

## “Gracious”

*Matthew 18:15-22 & Psalm 119:9-16*

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**Prayer for Understanding** Teaching God, we want to learn your ways. We want to learn the ways of forgiveness. We want to learn the ways of grace. We want to learn your ways of love. That is part of why we return to your text week after week, because we are hungry to be more like you. So as we prepare to listen to your good Word, calm the noise in our minds. Center our spirits to focus on you

so that we might learn and hear what we have missed in this story before. God, we want to learn your ways. Meet us here. Speak your truth. Help us listen. Amen.

**Psalm 119:9-16 MSG “How can a person live a clean life? By carefully reading the map of God’s Word. I’m single-minded in pursuit of God; don’t let me miss the road signs you’ve posted. I’ve banked your promises in the vault of my heart so I won’t sin myself bankrupt. Be blessed. God train me in your ways of wise living. I’ll transfer to my lips all the counsel that comes from God’s mouth; I delight far more in what God tells me about living than in gathering a pile of riches. I ponder every morsel of wisdom from God, I attentively watch how Jesus has done it. I relish everything God told me of life, I won’t forget a word of it.**

Peter is often all or nothing—either resisting Jesus or drawing closer to him in earnest. In today’s scripture, we see a version of Peter who is hungry to learn. His posture is humble and open—he wants to absorb Jesus’ teachings like a wet sponge. He asks a question: “How many times should I forgive?” Forgiveness is infinite. Forgiveness is abundant; grace is not earned. In your own faith, do you find comfort in theological formulas? Do you wish for straightforward answers? Can you let go of black-and-white thinking and instead embrace the infinite colors of grace?

A reading from the gospel of Matthew: **Matthew 18:15-22 NLT “If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if they won’t accept the church’s decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector. “I tell you the truth, whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven. “I also tell you this: If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, God in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them.” Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?” “No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!**

What do you think of these statements? Broken relationships are the root cause of all sin. Broken relationships are the major cause of suffering.

The Bible is God’s love letter to us. A primary purpose of the Bible is to teach us how to enjoy dynamic loving relationships with all people, God, and our self. Genesis identifies three ailments which destroy paradise: control, shame, and blame.

Whether you believe Genesis is literal, or metaphoric, the insights are the same. When reading Genesis, it is helpful to zoom out for the big picture message searching for what does the scripture teach us about relationships.

A controlling relationship is devoid of love. God knows what is best for us and God never controls us. God gives us free will. We are free to love God, or not. It has been said that true love has no limits. God created a good world where all are free to love and create infinite goodness. God, humanity, and the cosmos were all whole, complete, in perfect loving relationship, which is paradise, named the Garden of Eden. Eating the forbidden fruit from a tree represents humanities attempt to control God, control creation and control each other, it replaces love with coercion and manipulation.

As soon as humanity tried to control God and each other, they felt shame and hid. Shame is denying that one is created good. Shame is spiraling thoughts of scarcity, that one is never enough so one needs to compete, compare, and get ahead of others, that one is unlovable and they need to do something to earn love. Shame often results in withdrawal, numbing, disengagement, and a distorted perception. The opposite of shame is shalom, completeness, peace, connection, empathy, freedom and love.

Blame further deteriorates relationships, distorts reality, and hinders love. God is blamed for creating the tree and creating more than one human. This whole mess created hostility which resulted in more and more attempts to control others, eventually leading to murder. The perfect equality was destroyed. We have been struggling with inequality ever since.

The serpent is an angel who tried to control God, felt shame, and now is trying to make themselves look better by making humanity look bad. It is a shame, scarcity mindset that God does not have enough, grace, love, and power to forgive, heal, and perfect everyone, the fallen angels and the cosmos. Genesis explains: **Genesis 3:1-13 NLT** “**The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the Lord God had made. One day he asked the woman, “Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?” “Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,” the woman replied. “It’s only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, ‘You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.’” “You won’t die!” the serpent replied to the woman. “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.” The woman was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment, their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the spouses heard the Lord God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the Lord God among the trees. Then the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” He replied, “I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked.” “Who told you that you were naked?” the Lord God asked. “Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?” The man replied, “It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it.” Then the Lord God asked the woman, “What have you done?” “The serpent deceived me,” she replied. “That’s why I ate it.”**

In the end, equality will be restored and all attempts to control, shame, and blame will cease to exist. Revelation explains through the symbolism of another tree. **Revelation 22:1-5 NLT** “**Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations. No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship God. And they will see God’s face, and God’s name will be written on their foreheads. And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever.”**

In this in-between time, Jesus teaches us how to minimize control, shame, and blame, mend relationships and create loving equal relationships. Jesus said. “**If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense.**” Triangulation is destructive. An exception is if there is a chance that one will be abused if they meet with the offender. Most times if one involves others without the offender present, they are creating a bigger mess. Choose a time and location to meet that is neutral and when neither party has time constraints so both can be fully present. The purpose of the meeting is not to try to control, shame, or blame the other person rather to help them see how their behavior hurt you. Many times when one person points out the offense, they discover they misinterpreted the situation and or are only seeing a portion of the situation. Many times it has been discovered that no harm was intended rather it was a misunderstanding. The relationship is mended, all is well. There is great danger in not meeting to discuss these situations promptly because once one perceives that they have been wronged then often their mind creates a snowballing list of imagined hurts.

If the offender intended to hurt you, then you still do not go with the intention to control, blame or shame rather to enable them to see the hurt that they caused you and confess it. Active listening is critical, for the offender to speak back to the offended what they did, how that hurt them and how the offended felt as a result of the situation. Jesus said. “**If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back.**” The relationship is mended all is well as long as the one offended completely clears their mind and heart of the situation. There is to be no getting even, no revenge, no attempts to control the offender by bringing up the incident again. One is to freely offer endless forgiveness.

If the offender intended to hurt you and refuses to confess it then Jesus said. “**Take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses.**” Again the purpose is not to shame, blame or control, but rather for everyone to agree on the offensive behavior, name it, describe it and describe the loving behavior that will replace the offensive behavior so the relationship will be mended. Jesus continues. “**If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won’t accept the church’s decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector.**” How did Jesus treat pagans and corrupt tax collectors? With grace. Jesus healed them. Jesus enjoyed dinner with them. Jesus served them. Jesus inspired them to love out of gratitude for the unconditional love God has for them. Jesus commands us to love our enemies for love

eventual will prevail and mend every relationship. As mentioned earlier, in abusive situations the abused should find safety. Once safe forgiveness of the offender is beneficial for emotional wellbeing.

God forgives you of all. You are to forgive all. Ponder the moments you have been forgiven. Ponder the moments you forgave another, the relationship was mended, you both moved from isolation to community, from brokenness to community, from blame to awareness, from shame to freedom. Savor those insights so you can be a gracious person, a community builder and a peacemaker.

Peter was carefully listening to these instructions and thought there must be a limit to how many times one should work on this process and forgive. There must be a point where one can give up on another person. Witnessing every moment that Jesus is exceedingly gracious Peter suggests forgiving 7 times as that seems to Peter exceedingly gracious. Jesus replied. **“No, not seven times, but seventy times seven!”** A saying that means endless forgiveness, to never seek to control, blame or shame another or oneself.

Peter learned about abundant grace. It's about letting go of rigid limits and embracing the limitless possibilities of forgiveness and repair to make the worldwide community whole. Forgiveness is a boundless wellspring of grace. Repair is vital, both within ourselves and in our relationships with others. This story encourages us to embrace the transformative power of forgiveness and work toward reconciliation and healing. It inspires us to open ourselves to the expansive grace of God. By doing so, we can create a world where forgiveness mends what is broken, and where the glory of repair shines through, illuminating our shared humanity.

“Teach Me”

*a poem by Sarah Speed*

Teach me about the ways of the wind, about the ways of the world, about the ways of the heart.

Teach me about the soft crook of my lover's arm, and the way two souls can hold each other close.

Teach me about forgiveness, about the language of I'm sorry and the softness of sincerity.

Teach me about abundance, about seventy-times-seven and all the days of my life.

Teach me about joy, about its contagious weaving and its soul-healing.

Teach me about mercy, about open hands and deep breaths.

Teach me about the dawn of time and the stars in the sky.

Teach me what matters most.

Teach me what is mine to do.

Teach this achingly curious heart until I run out of questions or I run out of days.

Teach me some melodious sonnet, and I will have a life well-lived.

Art conveys an array of insights and typically unique insights for each person. Look at the art on the bulletin cover portraying today's scripture. We will take a minute of silence to be inspired. What do you perceive? What is God inviting you to do or be through this art? *Minute of Silence*

The artist Pastor Lauren Wright Pittman writes: When I'm creating a mandala inspired by a text, I'm able to zoom out and see the bigger picture, and the image itself ends up looking like a bird's eye view, which I think is a helpful perspective sometimes.

In this mandala, I wanted to follow a person through the process of reproof, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration. In the center, a person is standing alone, isolated, with their arms crossed in a closed-off posture. If you're sinned against, Jesus says to go and “point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” When you move to the second ring of the mandala, there are pairs of people shaking hands, finding common ground, or at least attempting to. If this doesn't work, then you are to bring one or two more together to provide counsel and witness. In the third ring of the mandala, two people are engaging with the closed-off person, sharing a way forward. In the next ring hyacinth flowers—which represent sorrow, regret, and forgiveness—stretch, bloom, and grow, bringing beauty into the now open arms of the people in the last ring of the mandala, who are embraced and woven into the community. The person from the center goes from being alone and closed-off to embraced and open. When I was drawing the figures from the center out, it began to look like a dance. Is this the picture that grace paints? Forgiveness cannot happen in isolation and certainly neither can reconciliation nor restoration. The movement toward wholeness is the movement toward one another. This piece contains seventy-seven people and flowers to represent the abundance of grace that Jesus calls us into. The gold represents the divine presence of empathy, compassion, grace, and love throughout this dance from isolation toward community, from brokenness toward wholeness, and from guilt and shame toward freedom. Amen