

## "What Grace Looks Like"

Matthew 18:21-35

September 17, 2017

We're rapidly approaching the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation next month. So, naturally, we will be doing a lot of talking about...what? Yes, GRACE, of course! Good Lutherans that we are, we know all about GRACE, don't we? Grace is what Lutherans are most importantly all about, right. It's our big Reformation contribution to Christendom! Right? Ephesians 2:8 which is...(anyone)? "*For by GRACE you have been saved, through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God...*"

We throw the word around a lot, but what does it really mean? What does grace really look like? It is what our lessons are all about this morning. But more definitively, our lessons tell us about what grace looks like when it is *acted out*.

Your take home from today: Forgiveness is what grace looks like when it is not just a word, but when is acted out. We see grace acted out as forgiveness in the first lesson from Genesis. Joseph forgives the brothers who sold him into slavery. He forgave them a very great deal, indeed. He did not punish them, though they certainly deserved it for the terrible thing they did to him; they sold their little brother, his father's favorite son and he forgave them. Forgiveness is what grace looks like when it is acted out.

In Romans, Paul says, Don't despise your brother; that is, forgive! Forgiveness is what grace looks like when it is not just a word, but when is acted out.

And in the gospel from Matthew, Jesus makes exceptionally clear that forgiveness-GRACE- must have no limit. Should we forgive as much as seven times? No, Jesus says, not just seven times, but seventy times seven. He doesn't mean 490 times is enough; he means forgiveness must have no end! That's grace! Forgiveness is what grace looks like when it is acted out.

But why? Why should we forgive like this? Why is there this enormous emphasis throughout Scripture on GRACE *acted out as* FORGIVENESS? Well, look with me for a moment at today's Gospel from Matthew, the Parable of the Wicked Servant. Here is this guy who was forgiven a great debt; and, yet, when someone else owed him money, he, "seized him by the throat and told him "Pay what you owe!" He refused to forgive his fellow debtor even a little; and, therefore, the forgiveness he had received was lost; it was taken away from him.

So, the lesson would seem to be: If you do not forgive, you will not be forgiven; that to not forgive is not only a sin, but the "Unforgivable Sin!" Isn't that in effect what we acknowledge in the Lord's Prayer: Forgive us our debts, *as we forgive* our debtors? But that is *not* grace. That's quid pro quo.

Jesus seems to be speaking out of both sides of his mouth. On the one hand, he says to us that we must forgive without limit. And, on the other, he seems to be saying, but God's willingness to forgive you *does* have a limit, and when the limit is reached, when you are unwilling to forgive others. Forgiveness with limits! That's not grace.

But, in fact, what is being said here is a little more complicated than that. You must forgive in order to be forgiven because, if you are unwilling to forgive others, then you, yourself, are unrepentant; you are unrepentant of the sin of not forgiving.

That's not double-talk. Listen to that statement again: if you are unwilling to forgive others, then you, yourself, are unrepentant; you are unrepentant of the sin of not forgiving.

It is not that God is unwilling to forgive you, not that *he* has placed a condition on forgiveness, but that an unrepentant heart is a condition *we* impose on ourselves. It is a condition that keeps us from repenting, keeps us from asking for forgiveness, and therefore, keeps us from being forgiven.

So, it makes sense: how can you be forgiven when you are unwilling to acknowledge the sin and ask for forgiveness?

You have heard it said from this pulpit many times that you and I are baptized and that means our salvation is assured. And it is unless we renounce our baptism by being unwilling to forgive because that is what baptism and grace are all about, the assurance of forgiveness! The whole point of baptism is that you have been forgiven! Right? To be unwilling to forgive as God calls us to do is to say, "I don't want it." I don't want that forgiveness that came to me in my baptism. I renounce my baptism.

It's a bit like that totally untrue thing that people, women mostly, say about men and their unwillingness to stop and ask for directions. You know what I'm talking about. Men, they say, refuse to admit they are lost and stopping to ask for directions would certainly be such an admission. Therefore, we men refuse to stop and ask, and therefore we remain lost.

Of course, that's not true about any of the men here this morning, but it is true that you can't give directions to someone who won't stop and ask for them! That was true before we had a GPS in our car. Of course, now we men say, "That thing is wrong!" As sorry as you may feel for the guy who has driven past your house five times in 20 minutes, obviously lost, and as much as you would like to give him directions, if he doesn't stop and ask, what can you do? Therefore, your inability to give him directions is a condition he has imposed on himself.

*That's the point.* It is not God's unwillingness to forgive; it is our unwillingness to stop and ask for it, or, to renounce the forgiveness we have *already received* in our Baptism by not forgiving others, by refusing to stop and ask directions.

Of course, if you really cared, what you could do is throw yourself in front of that guy's car to make him stop so you can help him. Now, that might stop him, or it might get you run over!

This is basically what God did in sending his Son. He threw himself into our sinful path to get us to stop and hear about grace, about the forgiveness so freely offered to us! Did we stop? No! We ran over him! Killed him!

And, then, some few, finally stopped, Paul and Luther among them, and helped the rest of us realize just how lost we really are. Standing there at the scene of the accident, looking up at the cross, we repented. We asked for forgiveness. And God forgave us for running over, and killing, his Son.

If he can forgive that, he can forgive anything, if we are willing to stop and ask. Repentance literally means to stop and turn around. Repentance means to admit we are lost and to ask for God's direction in our lives. As Luke 19 tells us, "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save *the lost*." Let's see, that would be you and me driving around in circles.

So, when we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive...", we are praying not only that God would forgive us, but that he would help us to repent so that we can *receive the forgiveness* that he so freely offers. And he will. And that is grace!

God imposes no limit, no condition on forgiveness. It is we who limit God's forgiveness by refusing to acknowledge our own need for it. We would rather drive around blindly than admit we are lost and in need of a Savior. Perhaps that's because God's expectation of us, *which is to be forgiving people even as he is a forgiving God*, perhaps it's because that expectation is just too great.

I mean, think about it! How can we be expected to forgive even seven times, much less seventy times seven? That's ridiculous!

How, having been reminded of the horror of Sept. 11, can we be expected to forgive those who drove airplanes into buildings full of innocent people. Forgive them? That's ridiculous!

And how can God be expected to forgive us for putting his Son to death again and again with our unrepentant hearts? Ridiculous?

No, not ridiculous; rather, this *is* the promise: if we acknowledge our sin, he will forgive us. Now that's amazing! And that, dear friends, is grace!

You want to know what grace looks like. Look at the cross. And that, dear friends, is grace.

So, I ask you this morning: Who have you not forgiven? What has someone done to you that is so heinous, so hurtful, that you cannot forgive them for it? Now, how does that anger, that you've carried around all this time, how does that anger feel to you? And how might you feel if you could forgive that person and put that anger away once and for all?

If you can do that, then you will know what grace looks like.

Forgiveness is what Grace looks like.

*Pastor Dwayne Westermann  
College Lutheran Church  
Salem, Va*