,
and allowing God's grace and forbearance to flow through me?

Dealing with their conflict, the Apostle Paul asked, vs. 10, 12,
Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?
For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

In a similar way, dealing with the issue of church conflict,
in the Matthew 18 passage, Peter had similar concerns about
forgiveness among Christians who offend one another, vs. 21,
"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as
seven times?"

According to traditional Jewish teaching and understanding
you should forgive someone who sins against you 3 times, but not 4,
so Peter recognizing how Jesus seemed to perceive things,
more than doubles rabbinic teaching suggesting 7 times, vs. 22
Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

That 77 times was a common idiom, meaning a number beyond counting,
and that according to **life within the Kingdom of God,**
faithful and obedient Christian forgiveness has no limit.

Forgive because doing the math is hard & keeping track is difficult,
for **in fact, if we're counting, then we haven't really forgiven,**
but are really waiting for them to exceed that boundary or limit.

The difference between Peter and Jesus was not a matter of numbers,
but the very nature of Christian community and forgiveness itself.
And then Jesus tells this parable to illustrate his point,
so that it's abundantly clear and disturbingly easy to understand.

In the parable Jesus tells, the numbers are way beyond reasonable.
10k talents represent more money than in all of Palestine,
way more than any king would possibly possess,
or ever allow a slave to run up such a debt.
Jesus was making his point by telling an exaggerated story.

The crowd may have chuckled when Jesus said that he owed that much,

when the slave dares and promise the king, vs. 26,

'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'

They'd have realized the impossibility of paying off such a debt.

The slave cowers and begs, then, vs. 27

And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

That was an incredible act of grace to forgive all that was owed,
and absolutely against the ways and expectations of this world.

The king has pity, accepts the loss, and forgives the whole debt,

breaking with the normal ways that this world thinks & functions
and demonstrating the gracious mercy of life in God's Kingdom.

The point is that our sin against God is a debt we could never repay,
but in Jesus Christ, God takes on our debt and freely forgives.

Forgiveness is a gift of grace, a reflection of God's love and mercy.

It's in clear and sharp contrast, that the second slave

owes the first man just a piddling amount, about \$16,

a debt you could easily to pay off in a fairly short time.

Then the second slave uses the same words that the first man,

'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'

This is intended to heighten and help us see the clear contrast

between the grace that the first man received from the king.
and his cruel refusal to extend that same grace to the other.

The obvious expectation of that 1st slave,

is that having received such grace and mercy from the king,

that of course he would forgive the tiny debt as well

out of gratitude for his massive debt being forgiven.

But rather than gratitude and sharing his good fortune,

the forgiven slave turns with surprising harshness,

throwing his fellow slave, fellow debtor into prison.

Angry and shocked at the 1st slave's unjustified harshness

his fellow-slaves report this unwarranted cruelty, vs. 32-33

Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. **Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'**

The point is, if we have truly received grace and compassion,

then of course we will extend that same grace and compassion,

especially in our dealings with others of Christ's Body,

whether it concerns an issue of conflict & sharp disagreement,

or something hurtful said or done that needs to be forgiven.

The Church by definition, are those who have received God's grace,
and who are called to reflect that truth and mercy of the Lord.

If God has forgiven my lifetime of sins, failings & wrongdoing,

then how can I not forgive & show grace toward sins done to me?

In response to the gracious love and healing given by God

we're called to live as advertisements out in the world,
declaring by the way we live and relate to others,
that God's love and healing **can change human lives,**

for knowing that we are loved and secure in the Lord,
leads to a perspective different than this world,
especially how we treat others, also loved by God.

**Those other people are in fact, far more important to God
than any issue or argument we're trying so hard to win.**

Paul is saying, even more important than our good deeds and theology,
is our ability **to live in community** and be at peace with others,
appreciating, and not crushing the rich diversity among us,
or trying to force someone to believe and behave our way.

Forgiveness and unity these are the primary tasks of the Church.

Forgiveness is the essential that makes Christians truly Christian
and what differentiates the Church, the body of Christ,
from all other human institutions and organizations.

Our call & hope is to remember what it means that God forgave us,
and keep that grace of Jesus Christ at the center of our lives,
by seeking first an authentic relationship with Christ
that leads to meaningful, faithful & joyful discipleship,

**for that is the pipe and conduit through which
God's grace and blessings flow out into the world,
that truly proclaim the truth and Gospel of Jesus Christ.**

To forgive is not to condone or acquiesce to wrong and injustice,
but is our simple refusal to let it overwhelm and destroy us,
or to alienate us away from God's love and from each other,

**always having an attentive concern for our impact on others,
and that seeks to bring out their best gifts, hopes and blessings.**

And here is the practical application of that important truth,
as Jesus said: **John 13:34-35**

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Since we are not seeing much grace, mercy, forbearance or peace,
or acceptance out in our world & culture or in the news right now,
maybe now is the time we are called & equipped to demonstrate
the gracious love of Christ as a better alternative to hatred.

We are a community of faith called to love and care for one another
and one measure, is the impact that we are having on other people,
all of whom are also loved and precious and matter to the Lord,
**and bear in mind that it's especially hard to focus on God
while we're busy being upset & offended by other people.**

It comes down to this, what sort of a church will we be?

Can we accept that all of God's creation is precious and loved?

Can we be an embracing, welcoming and non-judgmental church?

Will we welcome or exclude those who are struggling with their faith?

Will we welcome or exclude those who are searching for answers?

I hope and pray we will choose to be a place of welcome and diversity -

where people are free to disagree and discuss

to openly work through their issues of faith.

As we are informed in *Colossians 3:12~14*,

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.