

Learning To Be Forgiven
Matthew 7:1-6; John 3:16-21
May 30, 2010

In Romans 5, we are reminded that sin entered the world through Adam.

When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. (Rom 5:12, 15)

Please notice that I said *sin*, not *sins*. Through Adam, all humanity developed a sin nature. It is this corruption of our original nature that caused the relational damage that we see beginning as early as Cain and Abel.

You and I are created in the image of the Trinitarian God; a God who lives in community within himself – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Since we are created in God’s image, we too are meant to live in community (or communion) with other people and with God. It is our sin nature that makes it impossible to successfully remain in communion with other people and with God by our own will. We are constantly acting in ways that damage our relationships with our families, our friends and our God.

Enter Forgiveness. The practice of forgiveness is central in Christian theology and in the Christian life. Forgiveness is an act of restoration. It is not meant to be a sign that what preceded it did not matter. Instead, it is an act that affirms restoration of communion as of utmost importance in the Kingdom of God.

However, while it is important to forgive, in order to properly forgive others we must first learn how to be forgiven. In other words, before we can rightly forgive others, we must understand the places we need to be forgiven ourselves.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of the concept of cheap grace. While affirming the need for grace, he said that cheap grace denies any real need for deliverance from sin since it justifies the sin rather than the sinner. So, cheap grace offers consolation for the individual acts of wrongdoing without requiring any real change of life – without any real sense of dying or rising with Christ.

In order to move beyond cheap grace, we must submit ourselves to Christ’s judgment. We cannot become “new” unless we are willing to be shown, and confess, that our “old” nature is fallen. Too often we are not willing to have our own sins shown to us; instead we prefer to focus on the sinfulness of others.

However, Matthew 7:3-5 calls us to embrace a sobering reality that most of us are comfortable overlooking:

Why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.

Without the willingness to submit *ourselves* to judgment, we cannot be truly forgiven and we will not truly forgive others. The judgment that we need to submit to in order to learn to be forgiven is the judgment of Christ. If we will open our eyes to what is communicated in the act of the Incarnation of the Son in the person of Jesus Christ we will find that we are indeed sinners. We are taught that the forgiveness we have in Christ comes to us even before we ask. This is true, but it does not mean that we have not been judged by our Lord. The very fact that the Son offers forgiveness at all is the result of a prior judgment on the presence of sin in our lives.

In other words, the fact that the Son needed to come, take human form, be crucified and be resurrected is evidence of the presence of the destructive presence of sin in you and in me. It is still an act of grace in that God's unconditional forgiveness and healing are signs of God's Kingdom present. *God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.* (John 3:17) But, our judgment has already taken place in heaven.

What is needed in response to the judgment of God and the forgiveness offered through Christ is repentance. Forgiveness without repentance invites the perpetuation of sin. An example of this would be a man who physically abuses his wife. After the abuse happens, many times the wife forgives the man; however, the man does not repent. Because of the lack of repentance, we can be assured that the act of violence will happen again. In fact, we know that he did not repent precisely because we see the act of violence repeated.

It is the same with the violence we commit against our relationship with God and with the people in our lives. When we are offered forgiveness, but we do not repent, we can be assured that the destruction of communion will continue to happen. In fact, the evidence of our unrepentant stand is the fact that we repeat our sinful acts over and over again.

When was the last time you went to someone else (a friend, a spouse, a parent, or a child), repented to them for your action, and asked forgiveness? The relationship that has been broken by your sinfulness cannot be restored until and unless you humble yourself and repent. Even if you are only 10% at fault in the brokenness that exists, you must take 100% responsibility for your 10% and confess it.

It is exactly the mindset of one who loves the concept of being forgiven by the grace of God, but will not humble themselves to repent that Paul speaks to in Romans 6:1-7:

Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? Of course not! Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it? Or have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death? For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.

Friends, learning to be forgiven is imperative in the life of a Christian. If we do not come to a concrete, sincere understanding of ourselves as sinful people who need to be forgiven then we are in danger of reducing the forgiveness we offer into an act of power over those to whom we offer it. Learning to be forgiven means humbling ourselves before the Incarnate Son of God splayed on the cross. It means confessing that our sin nature has a hold on us that we would rather not acknowledge. It means repenting of that in us which separates us from those who love us – including our communion with God.

While it is not pleasant to look into the darkness that lurks within our souls, it is precisely what we need to do so that we can appropriate the power of the crucified and risen Christ. *Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was. We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin.* (the last part of the Romans passage above)

The new state of forgiven-ness in which we find ourselves as a result of our spiritual honesty and sincere repentance enables a new future for us in the Kingdom of God. This is good news for us. For once we can truthfully learn to become forgiven people, only then can we be Kingdom agents of forgiveness in the lives of others – ministers of reconciliation and restoration in the name of God.