

The Father's Forgiveness

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To “forgive” means to cancel a debt before it has been fully paid. It means to release a person from any further obligation. The “debt” incurred when we sin is eternal death, and the time is coming when, if other arrangements have not been made, each of us will pay that debt fully: “The soul who sins shall die” (Ezek. 18:20). But we’re told by the Scriptures that God is willing to forgive us. This means that a plan has been made available whereby God will erase our indebtedness and relate to us as if we’d never owed Him anything at all. To say that this is “good news” is a considerable understatement.

The story of the Prodigal Son in Lk 15:11-32 not only helps us to see what God’s forgiveness is, it illustrates the most striking feature of that forgiveness: the fact that we don’t deserve it. When the son in the story returned home, he was given a welcome that many would have said was unfair. “He hasn’t proven that he’s sorry, and he doesn’t deserve to be forgiven,” would have been the comment. But that is just the point. If the son deserved mercy, it wouldn’t have been mercy. But mercy is what he got, and mercy is what we will get when we come home to God.

It should be emphasized, of course, that God’s forgiveness is not unconditional. The Prodigal Son had to get up out of the pig pen, go back home, and take honest responsibility for what he’d done. When he said to his father, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son,” he was not just mouthing humble words — it was in fact true that he was unworthy! Similarly, we need to be careful not to take a presumptuous attitude toward God. Let us not be so arrogant as to think that God will forgive us without our facing those we’ve sinned against, making the necessary apologies, and ceasing from the sin itself. And while we’re making our apologies, let us not be so unrepentant as to make excuses for our sin. Jesus said, “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Lk 13:3), and no one has yet found a detour around that statement.

But let’s return to the point concerning the gracious, merciful nature of God’s forgiveness. The sheer undeservedness of it all is seen in several ways:

(1) God does not put us on “probation.” He will not forgive us if our repentance is not genuine, and if our repentance is genuine then “fruits worthy of repentance” (Mt. 3:8) will be forthcoming. But at the point of our coming back home, God is willing to fully reinstate us. When the Prodigal Son returned home, he didn’t find a father with crossed arms and a frown on his face saying, “Well, son, you’ve taken a step in the right direction, but let’s wait and see how you do before we have your ‘Welcome Home’ party.” No, the party was held as soon as arrangements could be made, and that was far from “fair” or “reasonable.” It was simply merciful.

(2) God does not require us fully to understand how deeply we've hurt Him. Justice would suggest that forgiveness be withheld until we've gained an adequate appreciation of the seriousness of what we've done, but God's mercy is seen in the fact that He's willing to forgive us long before that. The Prodigal Son could have had little idea how deeply he had hurt his father, and we can have even less idea what our sins have cost God. But God, like the Prodigal's father, is willing to forgive us anyway. This is, as the song says, "amazing grace."

(3) God takes us where we are and helps us grow from that point. When the Prodigal returned, he was no doubt as sincere as he knew how to be. And yet, if he was like most of us, his sincerity probably fell short of absolute perfection. Ideally, he would have returned home out of sheer, unadulterated love for his father. Realistically though, a self-centered concern to get out of his miserable condition was probably mixed in with his love for his father. In any case, the father took him at his word and welcomed him back. Having been forgiven, the son would have had many occasions in the future to learn a more perfect love for his father.

There is no more nourishing, soul-stirring truth than that God is willing to forgive us. Indeed, He is eager to do so. "And [the son] arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him" (Lk 15:20). This is mercy — undeserved and beyond anything we have a right to expect. It is the love of a Father who is willing to say, "The debt has been canceled. You are free and clear."