

Series: Words & Deeds Matter Part 2: “Really! They Are Life Changing”
“Divine Forgiveness Is Conditional”
Genesis 50:15-21
Psalm 103:8-13
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

Divine Forgiveness is conditional. Put another way, putting limits on whom we forgive and how often as well as receiving forgiveness ourselves is problematic. Listen to Robert Farrar Capon’s take on forgiveness. Capon writes,

You’re worried about permissiveness--about the way the preaching of grace seems to say it’s okay to do all kinds of terrible things as long as you just walk in afterward and take the free gift of God’s forgiveness. ...While you and I may be worried about seeming to give permission, Jesus apparently wasn’t. He wasn’t afraid of giving the prodigal son a kiss instead of a lecture, a party instead of probation; and he proved that by bringing in the elder brother at the end of the story and having him raise pretty much the same objections you do. He’s angry about the party. He complains that his father is lowering standards and ignoring virtue--that music, dancing, and a fattened calf are, in effect, just so many permissions to break the law. And to that, Jesus has the father say only one thing: “Cut that out! We’re not playing good boys and bad boys anymore. Your brother was dead and he’s alive again. The name of the game from now on is resurrection, not bookkeeping.”¹

The texts in Genesis 50:15-21, Psalm 103:8-13, Romans 14:1-12, and Matthew 18:21-35 each build on making this point: God remains faithful to God’s promises to Abraham, a faithfulness ultimately seen in Jesus Christ.

Genesis 50:16 reads, “So they approached Joseph, saying, ‘Your father gave this instruction before he died, Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’.... Joseph wept when they spoke to him.” Without Joseph

¹Source: Robert Farrar Capon, *Between Noon and Three*. Christianity Today, Vol. 30, no. 7.

weeping, forgiveness would not have been granted.

Psalms 103:2-3 and 13 reads, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits--.... who forgives all your iniquity...As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.” Without fear of the LORD, that means respect, forgiveness cannot be experienced.

Romans 14:10 reads, “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.” Judging is the opposite of forgiving. And the Bible teaches that if one cannot forgive then God will not forgive that person.

Matthew 18:21-22 and 32-33 reads, “Then Peter said to him, ‘How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.... 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?’” God never withholds forgiveness. But we must ask. When we have been forgiven by God and another, withholding forgiveness from another when we have received forgiveness for the same offense is sinful.²

Welcome all. We are to love those with whom we have disagreement. The phrase “hate the sin and love the sinner” has been turned into “Hate the sin and sinner.” Followers of Jesus are not to personify people with some sin. We are to be known as people of forgiveness. Never

²In the five paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of John W. Wright, Lincoln E. Galloway, Ron Rienstra, Sally A. Brown, Karen Baker-Fletcher, David J. Schlafer, and Raquel St. Clair Lettsome in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 3* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 298-300, 300-302, 303-306, 307-309, 309-310, 311-313, and 313-315.

forget the radical grace you have experienced. Like Paul, you have been a hater and persecutor of those with whom you disagree. Followers of Jesus aren't to negate political, doctrinal, or moral realities that consistently raise their heads in contemporary quarrels. We stand not because we are right, but because of God's unmerited love for us. Through being loved by God and in turn loving others, we move more and more in God's ways. Listen carefully to Romans 12:4. "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." Rules and regulations, doctrines and dogmas can become the lord, small "l" of our lives. Oh, we stand or fall before the small "l" lords all the time. If one chooses to serve another lord, it is before that lord that they will stand or fall. They do not stand or fall before you...or me. We are not to judge. In the end, all will be upheld by the Lord, large "L."

We are not to judge. We are to love. We are to forgive and dispense mercy. We are to love God and others. Period. Rob Bell, the author of *Love Wins* writes,

Jesus calls disciples in order to teach us how to be and what to be; his intention is for us to be growing progressively in forgiveness so that as it takes over our lives, we are taking part more and more and more in life in the age to come, now...Jesus invites us, in this life, in this broken, beautiful world, to experience the life of heaven now.³

The message of Jesus is this: who a person professes him to be is all that matters.

Loving instead of judging is the matrix through which every one of us, believer and non-believer alike, are welcomed and cherished. God forgives all who want to receive God's forgiveness. And when you do, it is a liberating and freeing experience. God's forgiveness is conditional in that you have to ask and receive. However, when it comes to forgiving others, we

³Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York, New York: HarperOne, 2011), 51, 62.

often have selective perception. Just perhaps, the way you forgive others as you have been forgiven is the way God captures the person trapped in the marginalization of judgment. Forgiveness does not come to you unless it goes through you. All you can do is speak and do a verb. Forgive. Amen!

*This sermon was preached on Sunday, 17 September 2023
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