

GRACE BEYOND IMAGINATION

Introduction:

I come from a family of 5 children. I have three brothers and one sister. In Tonga, children are expected to go to school and after high school, find a job to help their parents and make a living. We never thought about leaving the island or even going out of the country. America was a mystery to me. It was never part of the plan for my life.

However, I was part of a brass band in high school and was asked to make a trip to America to visit our Tongan community and raise funds for our high school. During the trip, we visited many churches. The last place we visited, I met some of my mother's family. They offered me the opportunity to return after graduating from High School to further my education.

My student visa was approved and I was accepted to Hawaii Loa College. I returned to Hawaii and began my education. The plan was that I would return to Tonga after 4 yrs. of college and help my family.

During my last year in college, I learned that God had a different plan for my life. God called me to Ministry and I was granted another 4 years on my student visa to further my education.

It is beyond imagination, that a young boy who grew up on an isolated island in Tonga with only limited resources and few opportunities in life but when we fully trust in God, the Bible says, there is nothing impossible with Him.

It was God's grace beyond my imagination, that I would be standing here as a preacher serving my Lord.

I am so grateful for a God who is with us every step we take. God knows what is going on in our life and God has a plan for each and every one of us.

What we see in Houston is beyond our imagination, the devastation has left people with uncertainty, fear, and homelessness. It is heartbreaking and difficult to watch this situation, but we know that God is suffering with them.

Gospel Lesson:

In our gospel lesson, Peter asks, "How many times should I forgive? Seven times?" Jesus' answer is astonishing: "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." The Greek is difficult here. The Greek phrase can also be translated "seventy times seven," but the exact number is not the issue. The difference between the two is not mere mathematics. The difference is the nature of forgiveness. In fact, whether Jesus says "seventy-seven" or "seventy times seven," either way, grace and forgiveness has no limit. It is unconditional. It is grace beyond imagination.

Story: illustration

A little boy was saying his prayers.

And as he went down the list of his family, asking God to bless them, he skipped over his brother's name.

His mother asked him, "Why didn't you pray for Bill?"

He replied, "I'm not going to ask God to bless Bill because he hit me."

And his mother said, "Don't you remember Jesus said to forgive your enemies?"

But the little boy said, "That's the problem.

He's not my enemy; he's my brother!"

Is Jesus telling us to do that which we can't do? No, it is not by our own reason or strength. Remember there is nothing impossible with Him. Christ says, in the closing verse, verse 35, not only to forgive but to forgive our brother from our heart.

Jesus has only chosen seventy-seven times as a play on what Peter has just said to Him, but what seventy-seven times really means is an unlimited forgiveness!!!

In effect, Jesus was saying to Peter, "It's not a question of how many times you should forgive your brother, but Why should I forgive my brother?"

Parable:

To answer that deeper question of "Why should I forgive my brother," Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant.

"Therefore," Jesus says, "the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

When he began to settle accounts, they brought him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold.

Because the servant didn't have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment.

But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, 'Please be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.'

The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan.

When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins.

He grabbed him around the throat and said, 'Pay me back what you owe me.'

Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.'

But he refused.

Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt."

This parable is really a picture of us? Jesus is holding up a mirror in order for us to see ourselves.

We are the servant who has been forgiven a huge amount of money, and God is the great king who has forgiven us.

And this "ten thousand bags of gold" is a huge amount of money!!!

Some scholars suggest that it represents the largest possible number.

It would have been more money than was actually in circulation in Jesus time!!!

And the king forgives the entire loan.

The king had every right to order that the man, his wife, children and all that he had be sold.

Even though that would fall way short of paying off his debt.

In desperation, the man makes an impossible promise.

He falls on his knees and says to the king: "Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back."

Of course, he never could have paid him back.

If he worked all his lifetime and gave the king everything he made he couldn't make that much money.

But in desperation, he cries out, and the king's heart is moved by the man's impossible situation, and, out of compassion, he forgives him, at a staggering cost to himself!!!

Which means, of course, that the king took on the debt himself.

Again, we must see ourselves in this if we are going to get the point of Jesus' parable.

We must see that the totality of our sin against God constitutes this kind of debt, an absolutely impossible amount.

We owe God a huge debt that we could never, ever repay.

But here comes the Good News, the wonderful Good News of the Gospel.

There will come a day when we stand in the presence of God and hear Him say: "By the blood of Christ you are forgiven."

The debt was wiped away.

In one moment it was gone.

And we were free!!!

No matter how bad it may appear to us, no matter how hurt we are by what someone has done to us...

Christ's forgiveness flows from his heart to us in the Lord's Supper. It flows to us in His word, "I forgive you all your sins." It flowed to us in Baptism. As Ezekiel writes, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."

The King threw the unforgiving servant into prison because the King's forgiveness had not reached him. It was outside of him. It had not reached his heart. A Theologian by the name Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains it like this, "God's forgiveness is not conditional upon our forgiving others. ... Forgiveness that's conditional isn't really forgiveness at all, [it's] just Fair Warning. What Jesus [is saying is] that the pride which keeps us from forgiving is the same pride which keeps us from accepting forgiveness, and will God please help us do something about it."

God has given us His Spirit. He has removed our stony heart, and given us a new and living heart. His forgiveness not only flows from Him to us, it overflows from us to others. What does that look like?

It looks like Renee who forgave Eric West, for drunk driving and killing her daughter. Did he go to prison yes? But did she let hatred and bitterness consume her? No. The love and forgiveness of Christ flowed in and through her to Eric. He is now a Christian and together they lecture against drinking and driving.

Was this hard? Yes, it was beyond imagination for Renee's family and the community but it's doable. Out of her forgiveness, they did great work for others and saved lives.

Forgiveness can be hard. It's costly too. It cost God His Son. Our forgiveness to others can be done by the power of the Holy Spirit, when we confess our own sinful pride, and walk by His guidance and His strength.

Our forgiveness is not just for those we like, or we are pleased with. It is for all. Those we know and love. Those we don't. Those we get along with, and those who hurt us.

Our forgiveness can keep on flowing. A husband asked his wife to forgive him for something he had done, and reminded her that Jesus wanted her to forgive him 490 times. She laughed and said, "Sir, you're already over 500 -- but I'll forgive you anyway!"

It is in our everyday relationships that forgiveness needs to keep on flowing. If you forgive your spouse once a day, you get to 490 in 1 year, 4 months, and 5 days. It's going to take way more than 490 acts of forgiveness to keep that marriage running.

The forgiveness we are called to offer is not based on a formula or law, but comes from what we have experienced in life and in Christ Jesus who willingly gave up his life for you and I.

We are called to forgive as we have been forgiven. At the center of the Lord's prayer we are reminded of this: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Forgiveness is not easy. It does not come naturally.

Helmut Thielicke, a German who had lived through the horrors of Nazism, writes: "This business of forgiving is by no means a simple thing. I am always on the point of forgiving, but I never forgive. I am far too just." The only remedy, Thielicke concluded, was his realization that God had forgiven his own sins and had given him another chance.

God's grace, once experienced, should transform us. The experience of being forgiven makes it possible for us to forgive. By living in God's grace, we find the strength to respond to others in grace, to offer forgiveness to each other and to those beyond the church.

This is the church's message. This is the good news we have to share – the capacity to break the chain of unforgiveness and ungraced.

How are we doing at living out God's forgiveness and grace? Are there ways that we fail to be merciful to each other, to our communities and to the world? The forgiveness that marks the church – forgiveness grounded in the mercy of God – offers good news to the world. It offers an alternative to hate, envy and revenge.

When you feel that it is beyond your imagination to forgive, remember what Apostle Paul says in Romans 5:8-9, "But God proves His love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ

died for us. Therefore, since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from wrath through Him!...

Jesus' death has nothing to do with anything that you have done. God is love and God loves each and every one of us. What is happening in Houston... What is happening in your life, don't blame God, that is our freewill that God offer to us to choose.

Many of us choose to do wrong and we must face the consequences. However, God is suffering with us and wanted us to remember that Jesus suffered on the cross for our hope and salvation.

You may be living with unforgiveness in your heart, you may feel that you just can't do it, but you must let go because God willingly let go of his Son, and Jesus willingly gave up his life for all of us.

Paul describes God's grace in Ephesians when he writes: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not of works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9).

Story: illustration

Toward the end of Sunday service, the minister asked, "How many of you have forgiven your enemies?" Eighty percent held up their hands. The minister repeated his question. All responded this time, except one small elderly lady. "Mrs. Jones? Are you not willing to forgive your enemies?" "I don't have any," she replied smiling sweetly. "Mrs. Jones, that is very unusual. How old are you?" "Ninety-eight," she replied. "Oh, Mrs. Jones, would you please come down in front and tell us all how a person can live ninety-eight years and not have an enemy in the world? The little sweetheart of a lady walked down the aisle, faced the congregation and said: "I outlived them all!"

Conclusion:

Today, we will gather at the Lord's table to remember that sacrifice. As you prepare to partake the communion, if you still doubt God's sacrificial love through his Son Jesus, if you can't imagine that what the Bible is saying is true. You need to repent and ask God for forgiveness then I want you to come to the table and receive Jesus body and blood, and take it in remembrance of God's love for you.

Yes, it is God's grace beyond our imagination. He forgives your sin in Jesus' death and Resurrection, and His Holy Spirit is always with you no matter where, what, and who you are. You are God's child. His grace beyond imagination is to all of us. Amen.