

## WHY FORGIVENESS IS DIVINE

Robert Frost said, “Home is where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” it’s interesting what he implied in that statement, that there might be a point when you **have** to go home, rather than just **want** to, and that there is this unwritten rule that because it’s home they must allow you access. Certainly some people in the world have worn out their welcome and might never be truly home again because of broken trust, broken relationships, and broken hearts.

However, if we take Jesus at His word, there is one doorstep that we will always be welcome to cross, and that’s the doorstep to His Father’s house. In the parable of the prodigal son we find ourselves taking sides; choosing the case of the younger son or the elder son, or even the father, mainly because we empathize with one of them. To truly understand this parable takes a sense of inner security that whatever we may have done, wherever we see ourselves in this story, we are both brothers at once and God is our Father.

We know how it goes. There was a man who had two sons, and the younger one basically asked his father to pay up and give him what should have only been his when his father was dead. This was a disgraceful and degrading request, but for some reason the father granted it. He divided his property between the two sons and the younger one set out for what Jesus called distant country. Why is it we always seek what is different and new, never content with the blessings we have right before us?

Unfortunately when the son’s money ran out through whatever exorbitant means he began to feel what real need was like. Maybe this was actually a fortunate truth. He was in a country experiencing famine, and he was so destitute he fed pigs and hungered after their food. He was scraping the bottom, both in self-esteem and hope. Then a revelation. He came to his senses. He realize the folly of his request and began to plan his homecoming, hoping against hope that his father would take him in merely as a servant. He knew he had severed forever the ties of a son.

Off he went and before he could even see the lights on the porch his father came running. Let me share one important detail with you; dignified men in the ancient world did not run. However, this father was willing to risk his pride and status in order to spare his son the probability of the neighbors seeing him first and exacting the punishment for a rebellious child, which was death by stoning.

So great was this father’s compassion that he didn’t allow his son to deliver his well-rehearsed speech asking for forgiveness and employment. He addressed the servant, ordering a robe, a ring, sandals, and a banquet. Did he neglect to tell the older brother about this son’s return in all the excitement? It would seem so, but we are left to make that assumption for ourselves. Jesus offered no explanation for anything in this parable. He left it up to the hearer and the reader.

We might wonder if this oversight could have been an indication of the relationship between the father and the older son. Perhaps they were not close; maybe the strain of what the younger son had done changed the dynamic of their relationship. In any event, the party was well underway when the older son came in from the fields. It seems a bit of an insult that his father had to beg him to join them, but then it was just as insulting not to be happy with the news of his brother’s return.

Rather than express relief for his brother's safety, the older son let loose his true emotions. He was angry that the one who left in such a hurry was now the center of attention. He was jealous of a brother who had seen the world while he was stuck at home. He resented having access to anything his father owned, including the excuse for a party, and never feeling worthy to take it.

Since the father felt it necessary to explain himself, we can guess that the older son never did go into that party. More than likely he distanced himself from his father and brother, as if he were in a distant country of his own bitterness. We are left not knowing the end of the story. We can only imagine what we would do in his place.

Although this is the story of the prodigal son, it may be difficult to determine which son was really the prodigal. The story has often been told as a rebellious act forcing a young man to return home in shame, the classic cautionary tale of family dysfunction. But did you know the word prodigal has nothing to do with leaving or returning home? Prodigal means to be extravagant or generous.

Surely this describes the actions of God on the day when His Son left all He had in heaven for a distant place called earth, left glory for humility, and gave all that He had, becoming a servant of His Father. Then when He had nothing left, He returned home to His Father's welcoming arms. God's grace was extremely prodigal.

It's always been remarkable to me that in this story the younger son came to his senses, but his brother never did. The younger son came to the realization that he had not only failed his father, but he had ultimately failed God. His repentance was such that he did not dare consider himself deserving, and yet he received grace upon grace. The older son could not see his own sin, the sin of resentment and anger and pride. His unrepentance was such that he also did not consider himself deserving. Consequently he cheated himself out of grace upon grace.

Don't let God's grace be for nothing, because it was not for nothing God gave it to you in the first place. Put it to use. Let it give you both confidence and courage to face your task in this world, which is to be an ambassador of Christ. We'll get back to that concept a little later. For now let's find out why it's such a tragedy to let our grace go to waste.

The obvious answer would be because of what it cost Christ. Paul stated in no uncertain terms that God made Him who had no sin to be sin for our sake. God asked Christ to do more than just die on the cross. He asked him to accept the burden of what He had never experienced before in His life, to be degraded and reduced to some sinful state. He became like us so that we could become like Him. The second reason we should not waste God's grace is that through Him and in Him we are a new creation.

Now let's pause here for a moment and process that information. This does not mean we are offered a chance to become a new creation or that it's there if we want to cash in on it. We are a new creation; period. It's been done. It's accomplished. It's like being married or graduating from college. You will be a married person until some point maybe you are not, but while you are married, you are married. You don't get to pretend you're not. Or once you graduate from college you are the owner of a degree, and unless someone strips you of that degree, you are forever a college graduate.

Now here's the thing; the world does not remain unchanged while we become new creations. In Christ's redeeming work something happened to the world, not just to individuals. We are in this world that has known the saving act of Christ and yet so many still do not know or acknowledge this reality. We who do know and acknowledge it must demonstrate to the world that we are new creations. We can't do this merely by acting in a new way, but by living in a new way. The way in which we are called to live brings us to the third reason we can't take God's grace in vain.

This is because through Christ's death we are reconciled to God and have had His righteousness transferred to us. The legal term is imputed, which means to attribute or ascribe some quality of one person to another. We are sinful, Christ is righteous. At the cross those realities became crisscrossed, and while the sins of the world rested on Him temporarily, the righteousness of Christ is ours forever. According to Martin Luther, this righteousness is the first and the last need of any sinful individual.

Luther also said, "Learn to know Christ and him crucified. Learn to sing of him, and say, 'Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and given me what is yours. You became what you were not, so that I might become what I was not.'"<sup>1</sup>

We can't overemphasize the necessity and strength of what happened at Calvary, not in the middle of Lent. This was not simply a matter of let bygones be bygones or what's done is done. God could not ignore the past any more than He could overlook the present or give no thought for the future. He wanted us to have a future, a different future. That's what reconciliation means; new creation, new outcome, new direction. No going back to the past. The former things have gone, so when we deal with each other, we can't keep revisiting the past unless it's to remember it fondly.

The thing about reconciliation is that it cannot be undone. Every morning the world will still be reconciled to God and at the end of the day too, no matter what might be going on in the world. You can't undo your neighbor's reconciliation to God; they can't undo yours. God has accomplished it and our job therefore is to be reconciling to each other. There is a lot of reconciling to be done at the present time.

Which is why Paul explicitly said don't continue to live as if God's reconciling act has not happened. Don't act like you don't know what God has done for you and for everyone else who calls Christ Lord. *"All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation."*

Being reconcilers is not something we chose or choose not to do. It is something we either *are* or *are not*. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to live as part of a ministry of reconciliation. There is no exception. There are no excuses. There is no back way out. There is no escape clause. It isn't something we can just choose to ignore. We all live under this requirement. It is part of the job, and if we don't find a way to forgive and reconcile not just with the people we love, but more importantly with those whom we have difficulty loving, then we are not living as Christians. It is as simple as that.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://dailychristianquote.com/dcqluther.html>

The most unfortunate thing about our failure to offer grace is that we fail to understand that grace is the most powerful tool we as humans can acquire. It is the best weapon we can carry. It is what should inform everything we are and everything we do as humans. Perhaps if we carried grace as our primary weapon, we would be less inclined to be suspicious of our neighbors. Maybe if we put down our guns and our guards, we could break down the barriers that created a world of “us” and “them.”<sup>2</sup>

The older brother should have practiced reconciliation with his brother. Their father was able to do it even though the younger son had been lowered in his own eyes to less than a son, yet his father still saw him with the role of a son. He saw both sons the same way despite their sins, despite the unforgiving attitude. The old had passed away and his son was a new creation.

For fans of Doctor Who the notion of a new creation or identity is the basis of the show’s longevity. The process is called regeneration. Each new doctor is a unique person, yet they all have the same identity as the Doctor. I see in this the example of our identity in Christ. We are His, we carry His name, and yet even as new creations He allows our individuality to remain. We should be able to identify the Christ in others.

Where is the reconciliation in a statement that certain people should be restricted entry into society or certain people should be shot or bombed or eliminated? Every Christian faces some form of conflict, whether from within or from the world around them because the world still walks in darkness. Who knows what awaits us when we step out the door each day? That’s no doubt the reason for Paul’s urgency when he said, *“I listened to you at the right time, and I helped you on the day of salvation. Look, now is the right time! Look, now is the day of salvation!”* The day for showing the world what the reconciling love of God looks like, for demonstrating the power to be reconciled to others in spite of your differences, is now.

Poet Alexander Pope wrote the famous phrase, “To err is human, to forgive divine.” I think he got it half right. He should have said “to forgive is divinely human” because only with God’s help is it possible. I think he redeemed himself in another saying, “Teach me to feel another’s woe, to hide the fault I see, that mercy I to others show, that mercy show to me.”

Don’t let the grace that you have received be in vain. Don’t let it be for nothing.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lectionary-calendar/fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-c#preaching>