

June 19 Forgiveness vs. Accountability

Luke 15:11-32

Today we celebrate the love and forgiveness of the father for the prodigal son. We love the image of the father running towards the bedraggled son as he shuffles in at the gate. The son starts his speech about how unworthy he is to be called a son but the father will have none of it. He calls for a new robe, a ring, shoes, and commands the fattened calf be butchered so that all can come and celebrate the fact that the one who was lost is now found.

When it comes to God, this is good news. It is what we expect and Jesus reminds us that we will receive this forgiveness when we come to God with a contrite heart. But here is the question that is not addressed by the story. Does this mean there is no accountability? If we say we are sorry is the deed wiped away with no thought to the damage we have done to others? We know this is not what Jesus meant.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called forgiveness without accountability cheap grace. So we must ask, "Where is the accountability in this parable?" The answer to this question depends upon whether you are the prodigal, the father, the friends, or the older son.

For the son, accountability is tied up in his turning towards home. To go home means you have to repent of your actions. Repentance implies accountability and restitution. If anger has taken you away from home you have to deal with it. If you hurt someone you have to ask for forgiveness. If you committed a crime you have to be willing to do the time. We sense his willingness to accept accountability for his actions in the fact that he is now willing to be a slave. Even though we understand the father to be God, the youngest son is not counting on the goodness or the forgiveness of the father. To be willing to repent knowing you will be forgiven is cheap grace. The prodigal son seems to be aware, at some deep level, that his father will know if he has truly repented, with all that means, and turned for home, or if he is just trying to slide by expecting a pass for his behaviors. He has been around his father so he knows him to be a compassionate person. He realizes he has deeply disappointed him by his choices so he thinks that he will need to do some kind of work to restore any kind of relationship

with his father. He was not expecting the welcome he received. So yes, there is accountability. The way home demands it.

For the father, we learn that the turn toward home is enough. There will be plenty of time to sort out the issues. At the present moment all that matters is that one who was lost is now found. Both the father and the son realize that, for the son to remain at home, there will need to be some changed attitudes. There will need to be some maturity. But for now, the willingness to come home with a truly humble attitude; to start anew is enough for God.

This is a word for all of us. Sometimes religion has made it seem that you have to do a lot, grovel a lot, before God will forgive you. I have people tell me that they have done things for which there is no forgiveness. I have had people say that they can't change enough to make God happy. This is not the story we hear. God wants us to turn, delights when we finally realize that we don't want to be in a far off country. We are welcomed, we are loved, and we are forgiven. Then the God of love also will challenge us to grow and to change, and to become the person we truly want to be. So yes, there is accountability, but it is in living out this new relationship after we have confessed our mistakes and made a deliberate decision to live life differently. It is not in trying to appease God.

There are a couple of other groups that have to deal with issues of accountability. Think about this scenario for a moment. You are one of the friends invited to the party. What do you do? Some would feel that if you go you are condoning the actions of the younger son. After all he sinned horribly. He hasn't proven that he has changed. All we have is his word for it and the father's delight. Is that enough?

We have to admit that there is a fine line we are asked to walk here. Some people rely upon Christians to be gracious and forgiving. They use it against us so they can continue their behaviors. I have had people who we know are going around from church to church asking for help. They share how they are trying to get home. Their parent is dying and they have been estranged, and now they realize they were wrong and need help. When you check things out and find out that others have heard the

same story, you decide not to help them. I had one person tell me, “I had to help them get home. It is in the Bible and that is what a church does!”

So, yes, we need to be cautious, but there are other times we just refuse to go to the party as an individual or a church. We are suspicious and want them to prove to us they have really changed. It would cost us nothing to be gracious but we hold back, wanting to make sure they are accountable. We force them to earn our grace.

Fred Craddock, a noted preacher and story teller, shares this account.

“I’ve told some of my friends what a shocking thing it was to discover that I had not really heard the story of the prodigal son when I preached those sermons about his coming from the far country, about them bringing the ring and the robe and killing the fatted calf. Then they bring the musicians, and there’s a party, and there’s music and dancing, and all of that. I preached that sermon as though this was the wonderful, natural, easy, right thing to do.

I had never thought about that party until a family up the street divorced and left three or four youngsters, girls, one of them attractive, prematurely mature, and about fourteen years old. She was truant at school, into marijuana, always in trouble, always up before the judge, chasing around and hanging on the tail end of every motorcycle that went roaring through the neighborhood. She finally was so truant and so involved in misdemeanors that the judge said, “You’re going to the reform school in southern Oklahoma.” She was sent away to a detention home for girls. About the fourth or fifth month that she was there she gave birth to the child she was carrying. She was fifteen at the time.

Word came to the neighborhood some months afterward that she was coming home. “Will she have that baby with her?” The day we heard she was to come, all of us in the neighborhood had to mow our grass. We were out in our yards, mowing our grass, and watching the house. She didn’t show, nobody came, and we kept watching the house and mowing the grass. I was down to about a blade at a time, you know, watching the house, when a car pulled in the driveway—and out steps... “It’s Cathy. She has the baby. She brought home the baby.” People in the house ran out and

grabbed her and took turns holding that baby, and they were all laughing and joking, then they went in. Another car pulled in, then another car pulled in and another car pulled in. They started parking in the street. You couldn't have gotten a Christian car down the street, just cars on either side, and they are all gathering there, you know. Suddenly I got disturbed and anxious and went in my house. It suddenly struck me, what if one of them saw me and said, "Hey Fred, she's home and she has the baby. We're giving a party, and we'd like for you and Nettie to come."

"Well, I've got a lot of papers to grade and all" Would I have gone? If you lived next door to the prodigal son's father's house, would you have gone over to the party? It's easier to preach on that than to go to the party."

We have the oldest son. He cannot get past the comparisons between his actions and his brother's, the father's response to him and to his other son. His life was built entirely on accountability, reward and punishment. The actions of the father don't square with that and so he is angry. Next time we will ask the final question this poses, "How do we feel when others receive grace, even when it feels like we are unappreciated?"

But for today let us celebrate God's great ability to forgive us. We know that when we turn to God we find that we are loved, and restored. God knows the power of love to transform us.