



LOVE PEOPLE PEACEMAKER

Man's Best Friend

Scripture's exhortation to love would be much easier if it read...

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your DOG as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (not quite Matthew 22:37-40).

Yes, we love people—at least we want to. But people are much more complicated than the always-welcoming, always-forgiving, always-grateful dog.

Relationships are...

The best of life.

The greatest pleasure.

Relationships are...

The worst of life.

The greatest pain.

We seek people for pleasure. We avoid people from pain.

It's insightful that after God said of Adam, *"It is not good for the man to be alone"* (Genesis 2:18), he then had all the animals pass by Adam to name them. It was after viewing and naming the animals that Scripture observes: *"But for Adam no suitable helper was found."*

We smile at the thought of the welcomed companionship of a much-loved pet. We instinctively know, however, that, they are no full substitute for our need of other people. We were not designed to live in isolation. We were designed for relationship.

Conflict

Let's acknowledge a reality.

Conflict happens.

Try as we may, the best of friendships experience conflict. Then add to that the relationships that are not the best of friendships. There's office-conflict, neighbor-conflict, junior high-conflict, conflict among the aged. Pretty much wherever there are people, there will be conflict.

How do we stay relationally engaged when we know, with relative certainty, we will get hurt?

Scripture's teaching on this topic is fairly predictable but no less profound..

Forgiveness

They came to Jesus and asked him, *“How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”* (Matthew 18:21).

Jesus’ response has been passed from generation to generation for thousands of years: *“I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times”* (Matthew 18:22).

Or put another way, to follow Christ is to be a person of forgiveness.. We do not hold things against people. We are a people of grace and mercy because we follow a God of grace and mercy.

Teachings on forgiveness sound great in theory; but when in the midst of complicated and conflicted situations, we wonder if they are naive. What about deep wounds? What about broken marriages? What about deceptive and domineering “friends”? What about the verbally abusive stepmother or the sexually abusive uncle? The old adage “forgive and forget” seems a bit trite in situations like these. Is this truly what Jesus had in mind?

Let’s be daring. Let’s not roll out a bunch of passages on grace and forgiveness. Let’s do just the opposite.

Let’s roll out a bunch of passages describing God’s anger.

Anger

About the God of grace and mercy, it is also said: *“God was very angry”* (Numbers 22:22).

And concerning the rebelling of Israel, we read, *“He was angry and solemnly swore: ‘No one from this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to give your ancestors’”* (Deuteronomy 1:34-35).

Later we read of God’s anger influencing his actions...

Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel and said, “Because this nation has violated the covenant I ordained for their ancestors and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died.”
(Judges 2:20-21)

We turn to the New Testament, and it continues.

About Jesus, we read, *“He made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables”* (John 2:15).

And from Jesus, we hear, *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!”* (Matthew 23:13).

And at the end of the age, regarding the rebellious, we read that *“their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur”* (Revelation 21:8).

Such passages may seem out of place when discussing grace and forgiveness. But what if they’re not? What if they serve as a foundation for good, authentic, and lasting grace and forgiveness? If we talk about grace and forgiveness in absence of going toe-to-toe with the realities of justified anger, our grace and forgiveness will be, at best, shallow and forced.



God's Grace

It's critical to note God's process of moving from anger to grace. What did God do to establish peace with his people? How did he move from a place of justified anger to a place of authentic forgiveness?

Let's state what he *didn't* do.

God has never winked at an offense. He has never looked at humanity's rebellion and in any way communicated that it's minimal, a shoulder shrug, or something to be downplayed. To the contrary, reconciling humanity's offense is the centerpiece of God's story.

There's a critical message in this.

Teachings on forgiveness and grace often send a misinformed message that the follower of Christ must minimize an offense. He or she must be the kind of person who never gets angry, never gets offended; and when hurt, pretends to always be okay. Such thinking is not only misinformed, but both dangerous and ironic. Dangerous because it causes great harm. Ironic because it leads away from the very forgiveness it professes to embrace.

Authentic forgiveness starts with reality. It stares the offense in the face. It acknowledges depth of hurt. It states legitimate and justified anger. If we pretend the offense is nothing, then forgiveness is nothing more than the painter whitewashing a rotten board. Nothing has really changed; it just looks better on the outside.

When humanity rebelled against God and has continued to rebel, God has let us know. He has made it clear that our offense is offensive. When he brought about grace, he didn't establish grace with a "no big deal" message. He established grace through sacrifice. The message from the cross speaks volumes to many aspects of life, not the least of which is the bold statement it makes about the weight of our offense and the counterweight of God's grace. God has not carelessly handed out forgiveness.

Which leads to an obvious, but all-too-neglected starting point for dealing with conflict.

Deal with It

When dealing with conflict, we must be forthright.

Scripture's teaching is clear. If someone sins against you, "*go and show him his fault, just between the two of you*" (Matthew 18:15).

The teaching is not...

...stuff your anger and say nothing about his fault.

Or...

...go and tell other people about his fault.

Or...

...meditate on his offense and make it even worse than it actually was.



We deal with offense. We engage. God has not hidden his anger. He has made his anger known and worked hard to bring about reconciliation. Likewise, we are a people of reconciliation, but not by glossing over offenses. We open the issue between offending parties. When the offender is unyielding, we do not then cover. Rather, Scripture gives clear guidance for dealing with conflict.

Consider it carefully...

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.
(Matthew 18:15-17)

Or put another way, when someone offends you, don't let it fester. Don't let it grow. Don't spread the offense to others unless their help is needed in the second or third conversation to bring about reconciliation. Unchecked anger is cancerous. We know well the experience of playing and replaying an offense in our minds. Rather than subside quietly, offenses grow, in our thoughts, sometimes appearing larger than they actually are.

Hear carefully these words to the people of Ephesus, "*In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold*" (Ephesians 4:26-27).

Anger is a reality. As shown above, God himself gets angry. But unchecked anger leads to a host of problems. For this reason, Scripture is clear: *Deal with it and deal with it immediately.* When we don't deal with it, we give the enemy a "foothold" in our lives, leaving us vulnerable to manipulation. The enemy leverages that unaddressed anger to wreck the marriage, wreck the job, wreck the church, or wreck the friendship. Letting the setting sun be the standard of timely reconciliation is a standard that protects from a host of other problems.

Tension

Fair enough. We get it. Be upfront with your anger. Deal with it immediately. Let the offense be known to the appropriate parties involved, move toward forgiveness, and then move on.

Which all sounds good until we hit the reality of our own situations. It would be nice if life were that cut and dried, but it's not. Maybe it works if we're talking day-to-day offenses, but what about deep wounds? What about complicated and ongoing relationships? What about past trauma or present abuses? Do we just voice our anger, forgive, and move on?

A critical distinction must be made.

Consider this statement: *Forgiveness is a gift; trust is earned.*

Forgiveness is given to those who do not deserve it. If we have a situation where our instinctive response is, "*That person does not deserve forgiveness,*" we are correct. Grace is never deserved. If we are waiting for a person to display worthiness of grace, then we



have confused forgiveness and grace for something it is not. We have mistaken it for trust.

Trust is given to those who have shown themselves to be trustworthy. The exhortations of Scripture to forgive those who have offended us—even deeply so—is most emphatically *not* an exhortation to pretend nothing has happened. The old adage “forgive and forget” is not the true counsel of Scripture.

We forgive and do not let anger fester toward others; but this does not mean we must forget what happened. We are not required to fully entrust ourselves to those not yet trustworthy. Life abounds with complicated situations where this would be naive at best and dangerous at worst. Scripture does not teach us to make ourselves needlessly vulnerable.

Which leads to a second tension in this experience: How to bestow forgiveness and grace in generous portions while not naively entrusting ourselves to others.

Consider the following...

If we forgive without protecting, we become vulnerable.

If we protect without forgiving, we become bitter.

Recognizing this distinction is a powerful tool.

Letting ourselves say, “*I cannot trust that person and need to protect myself*” may be exactly what we need to say in order to isolate forgiveness and grace from trust, so grace becomes accessible. When the two are jumbled together, it’s difficult to do either.

Let’s look thoughtfully to Scripture to see what it says to both sides of this tension.

Forgiveness

The man was deep in debt. He owed a great deal of money to his boss, and his boss called his loans. The man could not pay the debt, so “*the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt*” (Matthew 18:25).

Which of course brought the man to his knees: “*At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything’*” (Matthew 18:26).

How will his boss respond? This was big money. Surely no one would expect forgiveness in a situation like this. Will he consider this servant’s suggestion of a payment plan?

“*The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go*” (Matthew 18:27).

This was unexpected. A serious and significant debt was forgiven. Others would be happy for this man. They’d feel his relief. They’d tell and retell this story of grace.

They’d also expect the forgiven man to become a man of grace himself. But such was not the case.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. “Pay back what you owe



me!" he demanded.
(Matthew 18:28)

He experienced grace, but demanded justice. He demanded that others give him what he himself was not able to give. His debtor pleaded for mercy just as he had: *"Be patient with me, and I will pay it back"* (Matthew 18:29).

This would be the moment of truth. Would he extend to others the grace he had just received?

"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt" (Matthew 18:30).

Word traveled fast. *"When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened"* (Matthew 18:31).

The boss was displeased. He took bold and decisive action.

Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.
(Matthew 18:32-34)

Jesus drew a parallel: *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart"* (Matthew 18:35).

In other words, judgmental actions toward others are incompatible with a person who has experienced the grace of God. Our offense before God is great, as is evidenced by the severity of Christ's cross. When we truly get this, we are far more prepared to extend a similar grace to the deep and complicated offenses that have come our way. This does not minimize the offense anymore than God minimizes our offenses toward him. We extend an undeserved grace just as an undeserved grace was extended to us.

So...yes. Scripture's teaching on forgiveness is both broad and deep.

But what about entrusting ourselves to others? What does Scripture say about protecting ourselves?

Self-Protection

It's true. Scripture teaches we are not our own protectorate. God is our protector. Passages on the topic abound.

He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.
(2 Corinthians 1:10)

And...

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
(Psalm 23:4)

And...



Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence.
(Psalm 91:1-3)

Verse after verse, passage after passage, we are exhorted and comforted by Scripture's abundant teaching on God's protection. Yes, we could attempt to protect ourselves, but such attempts are foolish. Why protect ourselves by our own limited strength when God is infinitely more capable of looking out for us?

Which hints toward a critical distinction.

Scripture doesn't teach us to *not* protect ourselves.. Scripture's teaching is guidance toward the *best* protection. The teaching is not, "*Remove all protection from your life.*" The teaching is, "*Seek protection from the greatest strength available.*" God has both infinite strength and infinite wisdom. We will find no better source of ultimate protection.

With that in mind, to experience God's protection, we listen to his guidance. What would he have us do? What steps would he have us take? How does he counsel our relational world—specifically in the area of dealing with difficult people?

Consider the following proverb: "*Like a broken tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in a time of trouble*" (Proverbs 25:19).

It's a simple statement, but it's profound. It is counsel against relying upon an "unfaithful" person. Wisdom is discerning. We're not counseled to naively trust any and all people. This is counsel from our protector. It's a situation he's telling us to avoid.

Consider another: "*Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm*" (Proverbs 13:20).

Or more boldly: "*Stay away from a fool, for you will not find knowledge on their lips*" (Proverbs 14:7).

And one more: "*Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs than a fool bent on folly*" (Proverbs 17:12).

The message is clear.

Again and again, Scripture counsels cautiousness toward those whose association will do us harm. This does not mean we do not love these people, challenge these people, and yes, forgive these people. But it does mean wisdom acknowledges the need for careful boundaries.

This wisdom is given from our protectorate. It would be foolish to ask for his protection and then ignore his wise counsel. If we truly trust him and look to him for protection, we will carefully consider and apply the guidance he gives. When we love God, we listen to God. God gives depth of insight and wisdom. Those who love him will take full advantage of this counsel.

The wise counsel from our Protector is not to isolate ourselves from all people to protect us from all harm. Even more, there will be complicated situations—like marriages—where determining the best path forward will take careful consideration,



counsel of others, and thoughtful attention to Scripture's full teachings. But the principle is clear: Just because Scripture boldly teaches grace, this does not mean we toss wisdom aside and fail to adjust degrees of trust.

As Far As...

Paul's exhortation to the church in Rome pulls much of this together: *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone"* (Romans 12:18).

And it's no coincidence that statement closely follows this one: *"Love must be sincere"* (Romans 12:9).

If our love is sincere, it will consistently offer grace toward those who offend.

And if our love is sincere, we will know the difference between extending grace and extending trust.

If peace is not present in our relationships, may it not be due to our inactions or unwillingness. There will be times others refuse to engage our steps toward reconciliation; but may that refusal not come from us.

Relational situations are often complicated due to neglecting the straightforward teachings of Scripture. When anger is not dealt with and offenses pile up, situations become far more complicated than if they had been dealt with initially. With God as our God, we need not cower from the awkward and challenging conversations associated with reconciliation. We can engage courageously.]We are a free people and need not be controlled by anger, fear, or foolishness.

