

The Faith of Abel and the Mercy of God

By Jonathan Houting

By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks. Hebrews 11:4

Sinfulness: Our Current State

To understand the full implications of this passage, which speaks of faith, sacrifice, testimony, righteousness, and gifts, we need to go back to Genesis. Now, the story of the beginning of Genesis has been summarized in the following way:

Gen 1-2: The Connection between God to Man and Creation (Creation)

Gen 3: The Disconnect between Men to God (1st Fall)

Gen 4-6: The Disconnect between Man to Man (2nd Fall)

Gen 7: The Disconnect between Men to Creation (3rd Fall)

This study will be concerned with what happens in Genesis 4-6. Adam and Eve have been banished from the Garden of Eden and from the presence of God and what follows is the natural outcome from this.

Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man." Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."

But the LORD said to him, "Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden. – Genesis 4:1-16 (NIV)

This is where it all began. All fighting, rivalry, resentment, competition, jealousy, distrust, manipulation, pettiness, coercion, bigotry, hostility, secrecy, bitterness, and even paranoia has its origin in this story. Every violent act from a child snatching a toy from someone else's hand to a worldwide war starts here. This is the state of affairs we are in. The themes of Cain and Abel are essential to understanding our fundamental condition: Sin to others. All sin is rebellion towards God and yet most of the time it is displayed by hurting others. We aim our selfishness and anger at God but we hit the people around us. We see this in the Ten Commandments. Jonathan Edwards said that you can not break commandments 3-10 without breaking the first two. When our reverence towards God is diminished, all sorts of internal and external warfare take place. We know what's best; we are in control when we turn our backs against God.

This rebellion derives from a low view of God, which in turn, at its root, is from faithlessness. And this faithlessness is played out through our relationships. Look for Cain's reaction to God's warning. Can you find it? It isn't there! There is no humility of heart; no yielding to God's word and accepting of His advice. The Hebrew word for sacrifice here is not the one describing an atoning or covering for sins, but rather it is one dedicated for the acknowledgement and appreciation of God in their lives. It is a thanksgiving offering. It makes sense then that Abel's offering was accepted while Cain's was not. His heart has already been set to vengeance even before God tries talking to Him. He gives his brother one last chance to disagree with God's decision to accept his gifts before they walk into the field. Why else would Cain tell Abel what God spoke to him in verse 8 (NASB)? And in an act of hatred toward God, demonstrated through the slaughter of his brother, Cain offers to God a new sacrifice for his own appeasement. As Pastor Curt has explained in the past, sin sacrifices others on the altar of self. Cain did so, literally.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyred pastor and theologian during WWII, had a convincing theory about the effects of sin on relationships. He believed that sin is not only hurtful to others, but it goes much deeper than this. It affects the creation of God. We rarely think of each other as God's perfectly-created miracles whom He made in His image. In fact, we have such a low view of each other that we can easily begin to view each other as our own possessions instead of God's. When we sin against one another, we infringe on what God has created and damage it. We no longer view someone as their own individual self but we take by force their freedom, their autonomy in God. This can happen in all sorts of ways, from unknowing manipulation of close family to full-blown pre-meditated violence towards our greatest enemies. I have a very close friend who I would use for my own self-confidence for years without even realizing it. Whenever we would meet, I would have to prove myself to him. I did not see him as God's own but I saw him as competition for God's favor. Through no fault of his own, I saw him as more righteous and holy than I was and I became jealous. I, therefore, tried to impress him so that I could feel superior to him. I was using him to better myself before God instead of allowing him to freely be the human God made him to be and allowing our relationship to be free from each other's selfishness and insecurities. It is only when we can view each other only as God's gifts to one another, and not our as our possessions, can we really begin to genuinely love and appreciate each other. Our original humanity has been badly damaged by the sins we commit and the sins done to us. Sin has created a barrier, a void. Humans have stopped acting humane towards each other.

Faith in Our Sacrifices

...And Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. – Genesis 4:2-5

In one of his writings, St. Augustine explains why people murder. He gives the following three reasons: someone desires a possession, fears the loss of a possession, or has already lost a possession. Now which one describes Cain? I believe all three apply. Cain's possession was God's favor. Cain desired God's favor, feared the loss of the favor God already had for Him, and had felt that, since his gifts were not blessed, he had already lost God's favor. So whichever reason is right (if not all of them), Cain had desired God's blessing more than God Himself.

Before we expand on this idea, we need to ask ourselves what the reason was that God found favor in Abel's offering rather than Cain's. In my studies, I have found at least seven answers to this question, ranging from ancient cultural thought that says shepherds are better than farmers to the recent idea that there actually was no reason, but that it was God's sovereign choice in the same way that God independently chose to love Jacob yet hate Esau. Yet, the explanation that I believe fits in best with the context of both Genesis 4 and Hebrews 11 is that Abel had greater faith than Cain. When looking at what Cain appears to offer to God in verse 3 with what Abel offers in verse 4 we see that Cain declined to offer up the firstfruits of his work, while Abel offered the firstlings of his flock. It is simply missing in the text. This signifies that the faith Abel had in God was neither complacent or trying, but was humble, thankful, and sacrificial.

The material sacrifice is the symbol for the submissive and willing heart. Abel's sacrifice begins this important theme that is prevalent all throughout Scripture; 1 Samuel 16:7, Hosea 6:6, Micah 6:6-8, Luke 19: 9-14, and Hebrews 13:16 are just a few examples of God desiring our hearts, first and foremost. Out of our heart comes sacrifice. Our works can not bring us closer to God. To get this backwards is a huge mistake, leading to a hypocritical works-righteousness, which easily leads to a hardened heart. Cain's hard heart led to his feigned worship. But a right heart leads to a right sacrifice.

The famous preacher, Charles Spurgeon, tells the following story:

Once upon a time in an old kingdom, there was a poor, quiet gardener who grew an enormous carrot in his garden. Now this man loved his sovereign, so he came and presented the carrot to the king, saying, 'This is the best carrot my garden will ever grow. Receive it as a token of my love and dedication to you.' This moved the king and he then gave the gardener 5 acres of land, far more land than any normal gardener, so the man went home thankful. Now a nobleman at court overheard this conversation. He thought to himself, 'If that is the response the king makes to such a small gift, what will he give in response to a great one?' So the next day he brought the king a fine horse, saying, 'This is the best horse my stables will ever grow. Receive it as a token of my love and devotion.' But the king discerned the nobleman's heart, and in response he just received the horse and dismissed the giver. When the king saw the look of confusion on the man's face, he

said, 'The gardener's gift was a gift out of genuine devotion, but you are just trying to make a profit. He gave *me* the carrot, but you have given *yourself* the horse.

Cain saw his sacrifice as a means to an end. The reason he sacrificed to God was so that God would bless his crops. Cain feared that his sacrifice would not be blessed and became angry. After he killed Abel, he was more concerned for his land and his job than his relationship with God. It seems fitting that Cain killed his brother in the location that caused Cain's selfishness in the first place, the field. He worshiped the creation more than the Creator (Romans 1:25). There was neither any reverence to God beforehand, nor repentance afterwards. His priorities were all wrong. Abel, on the other hand, saw his sacrifice the end to his means. He tended the sheep in order to sacrifice to God. Abel found joy in giving back to God what God had given to him. This was his faith. Cain viewed sacrifice as a tool to get what he wanted. Abel viewed sacrifice as the outward response of his inward faith.

Are you a Christian because of the gifts He blesses you with? He makes you feel good inside, you enjoy a happy Christian fellowship, He helps your marriage, He keeps your kids off of drugs, He brings you success at work, etc... Or are you a Christian because you recognize that He chose you to see the sacrifice of Jesus as your only Hope in life and death and you can't help but to thank him with your life in return? Let us first focus on our fellowship found in God through faith in Jesus Christ lest we mistake our sacrifices for a necessary appeasement from an angry God rather than fruit from a giving Father.

God's Unfair Mercy

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" ... So the LORD said to him, "Therefore whoever kills Cain, vengeance will be taken on him sevenfold" And the LORD appointed a sign for Cain, so that no one finding him would slay him. – Genesis 4:9, 15

Punishment and religion seem to go hand in hand. Although this statement can seem controversial, it is quite natural, especially when a culture or nation's justice system finds its laws through religious morality. To really grasp the complexity of this topic would exceed the length of this discussion, but we are able to understand its basic concept. If someone disobeys, he or she is punished and has to pay back what wrong they've done. All religions understand this and normally some sort of repentance is made, a sacrifice is given and pain is normally incurred so that one will not wrong again. This is not to say that there is not a time and place for justice and righteous punishment to be given at the national, cultural, and family levels. There certainly is. Yet we have seen things differently.

In an inconceivable turn, after murdering Abel, God still pardoned Cain. Cain did not receive the penalty deserved. When the Law was given to Moses, there were three instances in it about giving an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth as punishment for a wrong doing (Lev. 24:19-21, Exod. 21:22-25, Deut. 19:21). But this was before the Law was given and God was able to deal with his people through His own Word personally (much like He does now through the Holy Spirit) instead of through the Law given to the nation of Israel. So why did God pardon Cain? What about justice? Cain murdered his brother in cold blood and his great punishment was... relocation!? Of course, it was more than just mere relocation. This was an extension of God's punishment towards Adam, Cain's father. God had taken away the

thing he was most passionate about, his work. But would that kind of sentence satisfy us if our son, father, brother, friend was killed in such a manner? What is God doing here?

Ezekiel 33 is a striking account of God's mercy and judgment on those who claim to follow Him. Verse 11 says, "...As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!" God withholds His full wrath against Cain because He had hope for Cain. Even though there was no sign of repentance or regret for his actions, God decided to let Cain live that he might eventually turn to Him. God delights in His mercy. And on an interesting note, even though God vows to avenge the death of Cain (a vow that, for whatever reason, Abel did not receive, although he was the more faithful one) God goes so far as to put a sign of protection on Cain in verse 15. God, in essence, is saying that He is tired of the killing and wants it to stop. God will not avenge the death of Cain because no one will kill Him. God did this earlier with Adam and Eve, protected rather than destroyed. The Creator is patient with those who disobey and show mercy to them to the point of protecting them (Psalm 103:10). The Bible describes our God as one who is eternally lawful, yet eternally compassionate (Hebrews 8:12).

The following is a blog post from Pastoralmeanderings.blogspot.com written by Pastor Larry Peters of Grace Lutheran Church in Clarksville, TN.

God does not desire the death of the wicked. That is an incredibly unfair statement. We are conditioned to think justice and in that justice the wicked suffer rightly for their wickedness. For God to transcend justice with mercy means is to risk being seen as unfair for mercy is seldom understood. But it is this mercy that is God's good pleasure.

God's pleasure is not the punishment of the evildoer. The criminal justice system of this world may be designed to punish but God's system is one of mercy designed to save. God's pleasure is not retribution against every evil word or act....

God's pleasure is not the eye for an eye justice that was the way of the Law but the mercy that redeems. In God's justice the punishment is born by the only one who is truly innocent, the Lord Jesus Christ. This mercy trumps God's justice at every turn. God can do anything He wants but what He wants is to seek out the sinner, surround Him with grace, and save Him through the merits and mediation of the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ.

...We may think that justice is what we want, but it is God's good pleasure not to give us what we want but what we need. And this mercy is better than justice. Do you begrudge God's mercy? Does it offend you that God is not fair? Jesus tells several parables in which people reject God's mercy as unfair or too generous. It is always easy to decide that mercy is too generous for others but we seldom judge ourselves in this way. It is His delight to show mercy to the undeserving and forgiveness to the guilty. This is the message of the cross. God meets us where we are. But He does not leave us there.

...God does not discriminate. He treats every sinner the same. He is not fair but merciful. Now, before the day of salvation comes to its close, He gives mercy to forgive, mercy to restore, mercy to bring forth repentance. One day it will be too late and we will be left with only justice. But that is not today. Today is still the day of salvation. Today mercy speaks: Christ died for sinners all, and the world. Will we accept His merciful gift to us? If we reject that gift of mercy, God will

give us the justice we think we want... but by then it will be too late for second chances. May God open your heart to His mercy, your mind to His grace, and your life to the new life only Christ can bestow. Amen.

As unimaginable as it seems justice was, in fact, served to Cain. Not because Cain got what he deserved; in our terms, he didn't. But through His sovereign decision, God had dealt with him justly and justice stops at God. God *is* justice. He is the sovereign decision-maker and all law and goodness derives from Him. We must trust in God's final Word in whatever situation He brings us through, the joyful to the painful. "Mercy triumphs over judgment." (James 2:13) Psalm 111:7-8 and Daniel 4:37 go on to speak about how God's word and work are just and right at all times. We, too, have received a pardon like Cain. But with the Law and Covenant God made with Israel in place, a perfect sacrifice was necessary for this pardon to take place. Jesus Christ became this sacrifice to, not only pardon our sins therefore offering us forgiveness with God, but bring us back into a right relationship with our God, something Cain never received.

God's answer to the victim

But you have come to... Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. - Hebrews 12:22, 24

When last we left Abel, he was the victim of a jealous, bloody murder. The world's first victim. But as we come to see, his story is not yet over. Verse 10 of Genesis 4 says that God told Cain that his brother's blood was crying out from the ground. Now, the traditional interpretation of what Abel's blood is actually saying is that the blood is crying out for justice. It's as if it is calling out for revenge, "Eye for an eye, God! His punishment should fit his crime!" But as we have just learned, God yielded this revenge and showed mercy to Cain. So what can the blood possibly be saying?

All throughout His Word, God seeks to bring order back to relationships and communities from the effects of sin (Exod. 23:6-9, Job 29:11-17, Ps. 10:14, Prov. 18:5, Jer. 7:5-7, 22:3, Matt. 11:4-5, Lk. 18:1-8). We have all sinned against another and this has brought about all types of consequences in society. The living results of sins are the homeless, poor, widowed, orphaned, robbed, enslaved, exploited, rejected, forgotten, and the physically, mentally, emotionally, and sexually abused. They are the hopeless, helpless, innocent victims. Abel was victimized to the point of death, as was Jesus. Not only is His blood concerned for the guilty status of Cain, He is also concerned for the status of the victim. It cries out (CRIES OUT!) for the return of the victim who died unjustly; a mental, emotional, physical and spiritual return. It is not saying, "Punish the evildoer" (Jesus took the punishment on himself), but "Restore the innocent victim". Punishment of the guilty does not un-victimize the victim. We see this in the sentencing of a perpetrator. Although a murderer receives a life sentence, the punishment does not take away the anguish experienced and the damage done. Something more needs to take place. God has taken care of Cain the murderer; now Abel is waiting for God to take care of him.

Hebrews 12:24 explains that Jesus' blood speaks better than Abel's. It is exactly in this respect that it does so. Jesus' blood accomplished many things when it was shed on the cross. The new covenant began, the Kingdom of God was ushered in, Satan was crushed, and

those who have been found guilty before God (everyone) yet trust in Jesus' authority and power are given a right relationship with Him (Rev. 12:10-11). But for our purposes, it has also brought restoration to the victim. Jesus Christ, too, died as an innocent victim (Matt. 12:7, 27:4, 19, 24, Lk. 23:47, 2 Cor. 5:12, Heb. 4:15, 7:26). His trial was illegal and his execution was unjust. He understands what it is like to be abused, hated, used, ignored, and mocked. But because Jesus Christ overcame the cross and rose again, we too can find peace, hope and purpose in our pain (2 Cor. 13:3-4). It is through His greater torment that we can find a companion in our wounds and victimization (Isa. 53:4). In times of harm, abuse, or any type of anguish, not only can Jesus empathize with us, but is truly united with us through our faith, and he has and continues to suffer along side of us (1 Pet. 2: 19-21, 4:1, Phil. 2:1-11). When we are in times of hopelessness and desperation, He cries along side us, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). He's been there and will bring us through.

Abel's blood is crying out for a stop – for an end to enmity, division, and violence. Abel's blood speaks hope. Yet Jesus' blood speaks better because it is the fulfillment of this hope! Where as Abel died while having faith in the hope for a return back to a perfect relationship with God (our text), Jesus' blood is the answer to this vindication and provides the actualization to our new relationship with and perfection in the Triune God (Heb. 9:22). Jesus overcame injustice! He is no longer the victim of violent aggression, but the Overcomer through resurrection and forgiveness. Yet, Abel's blood still cries out because there are still victims; the kingdom of God has been introduced but has not been fulfilled. Abel's blood will not longer cry out when there are no more victims and Jesus is our eternal King reigning on high (Acts 17:30-31, Eph. 1:20-23).

Conclusion

Make every effort to live in peace with all men... - Hebrews 12:14

All of this has important implications. The fact that we have forgiveness through the cross when we have wronged another *and* we have hope through the resurrection when we have been wronged by another will bring comfort, peace, and new life. Jesus Christ died for both the guilty and the innocent. Taking on our sins, He became guilty for us. Yet, living a perfect, sinless life, He was killed as an innocent victim. The cross is for the guilty and the innocent (Isa. 53). And his resurrection is available to both. Adam's sin brought enmity between humanity and God. Jesus' sinlessness brought us back together with God (1 Cor. 15:22, 42-49). Cain's sin brought enmity between all humanity and itself. Jesus' unjust murder brought it back together, allowing complete harmony and unity between individuals, families, communities, and nations (1 Pet. 3:8-9).

We need to see God's amazing, undeserving mercy to the obviously guilty Cain and begin to apply it to our lives. We have all acted the part of Cain and of Abel; we have all been guilty in some circumstances and innocent in others. God's purpose is not to punish us but to save us, to forgive our sin with a grace stronger than any and every sin we commit (Eze 18:38, Rom 9:22-24). Since Christ has restored peace through relationships, let us forgive with the same grace God gave to Cain. If God can have mercy on Cain for killing Abel, and forgive us who are no better, then why can't we forgive those who hurt us? Since God showed mercy to us through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, one sacrifice we make

in our faith is mercy – our faith shown through our mercy. Justice stops at God’s mercy. It stops at Jesus’ forgiveness on the cross.

Forgiveness may seem to be the response of the weak but only the strongest of the strong can forgive. Weakness holds on to every hurt, every lie, every disappointment, and every sin. We find the strength to forgive through the forgiveness of the cross; from Jesus Christ, who has forgiven us of all our sins. We learn from Him how to forgive others. We do not forgive to earn God’s forgiveness; we forgive because He has first forgiven us (1 John 4:19). It is not us doing the forgiving, but God forgiving through us. Forgiveness is never earned and it is not given to those who deserve it (1 Pet 3:15-18). Here on earth we withhold forgiveness and use it like a weapon to extract some suffering from the guilty or to save the blow for ammo to be used in the next argument. We enjoy holding someone’s wrongs against them. This is often how marriages dissolve. Spouses bring back the past. We enjoy the superiority, the power we hold over people. We want them to suffer in the same way that they made us suffer. We think we are more loved by God because they’ve committed more sins, ‘greater’ sins. We could never admit it, but in our heart of hearts, we DON’T WANT to forgive them. We don’t want the playing field evened. We think, “If I forgive them, we will become equal again. I will lose this power, this position I have over them. It shows I am a weak-willed person.” If this is true, then God must be the weakest being in all history, for He forgave us all. There are many people who have wronged you, but have you not wronged God more? (2 Cor. 2:5-11)

What happens when God pardons someone who has wronged us, while we are content on keeping that barrier up? God is providing mercy while we are unwilling to forgive (1 Thess. 5:14c-15). Anyone with children has seen this played out at home: your oldest son hits his brother. You, as a good parent, intervene, “That is enough, apologize to your brother.” Apology takes place and all should be settled. But once you turn around, the younger brother hits his brother back. Now, you have already laid down the law, your decision was made and justice was served. That should be that. But the brother wasn’t satisfied with your judgment and still felt anger towards his older brother. Do we not do the same thing with God’s forgiveness? We continue to harbor resentment, anger, even hatred, not only for the one who has wronged us, but for God’s forgiveness. It is God in whom we lack faith in, not our brother. Let us be self-aware of our bigotry, animosity and bitterness towards those God has forgiven.

Retaliation is a lack of faith in God’s spoken promise that revenge is His, alone. Striking back is undoing Jesus’ work of reconciliation done on the cross (Deut. 32:35, Rom. 12:19, Heb. 10:30, Acts 11:16-17). Jesus never tried to avenge John the Baptist’s death, never tried to free him from prison, never hated the government for doing so (he hated that their hearts were evil). Jesus chose to withhold punishment on prostitutes (Mary Magdalene), adulterers (woman at the well), murderers (the government killed John the Baptist), thieves (the one on the cross), liars (Peter), cheaters (Matthew), pagans (Gentiles), the self-righteous (the rich young ruler) – none of them got the judgment or punishment they deserved. Not only did he withhold judgment, Jesus accepted them. What about the victims caused by these sinners? The wife of the man who cheated, the robbed and cheated, the socially-oppressed... Jesus’ love was offensive to them. Forgiveness was necessary for everyone. Love will be offensive. The world does not understand why we love those who don’t deserve it. But this is the way of the cross (Rom 5:6-8, John 13:35).

God’s kingdom is upside down. The weak are strong, the lowly are brought up, the oppressed are free, and the wrongdoer is forgiven. These are dangerous concepts but this is

the way of our God. God forgives fully and erases sin through the blood of Christ (Luke 11:4). Our forgiveness is likewise an act of grace and the work of mercy. “Forgiveness is not fair” – but forgiveness is what we need from God most of all. And this forgiveness becomes a mark of His presence in us. When He forgives us and we forgive others, following His path of mercy, His presence is evident to the world (John 13:35). As what we’ve learned from Cain, forgiveness is God’s new justice we find in Jesus Christ.

Although not the leading purveyor of absolute truth, Wikipedia.org’s article on Forgiveness goes through various religions’ views on the topic. When it gets to Christianity, it has this to say: “The Christian statement on forgiveness is best demonstrated in the Gospel message itself, namely that God the Father, chose to forgive mankind not for their own merit, but by unmerited favor. Unlike other religions, a Christian’s forgiveness is given because of Christ’s sacrifice, and can not be obtained by any works done by the Believer. Out of the basis of this forgiveness, believers are motivated to forgive all debts because of their debt Christ forgave at His own expense.” One of the greatest ways to express our faith is by forgiveness.

“Relationships don’t thrive because the guilty are punished but because the innocent are merciful” – Max Lucado, Just Like Jesus. No sin is too great for forgiveness and reconciliation between two people. Nobody deserves God’s mercy – we are all undeserving – as Christians we spread God’s undeserving mercy to all impartially. We can continue to wallow in our self-pity, pride, superiority, refusal to forgive, or we can, in faith, completely hand over these feelings to God (not ignore them) and begin to feel the freeing power of mercy and grace (Rom. 14:7-14). Christ’s work of bringing about our new creation needs to be the central position as we look at our new behavior (2 Cor. 5:14-21). This is fundamental to our NEW condition in Christ – forgiveness is more than an action, let it be a mindset, demeanor, knowing that everybody is fallen and are selfish sinners, but that you are no better (Col. 3:1-5,12). If we believe that God is working to heal the world now and that the church acts as a witness to the possibility of the Kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven,” then we must seriously contemplate a stance of mercy, grace, forgiveness, and peace (Matt. 5:3-12, Phil. 4:8-9). Let us be a merciful, forgiving church that recognizes that revenge, holding grudges and feelings of superiority over others is never our place, but God’s. Let us repent of our refusal to see the goodness of God’s judgments and apply the forgiveness now available through Christ.

In closing, let this be my plea: parents, if your children have obedience issues; children, if your parents have disciplinary issues; brothers and sisters, if your siblings have resentment issues; husbands, if you wives have reverence issues; wives, if your husbands have leadership issues, friends, if your friends have jealousy issues... BE PATIENT, BE MERCIFUL, BE LONGSUFFERING, BE FORGIVING, BE JUST. Offering mercy can be the scariest and most difficult thing to accomplish as Christians. We need God’s strength. We need look to His example of sacrifice of His Son’s life so that we may sacrifice our pride because of the mercy shown to us. It is difficult to forgive, yet when done for the right reason, it can bring an incomprehensible joy and peace. It was not difficult for God to sacrifice his Son because, although it would cost Him the suffering of His Son, He knew what perfect unity it would bring. (Isa. 53:10-12, Mk. 14:36, Col. 1:19-20, Heb. 12:3). May this spur us on to make our worship and service genuine and our grace and mercy boundless!

Further Resources:

The Cost of Discipleship – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Life Together – ibid.

The Prodigal God – Tim Keller

Relationships Unfiltered – Andrew Root

Free of Charge – Mirslav Volf

God's No and God's Yes – C.F.W. Walther

What's So Amazing About Grace? – Phillip Yancey