

The Forgiveness at the Heart of Kingdom Living

Luke 6:27-38

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Jesus takes it for granted that we have enemies. No matter how good you are, no matter how kind, you will have enemies. There will always be mean people who want to hurt you. There will be nice people who get mean when you cross them. The question is not how to avoid making people mad; the question is how to respond to them when you do. Jesus says, “Here’s the thing to do when they come after you: love them, give to them, forgive them.”

Jesus wants us to live in a world where mercy surrounds us like sunshine. That is the world he calls the kingdom of God. The fundamental law of that kingdom is not that you reap what you sow or get what you deserve. The fundamental law of the kingdom is forgiveness. The most basic element of reality is grace.

You know that Jesus came announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God. It was the long-awaited messianic kingdom of God’s rule on earth that was being inaugurated through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. John the Baptist had said that the Messiah was coming and that he would bring judgment. And yes, you could say that Jesus brought judgment on hypocritical religion, on the selfish rich, and on those who use violence. But the Messiah’s kingdom turned out to be something different than most of his fellow Jews expected, even John. It was a kingdom of forgiveness.

One of the early miracles Jesus does in Luke’s gospel (5:17-26) helps to define his mission. You probably remember the story. Four friends bring a paralyzed man to see Jesus, carrying him on a stretcher, but they can’t get into the house where Jesus is teaching. What do they do? This is the part kids love: they go up on the flat roof of the house and brick by brick make a hole in the roof so they can let their friend down by ropes. Jesus is standing there preaching and down comes this man in front of him. In Sunday School the point of that story is how nice it is to help our friends—and especially to help them find Jesus.

But in Luke’s gospel the point is something very different. What does Jesus say to the paralyzed man? “Friend, your sins are forgiven.” I don’t think this means that Jesus thought sin caused the paralysis, but that what the man needed was to be made whole, body and spirit. But Jesus also meant to provoke the religious people who were there. They began to ask each other, “Who is this guy who thinks he can forgive sins? Only God can forgive. We don’t have the right to forgive.” Jesus says to them, in effect, you wouldn’t have a problem if I told this man to walk and healed him, but you are upset when I forgive his sins. I’m going to heal him, but for this reason: so that you will know that I have the authority to forgive sins.”

A few chapters later (7:36-50) a woman well known as a sinner comes into a room full of religious men and pours ointment on Jesus’ feet and kisses them. The religious think that Jesus shouldn’t have allowed her to touch him. But Jesus says to the woman “Your sins are forgiven.” The men at the table ask one another “Who is this guy who even forgives sins?”

These actions of forgiving sins and hanging around with sinners are not separate from the message of the kingdom of God. The messianic kingdom is a kingdom of forgiveness. The prophets had foretold that in the last days, when God’s rule on earth came to pass, that sins would be forgiven. Some Jewish teachers understood that forgiveness of sins was going to be one of the benefits of the messianic age, often called “the age to come.” Now Jesus came

announcing that the age to come was present in his person. The age of forgiveness had arrived. The heart of his message was that God is a merciful Father, and so he tells us to live in that kingdom of mercy ourselves. “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Jesus wasn’t content to teach, like the rabbis, that God would forgive someday. He taught that the kingdom has come now, and he made the kingdom real by forgiving people. The Jews had always heard, “If you do right, God will forgive you someday because you are part of his people.” But Jesus was now saying “Your sin is forgiven. Period.”

But Jesus carried it one step further. He told his disciples to extend the kingdom of God by forgiving those who had hurt them. Jesus says, “Now it is up to you to make the kingdom real in your community by forgiving those who have sinned against you. I can bring God’s forgiveness to you, but only you can bring forgiveness to the people who have offended you.”

Over and over Jesus commands us to forgive those who sin against us. He scares us by telling us that God’s forgiveness of us is inextricably bound up with our forgiveness of others: “If you choose to live in the old age of non-forgiveness rather than in the kingdom, that’s your choice.” You can either live over here in the kingdom of tit for tat, demanding justice; or you can live over here in the new kingdom of mercy and forgiveness. But you can’t have it both ways. You can’t claim forgiveness for yourself and deny it to others. This became a basic rule of life in the early church. Colossians 3:13 says “Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” Ephesians 4:32 says “Forgive one another just as God through Christ has forgiven you.” We who have entered the kingdom through faith in the Messiah are to live in the reality of that kingdom. We are to live out of an alternative view of reality.

That understanding is behind the verses we read from what is often called the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6. “These new attributes and behaviors flow from Jesus’ image of God as the merciful Father, whose own practices are not stingy or calculated, but lavish and full of grace” [Joel Green, *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*]. We are commanded to love our enemies. Why? Because God loves those who hate him. Everything in this passage depends on how we see God. If we see God as a tit-for-tat deity, then we will be his agents of punishment. But if we really believe that God is a God of amazing grace, then we will be agents of that grace. The common version of the Golden Rule was “Don’t do to others what you don’t want them to do to you.” Jesus makes it more active: “Do to others what you would want them to do for you.” But if that’s the Golden Rule in verse 31, what comes in verse 36 must be the Platinum Rule: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” He applies that: be merciful to enemies, be merciful to thieves, be merciful to beggars, be merciful to debtors. It sounds unrealistic, but Jesus reminds us that God “is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.”

I suspect that our root problem in forgiving is in our view of God, which is to say our view of the way the universe works spiritually. As long as we think that God is kind to the good and hates sinners, we are going to be struggling to earn God’s approval and eager to join God in condemning those who fall short. This is Fred Phelps’ religion at Westboro Baptist Church: God hates fags, God hates America, God hates sin and therefore God hates sinners. You can find texts to support that view. But I don’t know what the Phelps family does with texts like Jesus’ sermons.

Jesus says in verse 27 that we must love our enemies, and the word for “enemy” is literally “the hated.” Love those you now hate. He gives three examples of how to do that: do good to them, bless them, and pray for them. Love is not a feeling toward them—we may indeed feel hate. Love is acting for their good, speaking well of them, wishing the best for them, and asking God to help them. Jesus says that we are to respond with kindness to those who slap us in

the face, to those who take things from us, to those who beg and are demanding, and to those who borrow with no intention of repaying. Don't all of those things drive you crazy? Don't they make you mad? And in the old world we were justified in giving them what they deserved. But we live in a new world now. We are breathing mercy. We are floating on forgiveness. The life pumping through our veins is grace. So we treat people the way God does.

I want you to focus in a moment on your enemies. But before we do that, I want you to focus on God. Which God do you have—the God of mercy, or the God who judges and condemns? Have you been persuaded that God loves you and accepts you as his child as you are? Are you living in the reality that God has done everything necessary for you to be completely forgiven through Jesus' life and death and resurrection, that God has made the kingdom of grace a present reality? If you're not there, we need to talk about that privately so that you can share the life Jesus is talking about.

But now I want you to think of one person who has been mean to you. Think of one person you cannot forgive. Cup your hands like this in front of you—and place that person in your hands. See a small version of him or her standing there. Now I don't expect you to stop being angry with that person. What I want you to try is doing what Jesus commands us here. Try to think of something good you can do for that person. Say to that person in your hands, "God bless you." And pray to the Father, "Please help this person who has hurt me to grow spiritually, to develop and prosper in every way. I wish only good for him or her." If you are able to pray that, you have forgiven. Forgiveness is not ceasing to feel hurt; forgiveness is a decision not to make the other person pay for hurting you.

Is it really possible to forgive enemies? My life story says yes. I was born in Japan at the end of the American occupation following World War II. It is a miracle of history that the United States chose to be generous to those it conquered, and my parents' going to Japan as missionaries was an act of forgiveness. The reception they received was an act of forgiveness on the part of the Japanese. I cannot imagine us today extending the same kind of forgiveness to Islamist radical groups, who are no more fanatical or murderous than the Japanese or the Germans were. Perhaps that is because the vision of living in the kingdom of God has lost its grip on us as a people, and the Sermon on the Mount has faded from our consciousness (it once was the heart of the progressive political vision).

The war that killed the *most* Americans was the Civil War. Even before that war was over, President Lincoln called for malice toward none and charity toward all, and for binding up the nation's wounds. He was not living in the kingdom of tit-for-tat but in the kingdom of mercy.

Frederick Buechner tells about watching a scene in the Ken Burns film series on the Civil War. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, and veterans from North and South gathered at the battleground to reminisce. At one point, the veterans decided to reenact Pickett's Charge. All the participants took their positions, and then one side began to charge the other. Instead of swords and rifles, this time the vets carried canes and crutches. As both sides converged, the old men did not fight. Instead they embraced and began to weep.

Buechner muses, "If only those doddering old veterans had seen in 1863 what they now saw so clearly fifty years later." Then he adds: "Half a century later, they saw that the great battle had been a great madness. The men who were advancing toward them across the field of Gettysburg were not enemies. They were human beings like themselves, with the same dreams, needs, hopes, the same wives and children waiting for them to come home ... What they saw was that we were, all of us, created not to do battle with each other but to love each other, and it was

not just a truth they saw. For a few minutes, it was a truth they lived. It was a truth they became”
[“Journey Toward Wholeness,” *Theology Today* 49/4 (January 1993), pp. 454-464].

In *Rumors of Another World* [Ch. 13, Zondervan 2003], Philip Yancey describes how in a Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing in South Africa, a policeman by the name of Van de Broek recounted how he, together with other officers, had shot at point blank range an 18 year old boy, and then burned the body to destroy the evidence. The policeman went on to describe, how eight years later, he returned to the boy’s home and forced his mother to watch as he bound her husband, poured gasoline over him and set him on fire.

As Van de Broek spoke the room grew quieter and quieter. And when the story was finished, the judge turned to the woman and asked: “What do you want from Mr. van de Broek?” She replied, “I want him to go to the place my husband was burned, and gather up the dust there so that I can give him a decent burial.” Van de Broek, head down, nodded in assent. “Then,” she said, “Mr. Van de Broek took all my family away from me, but I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to my home and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. Van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real.”

That is the life in the kingdom to which Jesus calls us.