

Lesson 4: Why and How is Forgiveness Possible?

Key Concept: Why and how is forgiveness possible?

Answer: Grace, mercy, faith and repentance

Bible Study: Ephesians 2:8-10

Bible Study

Review from Last Week and Overview

Recap: Last week, we looked at how forgiveness works in our relationships with both God and humans, noting that forgiveness in both cases is bound up with suffering. In order to forgive someone, the offended party must be willing to suffer on their behalf. Or, alternatively, putting it in economic terms, the offended party must be willing to forgive the debt that has been created, which is why God had to pay our debt in a way that cost Him something (rather than just casually saying, “I forgive you.”).

Overview: Today we’re going to address 2 questions:

1. **Why is forgiveness possible?** The answer to this question is bound up in the concepts of **grace and mercy**, which we’ll explore.
2. **How is forgiveness possible?** The answer to this question is bound up in the concepts of **faith & repentance**, which we’ll explore.

Why is Forgiveness Possible? Grace & Mercy

In our vertical relationship with God, forgiveness is possible because God is both merciful and gracious. The fundamental characteristics of God in the Bible is that He is identified as a God of mercy and grace. Exodus 34:6 says, “The Lord, The Lord, the merciful and gracious God.” Over and over again, the Bible repeats that God is both merciful and gracious. Yet, even though we use these words frequently, it can often be pretty difficult to define these concepts.

Coaching Point: Ask the person you are meeting with to take their best shot at defining mercy.

DEFINITION OF MERCY: Mercy is not getting what you deserve.

Now, let’s apply this definition of mercy to everyday life. I have a friend who has three kids. When one of his children, named Ford, was four, he hit his younger sister named Milly. Ford’s Dad said, “Son, you know that you are not allowed to hit your sister. And you know that Daddy has to give you consequences to help you learn right

from wrong and to remember to do the right thing.” “Yes, Daddy,” Ford replied, with his chin tucked, dreading his imminent consequence. But then, much to his surprise, his Dad said, “Son, you deserve a consequence, but I’m not going to give you what you deserve. Instead, I’m going to give you mercy.” With a puzzled look on his face, Ford asked, “Dad, what is mercy?” It was obvious that Ford was altogether unsure whether this mercy thing could be trusted, until his Dad said once again, “Mercy is not getting the pow-pow that you deserve. Instead, you can go apologize to your sister and continue playing.” Shocked. Ford was absolutely shocked by mercy and instantly drawn to it, so much so that when he found himself facing another consequence a mere 3 hours later, he quickly retorted, “Dad, I want mercy.” Why? Because it sure is nice to get a break every once and a while and not get what you deserve. But contrast that with grace.

Coaching Point: Ask the person you are meeting with to take their best shot at defining grace.

DEFINITION OF GRACE: Grace is getting what you don’t deserve.

Some of my friends use this plan: When their oldest child really blows it big-time, does something that is financially costly, that normally he would have to pay back—like say he were, hypothetically, to take out a hammer and smash the tiles on the front porch because he was angry—their plan is to have the same talk, “You know you disobeyed Daddy and it hurts my heart. And you deserve to be disciplined for that action.” But rather than disciplining you and making you pay for the tile, we’re going to take the whole family to Disneyland. Then they’ll spend the whole day reminding him, “Son, why are we here? Because of grace—we wanted to give you a gift that you didn’t in any way deserve to help you understand our love and God’s love.” And, they also want him to know that grace is always expensive, so they will be intentional in letting him know that we’re going to have to miss out on a few date nights to pay for the broken tiles and cut back in all sorts of budget categories to pay for Disneyland. Grace is costly. Always. And it comes as a gift of love, not because of performance.

The film *Les Miserables*, with actor Liam Neeson, helps illustrate this concept of grace. Jean Val-Jean is a hardened criminal. He was thrown in jail for stealing, and then rotted there for 19 years, and became calloused, bitter towards everything and everyone. When he got out, his suffering only intensified because the whole community treated him like a leper, a menace to society. Even though he had money to pay at places to stay, he was turned away because he was a convicted criminal. Finally, when he was about to lose hope, a townspeople pointed to the door of the bishop and said, “Go knock on that door over there—you’ll be treated differently.” He knocked and the bishop greeted him with a warm smile and immediately took him in.

After feeding him and giving him a bed for the evening, everyone retires for bed. Jean Val-Jean, however, awakens during the night and steals the bishop’s silver. In the process, the Bishop hears a commotion and comes into the room and Jean Val-Jean

knocks him out cold and flees the house. Shortly thereafter, Jean Val-Jean is apprehended by the law and returned to the bishop's home on charges of stealing the bishop's silver. Knowing that he is about to be thrown back in jail for life, Jean Val-Jean cannot even dare to look at the bishop. Yet, in a shocking twist, the bishop says, "I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?" Jean Val Jean, speechless, can hardly believe his ears. Rather than convicting him for life, the bishop gives him the most valuable thing he owns.

He then leans over to Jean Val-Jean and says, "You no longer belong to evil. I've ransomed you from fear and hatred, and now I give you back to God." The bishop ransomed Jean Val-Jean, paying steep price, and gave him a gift that he did not deserve. That is grace. It is de-merited favor. It is getting something you don't deserve. And grace is what changes all of us.

We will never understand Christianity until we see ourselves in exactly the same position as Jean Valjean. That is the bad news that makes the good news so good. All of us stand before God as Valjean stood before the bishop: guilty, deserving judgment for the way we have wounded God and others. That is the bad news of Romans 3:23, "All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

But here is the good news: we have a bishop in Jesus. The Bible in the book of Hebrews says He is a great high priest, who gave up not just candlesticks, but His life. Just as the priest whispered into Jean Val-Jean's ear, Jesus whispers into our ears, "My brother/My sister, you no longer belong to evil. I've ransomed you from fear and hatred, and now I give you back to God." That is why Jesus says in Mark 10:45 that He, the Son of Man, must die as a ransom - "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." He ransomed us, not with candlesticks or silver, but with something far more costly, with His own life, with His broken body and shed blood. Grace... Amazing Grace. A gift that we don't deserve that changes us.

Now, before we move on, we should probably at least acknowledge one of the main objections that often comes up to a story that hinges on grace (as Christianity does). The objection often goes something like this: "If salvation is all of grace, not because of anything I do, then I can live like hell and it doesn't matter!"

Yes, but that is precisely the opposite of what happened with Jean Val-Jean. Jean Val-Jean was so affected by the grace of the bishop that he ends up becoming like the bishop, spending the rest of his life ransoming others from evil. Grace didn't motivate him to steal more but, instead, to love more and to give what he had received. He gives grace to prostitutes and misfits alike by hiring them, and even adopting little Cosette.

Yeah, but that is Hollywood. What about real life? In real life, as well, grace motivates love and good deeds, not a life of lawlessness. Think about it. Imagine that you have a friend who relentlessly cleans the house, does the laundry, cooks dinner, and she just won't stop working. You ask her, "Why do you work so hard? Take a break." She responds, "I can't because I am trying to earn my husband's love. If I can ever get the house clean enough, then I am convinced he will love me." You fire back, "You don't have a husband, you have a slavemaster. Slaves hope that if they work hard enough that maybe, just maybe, their master will one day be kind to them and have affection for them. On the other hand, in a loving, healthy marriage, the reason you do good things for your spouse is **because** you love them and have received the gift of love from them, not the other way around.

Yes, you say, but where is this in the Bible? Ephesians 2:8-10 says this very thing: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." This says that grace makes us new. Then, after we have received grace by faith, we, as God's workmanship, go and do the good works He has planned for us. Grace, therefore, leads to good works, not evil. Note we said this happens by faith, which leads us to our second question. . . .

Coaching Point: The material that follows on faith and repentance you have already learned in the lesson on the gospel.

How is forgiveness possible?

This transaction of grace happens through 2 things: faith and repentance.

Coaching Point: Ask the person you are meeting with to take their best shot at defining repentance.

What is repentance?

Repentance involves a two-dimensional directional change in a person's life. First, repentance requires that a person turn away from their sin - a horizontal change. For example, imagine that you intended to drive to Mexico. When you were in San Diego, you became confused and accidentally began driving north instead of south. When you realized this fact, the best thing for you to do would be to turn your car around and head in the opposite direction.

In much the same way, repentance requires you to turn from your sin and head in the other direction, but here is where the analogy breaks down. Repentance is not telling you simply to turn in the opposite horizontal direction, but it also requires you to turn to Jesus (Mark 1:15). Thus, repentance requires a vertical directional change as well. If you do not turn to Jesus, you will be fighting a losing battle of trying to defeat the power of sin in your own strength. Jesus wants us to repent, turn from

our sin and turn to Him **in faith**, relying upon his strength to live a life that is free from sin's dominion.

What is faith?

C Coaching Point: Ask the person you are meeting with to take their best shot at defining faith.

Everyone has faith. For instance, you might say, "I have faith that my car will make the 900-mile journey." This may be a well-reasoned faith (you have taken it to a mechanic, had it serviced, and all indicators seem positive) or it may be a "blind leap of faith" (you know nothing about cars, haven't serviced it ever, but just think it will). Nevertheless, you put your faith in your car if you choose to get in it, even though, at the end of the day, you can't prove that the car will make it until it actually does. This holds true with other things in which we put our faith as well. We have faith that our job will provide for our family, that our spouse will love us, that immunizations will help our children - but we don't know for certain until these things actually happen.

Saving Faith is a decision of the will to put your trust IN Jesus

Saving faith is a decision of the will to put your trust in Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Think of John 3:16 - whosoever believes IN Him shall have eternal life (also Romans 3:22). So, the amount of your faith is unimportant. Quantity is irrelevant - quality is, however, extremely relevant, and quality is determined by what your faith is in.

It may be tempting to try to trust in our works. Many people think they can build a bridge that will help them cross the chasm that separates them from God, and this bridge is called the Good Works Bridge. They try desperately to serve the poor, be kind to others, and perform a host of various good works. But the chasm separating God and man is far too wide for any Good Works Bridge to span the distance.

And, what is even worse, even if a Good Works Bridge could reach across the chasm, God's holiness would destroy us once we crossed the bridge and entered His presence. Sinful beings cannot be in the presence of a Holy God. Therefore, to solve the problem of the chasm separating God and man, God laid down His own bridge in the form of the cross, and as we walk across this bridge we are made holy through the blood of Jesus. Thus, saving faith is repenting, turning from sin and self-trust, and trusting in Jesus Christ and His promises.

Faith isn't in conflict with reason and intellect

Often it is said, "Just have faith," and what is meant is that you need to stop thinking and just believe. But Jesus didn't ask Thomas in John 20:24-29 to turn off his brain. Instead, he encouraged him to think hard. "Thomas, put your hands in my side here and feel the wound. Think Thomas. Remember this wound that I suffered. It really

is me.” Jesus says believe or have faith because of the evidence that is before you. Think.

Yet faith isn't mere intellectual belief

You must understand that saving faith is not merely an intellectual belief. The Bible acknowledges that even demons believe that there is one true God, but they are not saved by this belief (James 2:19). But what is the difference between saving faith and belief?

Let me illustrate. The Great Blondin is often thought of as the greatest tightrope walker of all time. He was the first man to cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope. No one believed intellectually that it was possible because of the sheer force of the wind and mist coming off of the falls. Everyone thought it was a death mission. But, nevertheless, he made it, and he caused people to believe, intellectually, that he could do it.

But like any daredevil, he had to keep pushing it and making the stunt a little more unbelievable. During his subsequent performances, he crossed the falls on a bicycle, on stilts, and at night. He swung by one arm, turned somersaults, and stood on his head on a chair. Once he pushed a stove in a wheelbarrow and cooked an omelet. On one occasion, he crossed blindfolded in a heavy sack made of blankets.

But his greatest feat came when he asked for a volunteer to get on his back. Everyone in the crowd had an intellectual belief in Blondin, but they were not willing to trust their life to him. Except one man. Harry Colcord, his manager, volunteered. He climbed on his back and they made it across. That is the difference between mere intellectual belief and a putting your faith in someone in a Biblical sense - you are entrusting your life to them. What you are doing is making a decision of the will based on the evidence.

When you repent of your sin and make a decision of the will to entrust your life to Jesus, you're then embarking on the journey of following Jesus. The beginning of this journey is characterized by a new birth in Christ Jesus, which we will discuss next week.

Discussion Questions

1. What about God's character makes forgiveness possible?
2. Define mercy.
3. Define grace.
4. Give an example of grace from your own life or from the reading.
5. Respond to this objection: "if salvation is all of grace, not because of anything I do, then I can live however I want."
6. What is repentance?
7. Read James 2:19; John 3:16; Romans 3:22. What is faith?

**WEEK 4- Why & How is Forgiveness Possible?
(Grace, Mercy, Faith, & Repentance)**

II. Review from Last Week and Introduction

- A. Recap: on Forgiveness = suffering/paying debt in vert/horiz relationships. Therefore, the necessity of the cross.
- B. Today:
 - 1. Why is forgiveness possible?
 - a. Grace & mercy
 - 2. How is forgiveness possible?
 - a. Faith & repentance

III. Why is Forgiveness Possible?

- A. MERCY: not getting what you deserve
 - 1. Story of kids not getting disciplined
- B. GRACE: getting what you don't deserve
 - 1. Story about taking kids to Disneyland when they do wrong
 - 2. Les Miserables
 - a. Bad News: Romans 3:23 - We are Jean Valjean.
 - b. Good News: (Hebrews/Mark 10:45) We have a bishop in Jesus.
 - c. Key quote: "you no longer belong to evil. I've ransomed you from fear and hatred, and now I give you back to God."
 - 3. The Main Objection to Grace
 - a. Jean Valjean was transformed by grace: he became bishop to everyone else.
 - b. Illustration of the wife with a slavemaster vs. husband
 - 4. Ephesians 2:8-10.

IV. How is forgiveness possible?

- A. REPENTANCE: 2 Dimensional Change
 - 1. Horizontal—turning from sin (Mexico example)
 - 2. Vertical—Turn to God for help
- B. FAITH: a decision of the will to put trust in Jesus
 - 1. We all have it (car example)
 - 2. Quality, not quantity (John 3:16)
 - 3. Not in conflict with reason (Thomas)
 - 4. Isn't mere intellectual belief (Blondin example)