

July 15, 2012 - Don't Need Google to Find Forgiveness

Times change don't they? I guess that's kind of an obvious statement but as I was thinking about that this week, I thought, you know, originally there were the DJ's, the disk jockeys who would take the records and put them on the turn table and they would play the music. Eventually, as time went on, and video killed the radio star, we moved from DJ's into VJ's. And they are the ones who get on T.V. and they would play the music videos instead of just a record. And now as we move into the internet age we have developed a new trade which is actually called CJ's. CJ's are cyber jockeys. Now, if you have never heard of that term or don't know what that is, let me explain it to you. I was introduced to it a couple of years ago and here is what a cyber jockey is all about. A couple of years ago I was at Break Forth and at one of the sessions, with a very well known speaker, he did something very different, something that I had never seen anyone do before. Instead of using Power Point like we would normally do on a Sunday morning or in a session like that, he didn't do that. Instead, he opened up his Internet Explorer or Firefox or whatever browser he was using, actually he didn't even do it at all he had a university student which he employed to do this for him so he had no control over it whatsoever. As he was up there talking, the person running the computer would go to Google and would open up the Google site, specifically the image part of Google. So as the speaker was talking or let's say it was me this morning, here is what would happen. The university student would be at the back there, manning the computer and if I started talking about someone like Canada's first Prime Minister, which was John A. MacDonald, he would type John A. MacDonald into the search thing and a bunch of pictures would come up. He would pick one of the pictures that came up, select it, and it would come up on the screen for all of you to see. Then he would hit the back button and I would continue to talk and as I talked, next maybe I would bring in an illustration about the Easter Island Heads. You know the big heads back out on Easter Island so he would look for that. He would select a picture, no not that one, that one's better, and he would put it up on the screen for all of you to see. I would continue to talk and as I was talking, he would continue to surf the internet for different things. So maybe now I'm going to talk about forgiveness. So he would type in 'Forgiveness' and hit the search button and come up with all these pictures and select one and put it up on your screen for you to watch. That's how the whole session went. That's what a cyber jockey is.

Now, Google is great if you need to find something. If you need to find a good place to eat; or maybe you need to find a location on a map; or you need to find a picture of well, just about anything in the World. Well, you can find it on Google. Maybe what you're looking for is the latest news about movies or sports or the stock market. All of those things you can find on Google. You can find almost anything on Google, from kilts to cars; from crayons to crocodiles; from airplane tickets to air mattresses; from tents for camping to tripods for cameras; I could probably do this all day and some of you are probably starting to wonder if I'm going to. But, the whole point of it is, that, if you name it, you can Google it. But, if you are looking for forgiveness, there are much better places for you to look than your trusty search engine.

This morning, we want to talk about ‘Forgiveness’. And we talk about forgiveness here a lot and we do that for a reason. In the Bible, there’s a lot of talk about forgiveness. That’s why it comes up in our teaching so often. Which, that fact, in and of itself, should tell you something about the heart of God and the teachings of Jesus. When we talk about forgiveness, we often talk about it and discuss things like: How important it is for us to learn to forgive other people. It is without a doubt extremely important for us to learn to do that both for our well-being and as God’s people and as a living example of God’s forgiveness to the World around us. However, today we’re not going to do that. We’re not so much going to talk about giving forgiveness to other people but more, we want to talk about simply, the way that we receive forgiveness from God. You see, our forgiveness for others flows out of the forgiveness we have already received from God. The way we accept God’s forgiveness into our life, greatly affects our ability to dispense that to other people. So today, we want to look at couple of different perspectives on receiving forgiveness. To do that, we’re going to use the story that the Worship Team read out for us earlier from Luke, Chapter 15, starting in Verse 11. We’ve already read the story so I will just give you a quick recap to refresh your memory a little bit.

There is a father who has two sons. The younger of the two sons asks for his inheritance. When the father gives him his share of the inheritance, he goes off to a far away country where he figured no one knows him and no one will see the things he is doing, especially his dad. When he gets there he does all the things that a young man with a lot of money is bound to do and about the time the money runs out, it says ‘there is a severe famine in the land’ it’s what we would call an economic recession in the land. Jobs are scarce and money is tight and no one is there to lend him some money. No one who is there is willing to lend him a hand until he gets back on his feet. So he ends up serving slop to swine. To a Jewish listening audience, this was quite possibly the worst, most humiliating, job that you could have. In their minds, it would alienate you both from your culture and possibly from God Himself. So, as the son is out there feeding the pigs, he realizes ‘My dad treats his servants better than this. Maybe he’ll hire me as a servant.’ So the son decides to go home. The father sees the son while he’s still a long way off and the father runs to greet him, runs through the streets, even thought that was something that a proper man of his age would never do. He gives him hugs and kisses and he gives him a robe and a ring and some sandals. They kill the fatted calf and they put together a great big party to celebrate the younger son’s return.

Now, the older brother returns home after a long day of work and asks what’s going on. Someone tells him “your brother has returned and your father is throwing party”. The older brother says “There is no way that I am going in there. I do all the right things and he does all the wrong things and he is the one who gets the party. And what happens now, am I going to have to split my share of the inheritance with him?”

And that’s the story that we have to work with this morning. Now, I’m going to make a few assumptions as we begin this morning. I’m going to assume that you recognize the love of the father that allows the younger son to make his own decisions, even though it breaks his heart to watch. That you see the father waiting and watching at the window from the very day the son

left until he returns home. That you understand the forgiveness extended by the father when the younger son returns, welcoming him with open arms, embracing him as a child and not a servant, reinstating his son-ship with the gifts and the celebrations. I'm going to assume that you know that Jesus tells this story to describe the way God the Father views each and every person on Earth. Now, if you haven't heard this story before and you need some of that symbolism explained or you need some of that though flushed out a little bit, that would be a wonderful discussion for us to have and I would love to do that with you. But, for this morning, let's just assume that those points have already been established because what we really want to look at today is how people respond to the Father's love and forgiveness.

So, let us start at the end, if you will. We're going to start at the end and spend a few moments looking at the older brother in the story. Now, we're starting with the older brother because he's the one the story is really all about. You see, this passage begins at the beginning of Chapter 15 and it begins with Luke recording this. Luke 15:1-3:

“Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and the Teachers of the religious law complain that he, Jesus, was associating with such sinful people even eating with them.”

So Jesus told them this story. In fact, Jesus tells three stories and the one we're looking at this morning is the third of these stories. He tells these stories to make a point to the Pharisees and the Teachers of religious law. In this story we're looking at this morning, those people are represented by the older brother. You see, when the younger son comes home the older brother is upset at the end of the story, because the father has extended forgiveness to the younger son. However, the older son's complaint isn't that the father has withheld forgiveness from him; in fact, if you listen closely you will hear that, the older son's view is that really, he's never needed forgiveness and the father's grace in the first place. He's upset that the younger son is getting for free, what he has worked hard and rightfully earned. Here's what the older son says: “All these yours I have slaved for you and never once refused a single thing you told me to do.” And that's exactly the position the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law saw themselves in. “We are the ones who have never refused to do a single thing God has told us to do. We are the ones who have never done a single thing wrong and we don't want Jesus just giving away for free, especially to the dregs of society, what we have rightfully earned on our own.” Unfortunately, that perspective of forgiveness did not die out in the First Century nor was it limited to the Pharisees. Listen if you will to author Jeff Vines recount a conversation he had recently right here in the 21st Century:

“A college student asked to meet with me after I preached a weekend message on sin and salvation. Standing in our church café, he accused me of creating a false need and then providing a solution to meet that need. ‘Salvation’ he complained ‘is only relevant if one is in need of saving’. I said ‘Well the Bible says that we are all sinners and the wages of sin, is death.’ His response ‘Well, I would agree that I'm not perfect, but I don't see myself as a sinner.’ ‘Well, what do you see yourself as’ I asked back. ‘A good person, who occasionally

does bad things.’ The conversation continued and I challenged his idea. ‘If he is a good person who occasionally does bad things’ I suggested ‘then why not just stop doing bad things. Simply wake up tomorrow and decide that you are never going to tell another lie, think a bad thought, or covet what does not belong to you. In fact, just decide that from now on, you will never again do anything wrong.’ He said ‘that’s impossible’. And I said ‘That’s right! And do you know why? Because you are a sinner.’”

The reality is that, no matter who you are and no matter how much good you think you have done, you are not a good person who sometimes does bad things. Neither am I. However, you are also not a bad person who occasionally does good things. The truth is, you are a broken person who sometimes works and sometimes doesn’t. And the only way to change that is if you are repaired. Have you ever seen one of those Si-Phi movies usually set in the future, in space or something and there’s this big super computer that pretty much runs everything and the people begin to think that maybe there is a problem with the computer and so the first thing they do is, they ask the computer to run a self-diagnostic program. Of course, the computer runs a self-diagnostic program and says ‘everything checks out O.K.’ Now, am I the only one who sees that and goes ‘What if the malfunction is in the self-diagnostic program?’ Well, we are all malfunctioning human being and try as we may, it is simply impossible for us to self-diagnose or self-repair ourselves, yet we are so easily seduced that we don’t need God’s forgiveness or grace in our lives. Or at least, we certainly don’t need as much of it as a lot of other people we see around us. But do you know where that perspective leads us? Sitting outside the house with the older brother, missing the celebration.

The Apostle Paul reminds the Christians in the Church at Ephesus, by saying this in Eph. 2:8-10: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift from God. Not by works so that no one can boast, for we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.” You are not who you are because of your own works but because God has been working on you.

Later Paul will say to the Church in Philippi: Phil. 3:3b-4: “We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us. We put no confidence in human effort though I could have confidence in my own effort, if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more.” And then Paul goes on to give a list of qualities and qualifications that would impress the most devout Pharisee and says “All this stuff doesn’t mean a thing compared to the difference that knowing Christ has made in my life.”

You see, once we take the perspective that we are good or at least good enough, on our own, because of the good things that we’ve done or because of the bad things we have not done, we eliminate the need for God’s grace in our lives. When we limit our own need for God’s grace we naturally start to limit the amount of God’s grace that we permit others to have as well. Just like the older brother, we begin deciding who is deserving of God’s grace and who should receive God’s forgiveness. But Jesus’ point in telling the story is that, none of us deserve it. But any one of us can receive it.

There's another perspective in the story and it comes from the younger brother. It comes from him in a time where he's got nothing. He's got no money, he has no friends, no food, no pride, no hope and he's sitting there in the pig pen serving slop to the pigs. Whatever illusions or intentions he may have had when he first left home; they've all disappeared now along with his inheritance. As he sits in the mud, drooling over the slop that's in the bucket beside him, an idea comes to him. He says "I will go home to my father and say 'Father I have sinned against both Heaven and you and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'" The son knows of the father's forgiving nature. In fact he's counting on it. It's his only hope for getting hired on as a servant at his father's house. But his words reveal his true perspective. He says "I am no longer worthy." And perhaps you've been there. Perhaps you have sat in the mud. In the pig pen. Perhaps you have hit rock bottom. Maybe you've been haunted by your past. Maybe you've been eaten up by your mistakes. Maybe you've been confronted by your sin. Maybe you have looked at your reflection in the slop bucket and thought, 'I am no longer worthy. No longer worthy of God's forgiveness. No longer worthy of a second chance or, let's be honest, a 102nd chance. No longer worthy of a fresh start. No longer worthy of being redeemed. But what the son didn't realize, what we often don't realize, when the son returned home, the father didn't run out to meet him because the son was worthy. He didn't hug and kiss him because the son was worthy. The father didn't give him a ring and sandals and a robe because the son was worthy. He didn't kill the fatted calf because the son was worthy. The father didn't forgive and restore him to the family because the son was worthy. Worthiness had nothing to do with it. In fact, the father doesn't even let the son finish the big long speech that he had been rehearsing all the way home. The son is forgiven and restored and loved and accepted, not because the son is worthy but because the father is wonderful.

John says: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God." 1John 3:1. The reason that the World doesn't know us is that it did not know Him. You see, forgiveness is all about God lavishing love upon us, not our own worthiness. And if you ever find yourself doubting that truth; if you ever find yourself questioning if God can or will forgive you; if you ever find yourself worrying whether God will accept you back home, then I dare you to look at the Bible because I guarantee you, that you will see God forgive someone for doing the same thing you have, or perhaps something even worse. If you find that hard to believe, check out this list:

- Abraham was a liar;
- Jacob was an extortionist, he was deceitful, he was a thief and a cheat;
- Joseph was arrogant;
- Joseph's brothers betrayed him and were deceitful;
- Moses murdered someone;
- Rahab was a prostitute;
- David committed adultery and was deceitful and was murderous;
- Solomon had 700 wives and 300 mistresses;
- Jonah willfully and knowingly disobeyed what God had asked him to do;

- Sampson was a promise breaker;
- Matthew cheated and defrauded people;
- Peter denied that he even knew who Jesus was;
- Paul persecuted the Church. He rounded up Christians and threw them in jail and had them Executed.

But even Paul at the end of that list, here's what he concludes at the end of all of it. 1Tim. 1:15-16: "This is a trustworthy saying, everyone should accept it: "Jesus Christ came into the World to save sinners and I'm the worst of them all but God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of His great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they too, can believe in Him and receive eternal life."

God's forgiveness does not depend on our worthiness. It is dependent on His Goodness. If God could forgive all of these people and not only forgive them, but forgive them and use them for great things in His purpose and His Kingdom, then He can and He will, do the same for you. He is standing at the door inviting you to come inside and join the celebration. He is watching at the window waiting to see you walk down the road on your way home. He is running to greet you with arms wide open, with hugs and kisses, with grace and forgiveness.

I want to conclude this morning, with some of Paul's words. These are the words that he begins the Letter to the Ephesians with: Eph. 1:3-8: As I read these, have them apply to your heart whatever is churning in there this morning, have these words speak to you:

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the Heavenly Realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For He chose us in Him before the creation of the World to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love, God decided in advance, to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ. This is what He wanted to do. It gave Him great pleasure. So we praise God for His glorious grace which He has freely given to us in the One He loves. In Him, we have redemption through His blood. The forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."