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THE GRACE OPPORTUNITY

Matthew 18:21–35

One Main Thing

God's grace opens up the opportunity for us to conduct lives of grace directed at others.

Introduction

I don't care much for ultimatums. Ultimatums make me uncomfortable because they force me to make life altering decisions. It appears to some that Jesus makes an ultimatum with his words in Matthew 6:14–15.

> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

When we forgive others, God forgives us. When we do not forgive others...well, God does not forgive us. Of

all the extremes in the Bible, this might be the most difficult. It isn't difficult because I don't desire to obey Christ; I deeply desire to obey Christ, but the difficulty comes because I know how hard it is to forgive others. More times than I care to admit I do not want to forgive those who wrong me. But I know that I must forgive, and ultimately, I want to want to forgive. I find myself in the same conundrum as Paul in Romans 7:19. What I want to do I don't do.

Going Deeper

I believe the mistake comes from perspective. The Gospel of Matthew repeatedly mentions the heart of the true believer. The most impactful occurrence is of Jesus himself in Matt 15:8–20. Jesus references Isa 29:13 to show the impact of the heart problem among the law-abiding traditionalist of the day. These individuals, much like traditional extremists of today, are so blinded by their tradition that they refuse to open their hearts up to love that only comes from Jesus. Jesus says it best, "So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God" (Matt 15:6). Heart problems inherently cause perspective issues. When the heart is not focused on the love of God and love of others (Matt 22:36–40) the Christian will fail in living like Christ. The perspective, thwarted by the heart problem, is where the mistake comes. Often Matt 6:14–15 is read with a "what can God do for me" selfishness. This causes the view that what Jesus spoke is an ultimatum. Think for a moment what might happen to our perspective

if the scripture was read instead as, "What can I do for God and His people?" This completely changes the interpretation! Instead of looking at what we can GET, we look at what we can GIVE. This is the perspective, the heart, that we must have. This is the thought process that allows us to set our minds according to the Spirit instead of the flesh (Rom 8:5). This is what Jesus spoke of in encouraging his followers to find a greater blessing in giving than receiving (Acts 20:35) and is certainly what he was referencing to the sons of Zebedee (James and John) in Matt 20:26–28 where he speaks to servanthood being greatest. When we have a give and not get perspective, we see Jesus' words in Matt 6:14–15 not as an ultimatum but as an opportunity to provide forgiveness and grace. The availability to receive forgiveness and the ability to give it is at the very heart of Christianity. If we desire to live like, be like, and act like Christ we must have forgiveness at the forefront of our minds.

Later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus offers a parable to drive the point home, the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:21–35). To properly understand this text, we must first review the immediate context. In verses 15–20, Jesus discusses conflict resolution. We often look to this passage for "permission" to disfellowship wayward brethren. However, we see the main theme of both these passages in Peter's response, "Lord how often will my brother sin against me, and I

forgive him? As many as seven times?" (v. 21). Both passages concern forgiveness and the mindset that one must have to offer it.

Peter understood the rabbinic tradition of the day, as did Jesus, which said that if you forgive a man three times you are not obligated to forgive him a fourth.[1] So when Peter offers the rhetorical seven, he believes he is extending great quantitative mercy. However, Jesus is not looking for quantitative mercy, but qualitative mercy. This is seen in his response, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times" (v. 22). That's how the ESV and some other translations render the verse. We might be more accustomed to the KJV's "seventy times seven," which we calculate out to be 490. Of course, any calculation misses the point that what Jesus intends to communicate to Peter is that you cannot set a number on how often we offer forgiveness, just as we would not want God to set such a number for the forgiveness we enjoy. So there is no need to calculate using first century common core here; Jesus is simply implying that forgiveness is limitless, and grace never ends. He illustrates with a parable.

A powerful king has a servant who owes 10,000 talents. This was an unimaginable size of debt. The talent was the highest unit of currency and a debt of 10,000

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[1] W. C. Allen, *The International Critical Commentary: The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1912).

talents would have been astronomical.[2] This number is so large a sum that it would be impossible for the servant to ever pay the amount back in his lifetime. The number may possibly represent "more than the entire annual income of the king, and perhaps more than all the actual coinage in circulation in most kingdoms... at that time!"[3] Perhaps the incomprehensible number finds itself hardly even equated with the forgiveness graciously given to us by God.

When the servant comes before the king he asks for patience and promises he will repay the debt. The king, knowing better, not only offers the patience, but he forgives the debt completely. This is the story of God we live each day. I am reminded of the hymn "He Paid a Debt He Did Not Owe."

> He paid a debt He did not owe.
> I owed a debt I could not pay
> ...
> And now I sing a brand-new song,
> Amazing Grace [all day long].[4]

How awesome would the story have been if it had just ended here. The master has patience, the servant is

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[2] R.T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary,* Vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985).

[3] Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014).

[4] Ellis J. Crum, *He Paid a Debt He Did Not Owe* (Sacred Selections R.E. Winsett LLC, 1977).

forgiven, grace is applied and not denied. But this is not just a story about the victory of grace God supplies; it is a story about our need to apply the same grace to others.

With his slate of debt erased, the servant walks joyfully to his next appointment. He calls a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii. This would equate to a hundred days' wages,[5] a miniscule amount compared to that which the forgiven servant owed. Now this is the part of the story we all see coming or at least we think. Of course, the newly forgiven servant will forgive his servant! Right? Then Jesus throws in the twist. The indebted servant asks for patience, just like the forgiven servant had done to his master, but not only does this forgiven servant fail to provide patience, but his greed and ruthlessness drives him away from the principle of grace and instead to vengeance. The forgiven servant imprisons the indebted servant until he can pay the debt.

Bystanders respond shocked and began spreading the news. The king found out, summoned the forgiven servant, and revoked his forgiveness due to the servant's unwillingness to show mercy and grace.

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[5] Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014).

Application

There appears to be a sort of succession in receiving and applying forgiveness and grace. There is a request for forgiveness, a reward offered by grace, and the required response of the forgiven to forgive others just as they had been forgiven. It is an opportunity and not an ultimatum. The teaching of the parable is a calling for Christians to forgive. We forgive because God has forgiven us even when we could not pay. He asks that we impart grace as it has been imparted to us. Can we really call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ if we do not forgive like he forgives?

This can make us extremely uncomfortable! And this discomfort can drive us to be self-proclaimed theologians asking questions like, "Does this mean our salvation is dependent upon our actions instead of God's grace?" But this is folly. Salvation is imparted by grace through faith (Eph 2:8–9), and this living faith drives us to desire to do good works (James 2:14–26). Afterall, this is what we were created for (Eph 2:10). Jesus is plain and practical. Do not expect your greater sins to be forgiven if you are not willing to forgive others.

The deeper we go into this idea of forgiveness the harder it can become. The greater the relationship the greater the chance for hurt and need for forgiveness. It is one thing to forgive a colleague for not inviting you to a birthday party, but it is something entirely

different to forgive the husband who commits adultery, the neighbor who sexually assaults your daughter, the person who murders your wife, and so on. Intimacy provides the opportunity for greater loss and makes grace and forgiveness more difficult. The need to forgive is greater than ever, but we simply do not know how, and quite frankly, we don't want to. This is where it will take a providential act of the grace God supplies.

We see the real-life account of this parable in Paul's letter to Philemon. Onesimus is a runaway bondservant deserving of punishment. Paul, though, asks Philemon to have mercy, patience, grace, and forgiveness toward Onesimus. He even says, "receive him as you would receive me" (v. 17). The message of Philemon is reconciliation and partnership. This is a vision of grace! Philemon receives Paul's words not as an ultimatum, but as an opportunity to provide forgiveness and grace.

Corrie Ten Boom recounts her vision of grace in her book *The Hiding Place*. Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch Christian and Holocaust survivor who was placed in a Nazi concentration camp for protecting Jews from the Gestapo. She recounts speaking at a church in Germany about forgiveness after the war. After she finished speaking and stepped down from the pulpit she noticed a familiar face walking towards her. It was one of the chief guards from the concentration camp where she and her sister were incarcerated. This man was the culprit who beat her sister mercilessly resulting in her death not many days later. As he walked straight

toward Ms. Ten Boom he reached out his hand and said, "Oh, Fraulein [ma'am], how grateful I am for your powerful message. To think that Jesus washed my sins away." Corrie Ten Boom found herself paralyzed with fear and anger. She later wrote these words, "Even as the vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them…and yet I could do nothing about it. I could not feel even the slightest spark of love or charity. And so, I breathed this silent prayer. 'Jesus, I cannot forgive him, please give me your forgiveness.'" And with that prayer she was able to lift her hand from her side and touched the hand of the man who had persecuted her. "From my shoulder" she writes, "along my arm and through my hand passed a current from me to him… and in that moment I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing depends, the world's healing depends upon God. When our Lord tells us to love our enemies, he gives us, along with the command to do it, the love itself."[6]

To forgive is not an act of your will power, but it is a divine function of grace. It means you make a conscious choice to move forward, unbound by evil. Jesus isn't making an ultimatum when he says we must forgive in order to be forgiven. Instead I believe he is providing

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[6] Corrie Ten Boom, John L. Sherrill, Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Westwood, N.J., Barbour,1971), 238.

an opportunity for how, we too, can provide visions of grace in the lives of our neighbor just as God has done for us. On Corrie Ten Boom's tombstone it is inscribed, "Jesus is Victor." Is Jesus your victor? May our hearts be forever changed to apply what God provides.

Grace: unmerited favor. A gift I simply do not deserve.

Discussion

1. What must we do to change our hearts and minds to look more like Jesus?
2. Jesus says we must love one another (John 13:34), but do we have to like each other?
3. What are ways God has had grace on your life?
4. Are there traditions we have today that make it difficult to show the love of Christ? Should we get rid of some traditions? Should we keep some?
5. Paul said he was the chief of sinners (1 Tim 1:15). Should we view ourselves in this way? Does viewing ourselves as sinners contradict the grace God gives us?
6. The king forgave the servant and later revoked that forgiveness because he was unwilling to forgive his servant. It appears that the king forgave, but did not forget. Does God forgive and forget? Does he forgive but not forget? Can we be forgiven today, but lose that if we stray from Him tomorrow? When we forgive must we forget?