

Series: The Journey to the Cross
#5 - "The Mercy of the Cross"
Luke 23:32-43 (NRSV)
By John Gill

Have you ever held a grudge? I know I have – and I suspect you have, too. Somebody did something that hurt our feelings or did us harm, and we have never been able to find it in our heart to forgive them. It doesn't really matter whether it was a big thing that impacted our lives in negative ways, or just some small perceived slight or insult – the result is the same – we're consumed with hate and bitterness. Long-standing relationships are strained or broken and we seethe with anger and resentment. It's a very natural human emotion – one every one of us has experienced in our lives – perhaps you're caught in its grip right now. If so, then I want to invite you to look to the cross this morning, and find there the way out of your bitterness.

No one in history had better reasons to be resentful and bitter than Jesus – he would have had very good cause to hold a grudge. Just consider all those who had hurt Jesus: The crowds had turned against him, Judas had betrayed him, Peter had denied him, the religious leaders had conspired against him, and the Romans had flogged and crucified him. The only ones who stood by his cross as he died were the Disciple John, Jesus' mother, and a handful of other women who had followed him. Everyone else had turned their backs on Jesus.

Deserted by his friends and dying in agony, Jesus would have been justified if he had cursed all those who had hurt him (that's what I would have done, I suspect). But amazingly, no bitter words pass his lips. Instead, we hear words of grace, mercy and forgiveness. He prays that those who had conspired to put him to death be forgiven, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they do." He offers pardon to the repentant thief crucified with him, "Today you will be with me in paradise." And after the resurrection, he specifically seeks out Peter to forgive him, and to call him once again to be a disciple and follow him, "If you love me, feed my sheep" he tells Peter. Then he says, "Follow me..."s

We are amazed that Jesus can be so gracious and forgiving to those who had harmed him. All those actors in the Passion drama share the guilt of Jesus' death – yet without hesitation, Jesus grants them forgiveness. And, it doesn't seem to matter whether or not the guilty party shows any remorse at all, or asks Jesus for forgiveness, or is completely oblivious to their need of forgiveness – Jesus lavishes the same mercy and grace on them all, and absolves all of them of their guilt. It just doesn't make sense.

We can understand why the repentant thief receives forgiveness for his sins – he seems truly sorry. We might even be able to comprehend how Jesus could have forgiven those who sinned out of ignorance – they didn't know any better. But to grant an acquittal to those who had deliberately conspired against him, and quite literally still had Jesus' blood dripping off their hands – that seems recklessly irresponsible. Didn't Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, call for repentance? What ever happened to the expectation that, first comes confession, and then

comes forgiveness? And yet, from the cross, we find Jesus doling out mercy and grace without any preconditions. Amazing!

And it's a good thing that Jesus is so generous with his forgiveness. Just because you and I were not present at the cross that awful "good" Friday, doesn't mean we don't share the guilt. The same sinfulness that nailed Jesus to the cross is still active in your life and mine. We are the guilty, and so we have blood on our hands – it was our sin that crucified Jesus, as well. As one of the great Lenten hymns expresses it – "Who was the guilty, who brought this upon thee – alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee – I crucified thee."

When Jesus asks the Father to forgive those who don't know what they are doing, he's speaking about you and me. Jesus extends mercy and forgiveness of sins to us, through the power of his Blood. That's why we call it "Good Friday" not because it was so good for Jesus - it wasn't! It was good for you and me, because, even though we don't deserve it, don't ask for it, or don't even know we need it – there is Mercy in the cross for us – grace lavished on us – grace upon grace! We can't do anything to deserve such grace, it is a gift – undeserved favor – all we can do is say, "thank you, Jesus."

And that, my friends is good news! Because of the mercy of the cross, you and I have received grace, mercy, and forgiveness, so that we are set free from the tyranny of our sin, and are liberated to live a new life in Christ. Yes, it's very good news – but it is only half of the story.

I believe that, while there are no pre-conditions to receiving the mercy and grace of Jesus, there are expectations. On the cross, Jesus didn't lavish his mercy and grace on us simply for our benefit. The Mercy of the Cross should inspire us to do as Jesus did – to in turn show mercy and grace to others. Just as Jesus forgave all those who had harmed him, you and I are to show those who may have harmed us mercy and grace, as well. It is the least we can do.

As those who have received the mercy of the cross of Jesus, we are morally bound to extend that same grace, mercy and forgiveness to others. We are to be as generous to others as God has been generous to us. As it says in Ephesians 4:32: "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." In fact, there is a direct relationship between receiving and granting forgiveness. In the prayer our Lord taught us to pray which we recite every Sunday, we say "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." - In other words, we ask God to "forgive us our sins – to the same extent that we forgive others." Thanks to the cross of Jesus, we are freed to forgive others in Jesus Name, and we are expected to do just that.

Yes, we are morally bound to forgive others. It is our duty – our obligation – if we want to claim the mercy of the cross for ourselves. But there are also great benefits for you and me when we can bring ourselves to forgive those who have hurt us. There are at least three great benefits of forgiveness:

First, when we can bring ourselves to forgive, we no longer have to be bound by resentment.

A wise person in one of my congregations once told me that, “holding a grudge is like taking poison, and hoping the other person dies.” Unforgiveness only breeds bitterness and slowly kills the one holding the grudge. The comedian Buddy Hackett once made this observation, “I’ve had a few arguments with people, but I never carry a grudge. You know why? While you’re carrying a grudge, they’re out dancing.” Or, as someone else has said, “To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and discover the prisoner was YOU.”

Jesus knew that the one who gains the most from granting forgiveness is the one who forgives, not the one forgiven. That’s how Jesus could ask God to forgive those who were killing him, and why he commands us to forgive, even our enemies. If we can’t bring ourselves to do it for their sakes, we should do it for our own. You and I cannot be free – truly free – until we are willing to forgive. It frees us from remaining bound by our resentments.

The second benefit of forgiveness is that it can start a chain reaction of forgiveness that will be a blessing to many people. Like falling dominoes, grace cascades from the cross and flows outward through relationships whenever forgiveness is offered.

In Matthew 18:23-35, Jesus tells a parable about a master who forgave his servant a huge debt – “ten thousand talents.” As soon as that forgiven servant left the Master’s presence, he grabbed another servant who owed him only a small amount, and demanded immediate payment. Jesus concludes the story with these words: “Then his lord called him in, and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt, because you begged me. Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, even as I had mercy on you?’”

Just as Jesus has forgiven us, so we are to forgive others. And the hope is that they, too, will extend that same grace and mercy to still others. Hate and resentment are contagious – but so is love. From the cross, Jesus sets the first domino of mercy into motion, hoping that each of us will, in turn, pass on the gift of grace. Of course, when we fail to extend forgiveness to others, the mercy of the cross cannot flow through us. But when we choose to forgive, miracles can happen as lives are transformed.

The third benefit of unconditional forgiveness is that it can restore broken relationships. So many family members or friends are estranged from one another because each person is too proud to take the first step in asking for, or offering, forgiveness. As Louis Smedes once said, “It takes one person to forgive, it takes two people to be reunited.” When we have the courage to extend grace and mercy to someone who has hurt us, reconciliation can take place. But only if we can forgive.

Years ago, during war time, armies would lug around cannonballs everywhere they went. They were never sure when they would come across an enemy and wanted to make certain they had plenty of ammunition to fire at them. But cannonballs were heavy and weighed them down, often causing their wagons to get stuck in the mud. Grudges that we might harbor are like cannonballs that weigh us down, and keep our lives stuck in the mud. What a relief it is when

we make peace, and we don't have to go through life with such a heavy burden. Like the army in peace time, we can stack up our cannonballs on the courthouse lawn, and return to a life of peace and harmony, free from the weight of bitterness. And that ceasefire must begin with you and me.

Forgiveness is simple, but it isn't easy. We may know intellectually that we ought to forgive, but knowing and doing are two very different things. It is relatively easy when the person is repentant (like the good thief seeking forgiveness for his sins). It's harder when the one we need to forgive is unrepentant (as Jesus forgave all those who had played some role in causing him to suffer). But it is nearly impossible when we are asked to forgive our enemies who not only are unremorseful, but may still be actively seeking to do us harm! Yet from the cross, Jesus models for us that we are to do just exactly that. We are to forgive all those who seek our harm, the repentant ones, and even the unrepentant ones.

So, who do you need to forgive, or ask forgiveness of? Perhaps you are holding a grudge against someone here in worship this morning – or another person in our congregation. It could be your spouse or some other family member. Maybe you are estranged from someone who lives far away, or someone you have not communicated with for a long time. It may even be that the one you hold bitterness against isn't even still living, or that you never had the opportunity to ask forgiveness of them before they died.

I suspect that every person participating in worship this morning has someone they need to forgive, or ask forgiveness from. And as we stand in the shadow of the Cross of Mercy, I want to challenge you to do something about it this morning.

In your bulletin you should have a piece of notepaper. At the top, I'd like for you to write "Dear _____" (the name of that person you need to reconcile with). Then, as music plays, I'd like for you to take a moment and begin to write a note to that person. Express how you feel. Ask for or grant forgiveness. Get a start – you can finish it later...

No one will be collecting these, so feel free to write what is on your heart. Then I'd like to ask you to take your letter home, and do with it whatever you wish. You may want to mail it – or rewrite it – or telephone or text or email the person instead. Or you may just want to hold on to it and pray over it, asking God to work out a reconciliation, or to take away the bitterness you have been carrying around. If the person is no longer living, write the note anyway, and do with it whatever seems right.

But whatever you do, don't ignore it. Because, if you withhold mercy from others, you are thumbing your nose at Jesus, and disgracing the Mercy of the Cross.

As Paul wrote: "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."

(Music while people write)