

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 2, 2011**

**EXPERIENCING GRACE:
FORGIVING AND BEING FORGIVEN**

Luke 6:37-42

A few weeks back, we began to consider the means of grace, by which we mean the ways and means, the tools and instruments, God has provided to enable us to better understand what grace is, to increase our appreciation of just how amazing and how totally sufficient it is, and to grow in both our experience of His grace and our expression of His grace in daily life in a world that desperately needs grace, a world “choked with the fumes of ungrace,” as Philip Yancey says in his book *What’s So Amazing about Grace?* (p. 35). So far, we have talked about three of these means of grace: the Bible, through which God speaks to us, and reveals Himself and His grace to us in the gospel of His Son, our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ; the privilege of prayer, in which, as dearly loved children of our heavenly Father, we are invited to come to the throne of grace with all our cares and burdens, with all the problems and troubles of this life, there to receive the mercy and grace we need at every moment (Hebrews 4:16); and the sacraments, focusing on communion (or the Lord’s supper) in particular, as a “visible sign of an invisible grace” (Augustine). The sacraments are pictures of God’s grace, allowing us in our seeing or touching or tasting to be more deeply aware of what God in His great mercy and grace has done for us and for our salvation.

I’m not going to talk long today, but I want to talk with you this morning about forgiveness as a means of grace. By its very nature, forgiveness is an expression of grace. For grace, as we have said many times, comes free of charge to people like us who do not deserve it, and never will. Forgiveness is not earned; it can only be given and received. It is something that can never be earned. It is an act of grace. When you refuse to forgive, or refuse to seek forgiveness from someone you have wronged, or when you become spiritually blind to your own sin and your need of forgiveness, you cut yourself off from the flow of grace. The cancerous fumes of ungrace pollute your soul.

Let me tell you a story or two to illustrate how essential a forgiving spirit is in living as followers of Christ and sharing the message of the gospel with others, on the one hand, and, on the other, how ugly an unforgiving spirit is.

Sam Moffett was one of my favorite seminary professors. Before coming to teach missions at Princeton, he had spent 30 years as a Presbyterian missionary in Korea, following in the footsteps of his father, who was one of the earliest Presbyterian missionaries in Korea. Before Korea, Sam Moffett had gone to China as a missionary. He was in China in the late 1940s, at the time of the Communist revolution led by Mao Zedong. He was forced to flee for his life from Communist pursuers who seized his house and all his possessions, burned the missionary compound, and killed some of his closest friends. He barely got out alive. When he left China, Sam Moffett carried with him a deep resentment against the followers of Mao, a bitterness “that metastasized inside him” (Yancey, p. 90). It resulted in a crisis of faith for

him. He realized that if he had no forgiveness for the Communists, he really had no message at all. For the gospel is a message of God's forgiving love, God's saving love, God's life-giving and life-transforming love, a message of grace and forgiveness for undeserving sinners. Which applies not just to Chinese Communists but to all of us. If we harbor unforgiveness in our hearts, what message do we have to offer a world starving for the grace forgiveness embodies?

This second story is from Tony Campolo, whose story about a man named Charlie Stoltzfus I shared with you several weeks ago. At one point in his life, Campolo was the pastor of a small church in a rural community. The word got out that a young, unmarried woman in the community had become pregnant. He (Campolo) went to visit her and told her of God's forgiving love and His power to give us a new life. She put her trust in Christ that day, and her face, marked with sadness an hour earlier, now radiated with joy.

Campolo says he wasn't surprised when she came to church the following Sunday. She showed up the next Sunday and the Sunday after that. Then she stopped coming. He went to see her again and asked why she wasn't attending church anymore. She said: "I can't. Every time I go into that church, I get the feeling that I'm dirty and no good."

"You shouldn't feel that way," Campolo said. "Jesus has forgiven and Jesus has forgotten."

He says he will never forget her response. She said: "Jesus may have forgiven, and Jesus may have forgotten. But the people at your church, they haven't forgiven. And they haven't forgotten." (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, pp. 155-156).

To refuse to forgive any "sinner" among us is a contradiction of the gospel we profess to believe. It exposes the ugliness of the ungrace of a judgmental, condemning, unforgiving spirit.

In this passage of Scripture in Luke 6, Jesus talks about more than just forgiveness. Verses 37 and 38 contain two negative commands and two positives, two "don'ts" and two "do's":

- *Don't judge (others) and don't condemn.* Or, it can be said this way: *Stop judging and stop condemning (others).* Jesus is not against the proper use of discernment or sound judgment in moral or spiritual matters, in questions of right and wrong, or in holding one another accountable in a spirit of Christ-like love. It is not a blanket prohibition against making judgments of any kind. What Jesus is against is a judgmental spirit that is constantly on the lookout for something or someone to criticize or condemn. What Jesus opposes is a critical spirit that is eager to find fault, quick to point out the mistakes or missteps of another.
- *(Do) forgive and (do) give* – generously and liberally. Extend the grace of forgiveness to others, and you are more likely to have the grace of forgiveness come back to you. When you forgive others, others are more likely to be forgiving toward you. When you give of yourself – your time, your resources, your love – generously to others, you are more likely to be blessed in return. Think of it as a kind of boomerang effect.

Showing grace to others leads to more grace. Withholding the grace of forgiveness from others creates a barrier which prevents us from receiving it.

A church (like the one in Tony Campolo's story) that preaches the grace of forgiveness but fails to practice it grieves the heart of the Savior and denies the gospel it professes to believe. May it never, ever be so in us. May it never be so in this church. May it never be so in your life or mine.

In verse 39, Jesus tells a parable to make a point. It shows the folly of the blind leading the blind. There are lots of things blind people can do extraordinarily well. But would you want your next flight piloted by someone who is blind? Would you want your football team to have a QB who is blind? The kind of blindness Jesus is talking about here is blindness in moral or spiritual matters. He is talking about being blind to your own faults, your own weaknesses and sins, while being quick to condemn or criticize others in a condescending, judgmental way. Or being blind to what is right and true and good, and leading others down the road to ruin.

A fully trained student (or disciple), Jesus says in verse 40, will be like his or her teacher. This can be good, if the teacher knows, and teaches, and lives the truth. If Jesus is our Teacher, if He is the Savior in whom we trust, if He is the Sovereign we serve, if He is the Lord we love and the Leader we follow, if He is the Redeemer and Ruler we revere, then to be found in Him and to be like Him in His character is our unflinching hope.

But if the teacher is blind to the truth and believes a lie, you can't expect the disciple to turn out any better. If you are raised in a racist atmosphere, isn't it likely that you will exhibit racist tendencies? If you are continually taught that Jews are evil, or that the Christian faith is a lie, or that violent jihad against the "great Satan," America, is the highest calling of every true follower of Allah, aren't you more likely to integrate these convictions into your way of life? If you are taught that money is the most important thing in life, and that the significance of your life is measured by how much you have, isn't that likely to affect the way you live?

Or, suppose you attend a church that preaches (or practices) judgment but not grace, condemnation but not forgiveness, and hatred of certain sins but not love for sinners, isn't it likely that your heart will become hard and judgmental, or you may end up disillusioned and cynical?

Don't try to remove the speck from the eye of our brother or sister if you've got a two-by-four stuck in your own. Don't worry about a fly in our neighbor's house if there is an elephant in your own living room.

Let's major in grace, not fault-finding. Let's take sin seriously, like Jesus did. Let's not go soft on sin. Jesus never did. But let's be as forgiving of each other, and as forgiving of others, as Jesus is toward us. If we won't forgive, or say we can't forgive, what message do we have?

The act of forgiveness is a means of grace. When we forgive, we demonstrate God's forgiving grace. When we humble ourselves to seek and receive forgiveness, His grace flows to us.

May His forgiving grace flow freely in your life and mine, and in our life together, to the glory and praise of God. May it flow freely here, so that this may truly be a grace place. Lord, let it be so. Amen.