

GRACE ON LOAN

Series: Gracenomics
December 7, 2014
Adam Mosley
Grace, Forgiveness, Justice
Matthew 18:21-35; Lamentations 3:22-23

*In his book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning relates a story of Fiorello LaGuardia, who was mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression and all of WWII. LaGuardia was called "the Little Flower" by his constituents, because he was only about five foot four and always wore a carnation on his lapel. He was a colorful character who used to ride the New York City fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police department, and take entire orphanages to baseball games. He was a beloved figure.*

One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself.

Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. "It's a real bad neighborhood, your Honor." the man told the mayor. "She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson." LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions--ten dollars or ten days in jail." But even as he pronounced sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous sombrero saying: "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Baliff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

So the following day the New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

Grace - unmerited love, favor, or forgiveness - is a powerful thing. It is, all at once, confounding and fitting - confounding because no one, including the recipient, can understand why grace is offered, but fitting in that we all long for second chances, we all need them, and by offering grace to others, we fess up to our own brokenness and need. Grace, rather than being a *counterforce* to justice, is actually the *full realization* of justice. Why should I be pardoned of *any act* if I'm unwilling to pardon others. Why should the scales of justice tip only in *my* favor?

You see, there are only two truly equitable ways to deal with justice. Either everyone receives the just punishment for all the wrong they've committed, or everyone is offered forgiveness. We can't pray for grace for ourselves while praying for justice for our enemies.

The last time we gathered, I began a series called *Gracconomics*, and I talked about *Our Great Grace Deficit* - the realization that we are all in need of grace, love, and forgiveness. This morning, I want to continue our series and talk about Grace on Loan - the fact that, once we've realized our own deficit, that understanding should propel us toward the ultimate form of justice and equity - grace for all people.

But before I go any farther, let's pray.

Pray

You know, almost any time I have an extended conversation with someone about this idea of grace and forgiveness, the question comes up. "How much should I forgive? Where's the line? I mean, isn't there some point where you just say, 'enough is enough'?"

The Apostle Peter - one of Jesus' closest friends and confidants - asked the exact same question of Jesus. It's recorded in the book of Matthew - the first book in what we call the New Testament - in the bible. Listen to Jesus' response in Matthew chapter 18, verses 21 & 22:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" [Peter thought that was pretty good. Seven times was a lot!]

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Matthew 18:21-22 [Comments mine]

Some translations say "seventy times seven". The point though, nearly all scholars agree, is that we are to forgive to an extreme degree - in fact, the message of Jesus to Peter and us is that we are to not count at all - that we shouldn't keep a tally, but should forgive and forgive and forgive - seventy seven (or seven *times* seven) times.

And to drive home his point, Jesus tells a story. Jesus loved to tell stories - tales that were easily understood and relatable to his audience, but which carried significant underlying meaning, which wasn't always immediately understood by his listeners. This is the story he told Peter:

He said, "You know the kingdom of heaven I'm always talking about - that realm where God rules fully? Well it works kind of like this:"

There was this king who wanted to settle accounts with all his servants. And as he began looking at his books, he realized that there was a servant who owed him a very large sum of money - the equivalent of 30 billion Kenyan shillings. A servant...who owed 30 billion shillings.

At the normal wage of a laborer, if he had given 100% of his wages to the king, it would still have taken over 160,000 years to pay back that debt. So, since he would never be able to

repay it, the king told him he would have to sell all of his possessions, plus his wife and kids, and give whatever money he made to pay down a tiny portion of that debt.

But the guy begged the king. "Please be patient! I'll pay it back. I'll work my butt off. Please just don't take away everything and everyone I have." Of course, the king knew that the guy couldn't fulfill that promise. He couldn't pay off that debt in a thousand lifetimes. But the king had pity on the man and did something extravagant - he forgave the debt. In full.

Can you imagine a 30 billion shilling debt just being wiped clean? The servant was ecstatic! He bounded out of the room, riding high on his new-found financial freedom and bumped into a fellow servant who was, himself, on his way to see the king.

And the guy realized something. That fellow servant actually owed him some money - a hundred silver coins - about 50,000 shillings. Now, that's no small sum of money, and the guy understandably wanted to be repaid. But he became aggressive with his friend.

He grabbed him and said, "Pay back what you owe me!" His friend fell to his knees and begged him, "Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it back."

But the guy refused. He called the guards and had his friend thrown in prison until the debt was paid off. Well, this caused an uproar among all the other servants. They had heard how the king had forgiven such a large debt, and now this man was putting his friend in prison for a comparably small sum.

The other servants went and told the king what happened, and the king was furious. He had the servant brought to him, and he called him every name in the book. "I cancelled a massive debt of yours simply because you asked. There was no reason I should have cleared that debt, but I did it anyway. Don't you think you should have had mercy on your friend?"

The king was so angry that he handed the man over to be tortured by the jailers. And he would be tortured for the rest of his life, since he was unable to repay that debt.

Then Jesus told Peter, and the others gathered there, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Wow! What a story! What a *threat*. Jesus basically said, "If you won't forgive others, then God won't forgive you." I heard someone compare forgiveness to breathing - that we have a certain capacity for grace, and that, unless we breath out grace to others, we have no more capacity to breath in more grace from God. We must, instead, receive and give, receive and give - a rhythm of grace in our lives and the lives of those around us.

But forgiveness is hard, isn't it? I mean, it's easy to say we should forgive, but when you think about the person who hurt *you*, who betrayed *you* - the person who *owes you* - forgiveness and grace don't come easy.

C.S. Lewis, in his book *Reflections on the Psalms* says:

There is no use talking as if forgiveness were easy...I could say of a certain man, "Have I forgiven him for what he did that day? I've forgiven him more times than I can count." For we

find the work of forgiveness has to be done over and over again. We mortify our resentment; a week later some chain of thought carries us back to the original offence and we discover the old resentment blazing away as if nothing had been done about it at all. We need to forgive our brother seventy times seven, not only for 490 offences, but for one offence.

And that's the toughest thing isn't it? Those nagging wrongs that have been done to you. The ones you thought you put behind you, only to find them resurfacing again in your mind. And we have a few responses in those moments. We can either let unforgiveness fester, and get all worked up again - to our own detriment, or we can just feel guilty about our unforgiveness and get upset at ourselves, or we can choose to forgive *again* and begin again the process of restoration with that person, just as God begins anew his restoration with us each time we turn from his way.

And only one of those responses really has any chance at a positive outcome. It's been said that unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. That stuff festers in us. It poisons us. Unforgiveness in one relationship affects all our other relationships. It's bad stuff. It will kill us.

But forgiveness brings life. Grace - the kind of grace God offers *us* - when extended to others, is one of the most life-giving forces in the universe. So, where's the line? How much should I forgive? God's answer is, "Well, that depends. How much do *you* want to be forgiven?"

Which begs the question: **How much have I already been forgiven?**

Last time we were together, I talked about recognizing our own grace deficit. Like the servant in the story Jesus told, there is much value in taking a reckoning of our accounts. If you're like me, you might start doing the math and realize that you, too, owe 160,000 years wages!

Jesus showed us just how far he was willing to go to forgive. He was a man who is now seen by billions of people, of various faiths, as a good man - someone who serves as a model human being - someone to be emulated. Even those who don't believe in Jesus' divinity, believe that he was a good human being. But everybody has their limits, right? Not Jesus.

In the final few days of Jesus' life, he was unjustly arrested, wrongly convicted, tortured physically and psychologically, and brutally killed by being hung on a cross - a method of execution that was slow, painful, and ultimately, resulted in death by suffocation. And what was Jesus' response as he hung there on that cross? He looked at the soldiers who had spit on him and beat him, he looked at the religious leaders who orchestrated his arrest and the government officials who had overseen his mock trial, he looked at the crowd who had come out to watch the spectacle, and he said, "Father, forgive them."

Forgive them? I've got to tell you, this is one of those times where it becomes *really clear* that I'm not so much like Jesus. Forgive them? How about, "Father, bring the thunder! Bring your wrath on these worthless piles of nothing. Wipe them off the face of the planet. They want to see if I am who I say I am? It's time to show them who's boss!" That's how *I* would have felt. That's what *I* would have said. But Jesus says, "Father, forgive them."

You see, Jesus understood the power of forgiveness and grace. In fact, Jesus knew the whole point of his life and death was that there are certain consequences for our actions that we are fully incapable of handling. Jesus knew that, over the course of history, humankind has built up a debt that we can never repay. It's a debt that is crippling. It's a debt that will kill us. So, he offered himself in our stead. He said, "Let me take on that debt. You're free of it. 160,000 years of debt? 160 *million* years of debt? I've got this. Let me pay the price. Father, forgive them."

Are you kidding me? I said it last time, and I say it again: This is *the good news* of Jesus. That no matter who you are or what you've done, God forgives you. Jesus pays off your debt. And just as you might struggle with forgiveness day in and day out, God forgives you and offers you grace every single day. In the ancient book of Lamentations, it says:

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.*

Lamentations 3:22-23

Every day. God forgives you every single day. He loves you, and there's nothing you can do to change his mind. How much have you been forgiven? The meter's still running. So, armed with that knowledge, how will you live your life?

Will you, like the servant in Jesus' story, go bounding down the street, freed by the benevolence of the king, only to let your selfishness take control at the first opportunity? Do you view life as a "What's in it for me," proposition? Is everything a ledger sheet where your forgiven debt, and your debtor's loan repaid both go on the same side of the balance sheet? Where the only thing better than being forgiven 160,000 years worth of debt is to be repaid 100 days worth?

You see, the servant was grateful to have been forgiven such a huge debt, but he lived his life for himself. He didn't connect his own debt forgiveness with the debt he was owed. He saw himself as a victim of life - one who was always owed something. He didn't see the larger picture. Will you choose to live your life like this man?

Or will you choose to live a different kind of life? Will you choose to recognize the depth of your own grace deficit. Will you embrace the power of the kind of forgiveness offered to you by Jesus? Will you see that God has poured out this *massive ocean* of grace for you, and all he's asking is that you take a *cup* of that grace and offer it to others?

Here's the really cool part. You don't even have to be strong enough to offer forgiveness. That person who's just too hard to forgive - the one who did that one major thing, or that list of minor offenses - that person you just can't find it in yourself to forgive? God can help you in your forgiveness of that individual.

It starts with your relationship with him. You know, we're all in a relationship with God, even if we don't want to be. His posture toward us is one of love, of acceptance, of forgiveness. Like a loving parent of a distant child, his love doesn't change based on our choices. But when we choose to come to him - even in our times of weakness and greatest need - he embraces us and gives us strength we would not otherwise have. That's the kind of God he is.

In those moments when you say, "I simply can't forgive that person. Maybe I should. Maybe I need to. But I can't find it in myself," God says, "Let me help you. Let me give you the ability to do what you can't do on your own." This is central to what it means to live life like Jesus. It's not about being strong - it's about giving over to God in our weakness. Letting him take the wheel of our lives. He's much better at this than you or I will ever be.

But what happens if we don't live that way? What if we hold onto those offenses? What if we're unwilling to forgive? Well, besides the fact that Jesus says that God won't forgive us (which is, like, a pretty major thing to take into consideration), there are other consequences. Remember, I said that unforgiveness is a poison. In the best scenario, it will kill us. In the worst...well...

On October 2, 2006, Charles Roberts walked into a one room Amish schoolhouse near Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. He was carrying an arsenal of guns, and he was hellbent on using them. Once inside that schoolhouse, he murdered five Amish school girls and seriously wounded five others. Charles Roberts, a 32-year old dairy truck driver, had no connection with his victims - no relationship with them or any reason to wish them harm. His crime didn't make a whole lot of sense. Charles was a family man. He and his wife, Amy, had three young children. They went to church.

But Roberts was a person who didn't know grace. He was a bitter man, because nine years earlier, his firstborn child, a daughter, died 20 minutes after her birth. And he allowed his grief over the death of his daughter to turn into bitterness. And then the bitterness consumed him so badly that he lost every shred of his humanity. In Charles Roberts' world, justice demanded that someone else feel the pain he felt. He decided, "Somebody is going to pay for the death of my daughter. And since I can't get at God and make him pay, I'm going to punish some Christian girls to get even with God."

The kids he chose belonged to a religious order that values peace and reconciliation and family. So, imagine the shock and horror when, at about 11:00 in the morning, Charles Roberts broke into their schoolhouse with a 9mm handgun, a 12-gauge shotgun, a 30.06 rifle, two knives, and 600 rounds of ammo, and yelled out, "I'm going to make you pay for my daughter." While he was murdering these little girls, and ultimately taking his own life, his wife, Amy, was at a Moms-In-Touch prayer meeting praying for children at the local school.

But the massacre of those schoolgirls wasn't the end of the story. Charles Roberts didn't get the last word. Within hours of the killing, a group of men from the Amish community showed up at Amy Roberts' house. Few would have blamed them if they were angry - if they were looking for revenge. But they went to the Roberts' house that day with another purpose. They went to express forgiveness. They brought gifts of food to Amy and her children. They told Amy that they hoped she and her family would stay in the community and that they had forgiven her husband. This happened on the same day that they had lost 5 of their own children.

In the following days, Charles Roberts' parents had a stream of Amish people knock on their door offering their condolences for their loss of their son, and expressing forgiveness for his act. In fact, there were 40 Amish people at Roberts' funeral, including the parents of the murdered girls. The funeral director, who watched these people console Roberts' family and console Roberts' widow said this: "I was lucky enough to be at the cemetery when the Amish

families of the children who had been killed came to greet Amy Roberts and offer her their forgiveness. And that is something I will never forget, not ever. I knew that I was witnessing a miracle.”

Charles Roberts let his grief fester and resentment build up. Unable to understand his situation, and unable or unwilling to lean into the strength offered by God, he sought to collect on his debt. Unforgiveness leads to death. Forgiveness brings life, even in the midst of unthinkable tragedy.

So, what about you? As you sit here today, can you identify with the struggle of Charles Roberts? Do you have some pain, a tragic event or unjust treatment that colors the way you view the entire world? If you do, I would love to pray for you. No one should have to carry that kind of heartache, but none of us are able to just shake that off. I want to pray for God to intervene in that situation and bring you what is called in the bible, “the peace that passes (or surpasses) understanding.”

Or maybe you are more like the servant in Jesus’ story - fully aware of the many ways you’ve been the recipient of grace, but unwilling or unable to offer it to others. Maybe you realize that you’ve been living your life for yourself - without regard for the power that your offer of grace, love, and forgiveness can have in someone else’s life. Again, if that’s you, I want to pray for you. Recognizing your own debt is huge. Now, let’s ask God to help you take that next step into forgiveness and grace for those around you. That’s what he asks us to do, and that’s what he will empower us to do.

Then there’s another category of people here. Some of you may actually identify more with Jesus and those Amish families than with anyone else I’ve talked about this morning. You see yourself as a person of peace, of love, of forgiveness, acceptance, and grace. And in return, it seems all you’ve received is pain and tragedy. Jesus, the forgiver, was tortured and killed. Those Amish schoolgirls are just as dead as they would have been had their parents and community not offered forgiveness. That pain is real. What, then, are we to make of the fact that our forgiveness of others doesn’t alleviate our own pain or suffering?

If you’re in that place, I want to pray for you that God will speak some very personal words to you. Because you’re doing what he asks, and you’ve found how tough it can be. But God understands. Jesus has been there. He gets it. And because he gets it, he can help you get through it. The parents of those murdered girls didn’t offer their forgiveness because they were such good people. They offered their forgiveness because they tapped into the unspeakable, unfathomable, all-encompassing, all-powerful grace of a loving God. Nothing short of that could have caused them to do what they did. So, I want to pray for some of that for you.

Lastly, you might be sitting here thinking, “This is all well and good, but I don’t even have a relationship with God. I don’t have any connection with Jesus.” Well, he wants to have a relationship with you. So, if you’re up for it, say yes to him. If you’re willing to do that, I want to pray for you, too.

Now, this is not a huge group of people, so I don’t want to single anyone out, but maybe as I pray for each of these groups of people - those who identify with Charles Roberts (with deep, unresolved pain), those who identify with the servant (struggling to connect your receipt of grace with your ability to offer grace to others), those who identify with Jesus and

the Amish families (as people of grace who seem to always be on the receiving end of pain and suffering), and those who simply want to begin to enter into a relationship with Jesus - as I pray for each group, maybe you could just raise your hand. When I begin to pray for the group you identify with, maybe you raise your hand to say, "Yep, that's me." You don't have to, but you could.

If you would like, after I'm finished praying more generally for these four groups, you can have someone pray with you individually. Maybe there's something God wants to do in your specific situation this morning and he's stirring you to get some individual prayer. We would love to do that, too.

So, I'm going to pray for these four groups, then I'll dismiss everyone, and Melody and I will be up here to pray for anyone who wants some individual prayer.

Pray