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# GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

## THROUGH THE ROOF TO FORGIVENESS

*By Ron Allen*

Imagine this: You visit your family doctor. You enter the waiting room. As usual, there are too many people there; a congregated sample of humanity with its many ailments. Some shuffle about, sniffing and coughing. Others sit silent, their faces anxious and taut. Others bear the depleted look of those who have long born pain.

Suddenly, the door is bumped open, and a wheel chair materializes and passes through the room, into the doctor's surgery where he is busy with another patient. The chair is propelled by several men who seem very eager to have their friend seen to. The doctor looks at the man in the wheel chair and says to him, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Now that is surprising! The last thing you expect the doctor to say to this handicapped man is, "Your sins are forgiven." What kind of a response is that? What has sin got to do with it?

Something like that happened in the Galilean city of Capernaum two thousand years ago, when Jesus was teaching in a house there. The story is in Mark 2:1-12. The house was jammed full of people trying to hear Jesus. Suddenly, the roof opened up and a paralyzed man was let down through the opening by his four friends. Jesus said to him, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

For weeks, Jesus had been traveling in Galilee, holding rallies in synagogues and in the open air. Many were impacted by Jesus' natural spiritual authority. But some were less than enthralled—they were the Pharisees. Most of Israel's religious teachers were from this sect. Their influence was well-established, and they guarded it carefully.

When the paralyzed man came through the roof to be told by Jesus that his sins were forgiven, some Pharisees were in the room. Their ears pricked. They felt that Jesus was being blasphemous. Jesus' authority was already a live issue for them, and here

he was speaking as if he was God (Mark 2:6, 7).

Jesus knew that the scribes represented the nation's ruling hierarchy; he knew that they believed themselves to possess legitimate religious authority. His language, therefore, was calculated. He aimed to raise the stakes in regard to the question of his authority. Not only that. He sought to use the opportunity afforded by the dangling paralytic, to impart an important truth.

That truth is this: If life is spoiled by physical handicaps and disorders with their accompanying distresses, there is an even more elemental malady that disrupts persons at the core of their being. There is catastrophe in man's moral nature. We are conscious of lapses in our own character; we are aware of moral debit. Something in our soul causes us to think less of ourselves when we act in a certain way or when we fail to act in a certain way. The Bible, and the religions based on it, have called this phenomenon sin.

An increasingly atheistic view of the world has meant that sin, in our time, has been largely relegated to the category of a 'primitive superstition.' But those features of life described by the word remain very real; they are part of us, and we struggle with them.

In circles where sin is still acknowledged, it is often used to categorize behaviors which are still an affront to social order. Things like murder, robbery, sexual abuse of minors, and terrorism. But if these were the sum of our offences, sin would be far less a problem than it is. Like icebergs that float away from the Arctic, most of sin's mass is below the surface; it's there, but you can't see it. Think of the internal tensions; the twisting and buckling that goes on in the invisible realm of temperament. Think of envy, pride, conceit, smugness, narcissism, arrogance.

The prodigal son leaves and dedicates himself to passion and profligacy. It's easy

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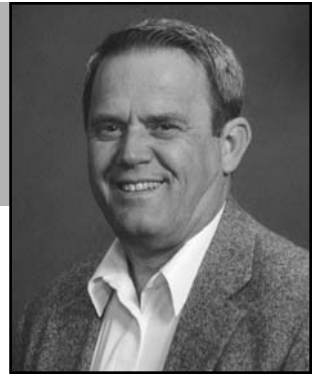


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# EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

*“Be merciful, just as your father is merciful”  
(Luke 6:36).*


**E**ach day of our lives we are in positions of power in relation to some people, and powerless in relation to some others. In both situations mercy is desirable, but it is in the latter that we discern its value most clearly.

The proper attitude of humans to their fellows over whom they possess some advantage, is mercy. Imagine yourself in a plush restaurant. It is a busy evening and the waiter is at full stretch, keeping your table well-supplied along with all the others. Inadvertently, he spills something on your sleeve. He is now in your power. You could make life hard for him. You could cause him to lose his job. Or, you could use your momentary advantage to do him some good. You could show mercy.

Once, there was a schoolmaster in Welsh town who used to

thrash his boys when they arrived late for class. One morning he thrashed a small boy who had never been late before. Later, he learned that the little boy had heard about an accident down in the coal mine. He had gone to the pit only to learn that his brother had been killed. That headmaster was too interested in maintaining law and order to practice mercy.

All relationships provide opportunities for us to be merciful. In a hundred ways, we daily experience both power and powerlessness where other people are concerned. Unless these relations are sanctified by the Spirit of Jesus, they can become occasions for menace and damage to our fellow man.

God is love. There is forgiveness with him. Let us therefore seek the Great Mercy for ourselves, and for our neighbors; so that we will not be dangerous to them, but helpful, gracious and kind. 

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to see what a sinner he is. His elder brother is more discreet. He stays home and nurtures his jealousy, sullenness and bitterness. Yet, how damaging these distortions of the spirit are. How much estrangement they cause, how much wreckage, how much sorrow is sown in the soil of human life by these ‘elder brother’ behaviors, which are ever so plentiful in polite society.

What we often think of as our private shortcomings are never truly so. Personal lapses always spill over and hurt someone else. Secret hatreds and angers taint the water supply that others must drink from. There is a social dimension to the evil within. As individuals, we belong to families; we are part of, and help to create, economic systems, political structures which may favor us while producing inhuman conditions that damage others.

When Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “*Son, your sins are forgiven,*” he seemed to have missed the point. But we do not

know that that is how the man himself saw it. For all we know, he may have had guilt feelings about something in his life and suspected a connection between it and his paralysis. We do not know the crippled man’s mind, but we know the plague of our own heart. We know when bad things happen, when our well-being is taken from us, when disease or disaster strikes, past actions of ours which we are not proud of, are apt to bob up in front of us and stare at us; making us wonder if there might be a connection between them and the blight by which we have been struck.

Jesus was a shrewd judge of people. He seemed to be able to read the mind of the scribes. We might well suppose that he could read the lame man’s mind too. And that is why he spoke healing to his soul; because it was part of his suffering. But Jesus meant to teach more. He knew the scribes who questioned his authority were saying to themselves, “It’s all very well to tell the man that his sins are forgiven. But how can that be verified? You haven’t spoken healing to his paralysis, because →

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his continued inability to walk would expose your pretensions to authority as a fraud.”

Jesus responded directly to them: *“Which is easier; to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. He said to the paralytic, ‘I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.’ He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all”* (Mark 2:9-12).

Christ’s pronouncement of forgiveness was strategic. By it, he drew attention to sin as the root cause of all human distress. Furthermore, he sharpened the issue of his authority by associating himself with sin’s forgiveness. His action focused on the difficulty of forgiveness. The scribes assumed that to forgive was easy compared with physical healing. Jesus took the opposite view. He regarded the straitening of a crippled man’s legs as the easier task.

The most strenuous challenge a self-conscious creature can face is the forgiveness of a fellow. To take your pound of flesh because you have a right to is a walk in the park compared with forgiving one by whom you have been terribly wronged. To forgive, one must summon every ounce of courageous virtue one can find in himself—and more besides.

For one thing: forgiveness is against reason. There is no reason why I should forgive the one who has wounded me, or buried me in grief by hurting someone I love. There is no reason why I should forgive the person who has trashed my good name and taken away my peace; no reason why I should seek to understand him. To do so would be to set aside my own rationality.

The parents of a young man make their appearance on a television chat show. They are there to share their story about what happened to their son. “He was a beautiful boy,” they begin, “but while at college, friends persuaded him to try some recreational drugs.” They go on to recount their son’s journey down a path of self-destruction. Soon he was hooked. Despite a wholesome upbringing, he turned to vices in order to feed his habit. Nothing was too horrible, too evil to him. His Mom and Dad were lied to, betrayed, abused, physically beaten, defamed and stolen from.

At the time of their appearance on national television their son is clean. But his youth and innocence are wasted. The parents love their son and they forgive him. But do not think this is easy for them. Look at them! They too, are prematurely old. Their faces are furrowed by grief and horror. It is as if they themselves are the wrongdoers. That is how forgiveness is. The forgiver feels in his own flesh, the burden of the offence.

Forgiveness is arduous precisely because it takes the offence seriously. Tolerance is something else. Tolerance says, ‘what you did doesn’t matter much at all.’ Forgiveness says it matters enormously, profoundly.

Forgiveness is grueling—not just for the forgiver—but for the person who is forgiven. Many offenders are sent to prison, but before they go there, some of them are obliged to sit in court and hear victim impact evidence. In these cases, the perpetrator must face his victims and listen to the harrowing story of what his crime has meant to them.

I do not say that forgiveness is granted in these instances. What I say is that when I accept forgiveness from someone dreadfully let down by me, someone for whom I have been utterly disastrous, someone whose rights I have taken, whose progress I have hindered, whose opportunities I have blocked, whose liberty and dignity I have stolen—for me to be forgiven by such a person is an excruciating humiliation.

The forgiver puts me in the dock. I am forced to acknowledge the hideous nature of my wrongdoing. I am made to see that I cannot undo my action. The harm has been wrought; the results will stay. I am utterly without argument. Unless the one I have wounded will act to mend the brokenness between us, I am undone, helpless and hopeless. If the bond that once linked me to that person (whether of spouse, sibling, friend or fellow human being) is ever to revive, it will have to be breathed into life by my victim. And I will have to accept its reconstitution as a gift, because there is nothing I can do.



*The most strenuous challenge a self-conscious creature can face is the forgiveness of a fellow.*

If forgiveness is exacting for us, think what it must be for God. In our story, Jesus makes the point that forgiveness is hard, but by enabling the paralytic to walk out on his own two legs, he showed that he had not spoken idly when he had said, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” By working a healing that was easy to verify, he strongly argued for his ability to work the harder miracle—the miracle of forgiveness.

God is the supreme forgiver. The healing of the paralytic was a sign that God would bring about a great forgiveness through Jesus. It pointed to his ordeal on the cross which showed the vast power of sin, and God’s complete forgiveness of it. The cross tells us that our wrongs are real and terrible, but God has endured them as if he were the perpetrator (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Look at Jesus, betrayed by all his disciples, meeting with them after he had risen from the dead. Well might he have spoken to them saying, “Thanks for nothing; when the heat came on, you all abandoned me like scared rabbits. I’m through with you.” But he doesn’t speak these words. He just says, “Peace be with you.” Then he shows them his wounds. The risen Lord always shows us his wounds. We are forgiven. “By his wounds we are healed.”

# THE HIDDEN GOD (concluded)

By Desmond Ford

*"After the fire, a still small voice."* This is a pattern of the way God was going to deal in the future; because after Elijah, the later prophets don't work miracles. Elijah worked about seven mighty miracles and Elisha, who asked for a double portion of his spirit, worked fourteen. But after the phenomenon of Elijah and Elisha proclaiming the power of God, the prophets don't have it. They are no longer in the miracle-doing business. Men are taught that change does not come that way. They must listen on the quiet or they will miss what is best. It is not an accident sometimes when we are compelled by a broken leg to lie still for a while. It is good for us to be still. We will miss the best if we are not still.



*Never deny the star's constellations because of the dark patches.*

A century-and-a-half later, along comes Isaiah and he works no miracles. Another century-and-a-half goes by and then comes Jeremiah. He is not in the miracle-doing business. So it goes on, and suddenly, the prophets run out and the voice stops and there are four hundred years of solemn stillness—from Malachi to John the Baptist. Then the Son of God comes.

Notice the consistency of how God chooses to reveal himself most times; it is usually both a revelation and a hidden occurrence. Never deny the star's constellations because of the dark patches. All of life is irradiated by the hidden God. All of human experiences; wherever you have truth, wherever you have love, wherever you have forgiveness, there you have God. God is always present and God is always hiding. God is present in the Christian church. Oh what a hiding is that! The church is no art gallery. It is a hospital. God is present in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper. I only see water, bread and grape juice, but he is there.

In my day-to-day experience, I cry out to the hidden God to

show himself. Despite my unbelieving heart, he is there. That is why I still breathe, see and think. Who can explain the mystery of thought? No surgeon exploring the mind has ever said, "I've got it; here's a thought." Those who want to see everything before they can believe it have never seen their own brain. They do have one. God is always present and always hidden. It was so at the burning bush, it was so in the cloud that overshadowed Israel, it was so in the sanctuary, and finally it was so in the Man from Galilee.

The Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard, tells the story of a king who fell in love with a commoner. "What shall I do?" he thought. "Shall I send my army to take her from her parent's house, put a crown on her head and dress her in beautiful clothes? I can compel her to come, but will she love me?" What did the king do? He disguised himself as a commoner. He wooed her as a man who had nothing, and so he gained her love.

You know why Kierkegaard tells the story. What the king did is what God did. He made himself of no reputation and took on him the form of a man, and humbled himself unto death; even death on a cross.

Think of it: How does God get across to finite, sinful human beings? He abdicates. He trembles as he takes risks. He chooses limitation. You and I long for him to intervene visibly, tangibly. We want the earthquake. We want fire to scorch and destroy what is bad. But such a God would rob us of our freedom and could never evoke our love.

My friends, we will never in this life have the overwhelming power of demonstration, sensory interposition, so that it is no longer an effort to believe. It would rob us. It would take away our freedom. But if we look for him in the darkness, he will shine.



*But if we look for him in the darkness, he will shine.*

**When you forgive someone, you slice away the wrong from the person who did it. You disengage that person from his hurtful act. You recreate him. At one moment you identify him ineradicably as the person who did you wrong. The next moment you change that identity. He is remade in your memory.... Once you branded him as a person powerful in evil, but now you see him as a person weak in his needs.**

-Lewis Smedes.