

A Forgiveness Problem

We have a forgiveness problem.

In my former career, I had an employee who struggled with being on time. She wasn't always late, but she was one who would come bustling into the store right as her shift was starting. She was often hurried and frazzled, and by the time she got settled (stuff put away, checked the daily schedule), she was usually five to ten minutes late. So, we worked on it. We had conversations about the importance of being on time. She genuinely wanted to do better. For the most part, she did. Some people are just "late people"...they're always going to struggle with time management. What I appreciated was that she a) knew it was a problem and b) tried to improve.

One morning, this employee was late again. We were gathered around for the morning meeting (five minutes before open), and she came just as we were breaking off. She had been doing better...she felt bad she was a bit late...and she said to me in front of the group, "I'm sorry I'm late." I don't know why, but instead of saying the *normal* thing like, "Oh, it's fine" or "Don't sweat it" or "Forget about it", I looked straight at her and said, "You're forgiven." And I meant it. She was sorry (I knew her well enough to know) and she had genuinely apologized. But instead of a platitude, I wanted her to know that her being a little late was not being held against her in any way. As her boss, I was saying, "Your offense will not be counted against you—due to the fact that you are contrite and I am willing to forgive."

What is so memorable was the look on her face. When I uttered the phrase, "You're forgiven", it was as if I had slapped her or called her a terrible name. She was shocked. She stammered a bit and said, "Well...okay...I guess..." But I had completely disarmed her. Why? Because I had said something that spoke not to forgetting or overlooking the offense, *but that her offense was not being held against her*. And it was shocking language. It certainly had theological implications. She was not a Christian but nonetheless she understood the importance. However, we are so used to simply ignoring sin, and pushing it to the side, that we are shocked *when forgiveness is practiced*. We have a forgiveness problem.

Contrast her with another employee. She also struggled with being on time. She was a "high performer" and got results for the store. Unlike the other employee however, this one wasn't a bit sorry about being late. In fact, she would routinely stroll into work late and often take her time getting to her station. She wouldn't apologize or say she's sorry. Because she wasn't. Like all employees, we started documenting her lateness. After several, we had conversations with her about improving. We laid out action plans. We set clear expectations—you must be on time. Every time she would say very little, except to point to her "results". After several months, I finally let her go. She was shocked. "You're firing me? I'm one of your best employees!"

Both scenarios offer a different picture. Both were chronically late. But one was contrite and tried to do better and the other simply didn't care. Both were committing the same infraction.

One improved (sort of) and the other was fired. One was forgiven and the other was not. But both *illustrate a different problem with forgiveness*. On one hand, forgiveness is shocking because it very often is not practiced or even talked about. Instead, in our human interactions, we tend to just “forget about it”. On the other hand, *forgiveness is not practiced because either the person is not sorry, or the offended party is unwilling to forgive*. So, forgiveness in the world remains a foreign concept—due to our inability to practice it or a hardness of heart and lack of contrition.

This forgiveness problem extends to us in the Church. We have a forgiveness problem. Oh...we talk about forgiveness, we “practice” corporate confession and absolution, we “traffic” in it...but we very often take the stance of the two employees—*lack of sorry* and *lack of practice*. The problem is not forgiveness itself. That is, forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ alone. That is the Gospel. We certainly don’t earn forgiveness! But our forgiveness problem is based on living in a world that does not practice forgiveness, and does not show sorrow for sin. We imitate what we see all around us. So, instead of living in this “costly” gift of grace, we in the Church live as if forgiveness is “cheap”.¹ It is a commodity that is bought and sold. We come to worship for an hour a week and leave assured my sins are forgiven. Because my sins are “justified” we feel as we can go and sin as much as before...only to return to church to get my tank “refilled”.

Let me be clear—the forgiveness problem has nothing to do with the efficacy of Jesus Christ and Him crucified! *The forgiveness problem is actually a discipleship problem*. As disciples, we don’t practice the same kind of love and compassion for others, we don’t practice contrition, we don’t (or won’t) amend our ways. *We have forgotten what it is to be repentant*. Instead, we demand our cheap grace so we can get on with our lives. The Church is seen as a store where we can get our commodity and the means of grace as something that is bought and sold. But in our daily lives, we show no true ability to forgive another and be forgiven. Because, as demonstrated by the young lady above, we are shocked that someone would actually put away our sin.

Let me be clear some more—**forgiveness starts with Jesus**. That is the only place where we can turn. The world’s notions about sin, and grace, and forgiveness are perverted imitations. The world operates with a tit-for-tat mentality. Or, even worse, sin is simply done away with. Everything is about feelings...how we feel, how people make us feel. So, *without Christ, there is no forgiveness*. And without the Law accusing the sinner, there is no contrition. But both are necessary—repentance and absolution. The word of forgiveness spoken in the name of Jesus predicated on God’s work in Him to put away our sin and guilt.

This Lenten season, especially the midweek services, we will focus on the different aspects of forgiveness. We will look at the root problem of sin, who it is that actually forgives, how we get it wrong in our relationships, and how we might actually practice true forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ. I hope to see you at worship.

¹ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer and *The Cost of Discipleship*, especially chapter one and “Costly Grace” (p.41-56).