

Sermon
10/23/22

Does God Forgive All Our Sins?
Pastor Dan Peterson

Over the past few weeks we have been hearing a lot about the gospel, the “good treasure” (2 Timothy 1:14) entrusted to each of us that makes sometimes oppressive texts like 1st and 2nd Timothy worth the trouble.

We have returned repeatedly to Martin Luther, who helps us better understand the gospel by defining it as the good news or glad tidings of what God has done for us in Christ that “one sings and tells with gladness”

(Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings, p. 108).

We learned as well from Luther and Scripture how this good news includes not only the forgiveness of our sins, but also the victory of life over death in and through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Christ has “abolished death,” as 1 Timothy 1:10 says, setting us free to live with the knowledge that death will not have the last word.

Today, however, all this talk of God’s victory over death and especially the forgiveness of sins comes to a *screeching halt* thanks to Jeremiah 14, our first reading. Here we discover that God’s mercy has limits, that some of the Israelites’ worst behaviors are apparently *too great to pardon*.

We will turn to Jeremiah 14 in a moment, but first I would like to ask each of you a question: do you think there are limits to God’s mercy? Does God’s mercy triumph over judgment, as James 1:13 puts it, or are some sins simply too great even for God to forgive?

It Depends

Well, some of us might think, the answer depends on which God we have in mind. If we are talking about the “Old Testament God” of wrath and judgment, then yes, mercy has limits. According to the New Testament, however, the God of love wipes away sin completely through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Love wins.

Consider the teaching of Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew, he counsels Peter to forgive the sins of other Christians not merely seven times but 77 times (18:21-22). While *vengeance* before the time of Israel had no limits, Jesus affirms that

among those who wait for the coming of God’s kingdom, *mercy* [has] no limits. Seventy times seven is not to be taken literally. It points, rather, to the limitless grace which is to be displayed by the child of God. “

(Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible, p. 632; italics mine)

Notice, however, the limit implied in Peter’s question. He wants to know how often he should forgive another member of the church, a fellow sibling in Christ. But what

about those who do not belong to the church? Does the mandate to forgive without limits apply to them as well?

While Jesus leaves our question unanswered in his exchange with Peter, other passages in the New Testament limit the “Wideness of God’s Mercy,” to cite the title of a popular hymn in the *ELW*. For example, Jesus says that he will deny those who deny him before his Father in heaven (Matt. 10:32-33). In Mark and Luke, on the other hand, Jesus say God will forgive those who deny him but not forgive those who “blaspheme” against the Holy Spirit (Lk. 12:10, Mk. 3:28-30).

The distinction we sometimes make between the Old Testament’s God of Wrath and the New Testament’s God of Love accordingly does not hold. Both testaments place limits on divine mercy. Denying Christ in the context of persecution constitutes an unforgivable sin for Matthew, while denying the Holy Spirit as the true source of healing in the miracles of Christ and his followers constitutes the unforgivable sin for Mark and Luke.

Contemporary Sins

Today, of course, few of us would identify “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” in our catalog of potentially unpardonable human behavior. Instead, a host of other examples arise. Can God, for instance, forgive those who organized and benefitted from the institution of slavery in this country?

Andrew Wymer of Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary lists a few more.

Does God forgive the sixteenth-century conquistadors, accompanying friars, and their sponsoring institutions whose genocides killed millions of indigenous persons in the Americas? . . . Can God forgive those of us alive now – those of us who experience social privilege along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality or ability – who have not practiced reparations or dismantled the violent systems from which we benefit? Can God forgive us as we extract from the earth and consume the spoils in such a way that is driving the sixth mass extinction that this planet has ever known – the extermination of countless species, other than human creatures?

(*Working Preacher*, “Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost,” accessed 10/20/22)

We know what our theology says: God will forgive anyone as long as they ask. Jeremiah 14, however, suggests otherwise. Here we encounter a God “whose forgiveness has limits, or perhaps boundaries” (*ibid.*) Here we find a God who disregards the pleas of God’s people, as if to say, “too little, too late.”

Jeremiah 14

God’s attitude toward the people of Israel in Jeremiah 14 becomes clear once we distinguish who speaks and when.

According to verses 7-9, the people implore God to forgive them and save them from their “time of trouble.” As the omitted verses indicate, the Israelites are in a perilous situation. Drought ravishes their land just as it does in many parts of ours. The people suffer, and they attribute their suffering to God who – they believe – is punishing them for their sins.

The Lord speaks in verse 10. “He” refers to the Israelites as people who “loved to wander,” that is, a people who commit idolatry by worshiping the deities of their tribal neighbors. Now God will punish them. Now God will make them suffer for their disloyalty, even though God weeps according to verse 17 at their impending destruction.

In verses 19-22, the Israelites again beg for forgiveness. They refer to the “terror” around them, possibly a reference to the Assyrians of the 8th century BCE who, like members of ISIS today, were known for beheading their enemies and who would soon decimate the majority of the Israelites living to the north.

The Israelites remind God of God’s covenant with them, and they compare the power of God to the futility of the idols. “Can any idols of the nations bring rain?” they ask. “Is it not you, O Lord our God?”

The pleading of the Israelites nevertheless goes unheard. Why? Probably because God recognizes their “fair-weather faith.” As one commentary explains, “In their need, they remember God; in their prosperity, they forget [God]. No intercession or ritual acts will avert the divine punishment.” These people have wandered; “they pour[ed] out drink offerings to other gods” (Jer. 7:18), and in so doing they provoke God’s unforgiving wrath.

Our Idols

Presumably none of us “pour out drink offerings to other gods,” but where do our loyalties lie? Do we wander? Do we forget the God of our faith in our (sometimes) idolatrous pursuit of wealth, status, success, perfection, digital addiction and distraction, or the constant need to fill our schedules or our children’s schedules with things to do?

Do we take time to be still and know God is God, as Psalm 46 says, or do we turn to God only in our hour of need?

Now obviously as a Lutheran Christian, I place my hope in a God whose forgiveness has no limits, that is, a God who ultimately conquers the powers of sin and death through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I trust in the god, as our Gathering Hymn puts it, who in Christ comes to us “by death and sin surrounded, [yet] with grace unbounded.”

I think of my own sins, of ways I have hurt people in the past, of ways I have wandered, my lack of patience, my idolatrous perfectionism, and I cling to the promise

in the second stanza of the same hymn: “All men and women, who by guilt are driven, now are [all] forgiven.”

Beyond that, I think of you as your pastor, and I pray for you, that you may also hear these words, these promises of grace and mercy as if they were spoken to each of you personally, that you may feel liberated from whatever guilt, disloyalty, or regret burdens you.

I pray, as we observed today, that you remember your baptism and how its waters made you clean in the name of the Triune God, and with you, as 1 Timothy 4:10 puts it, I hope for the salvation of all people.

I do not believe God’s forgiveness has limits, but I do believe that Jeremiah 14 teaches us something important – namely, never to take the mercy and grace of God for granted.

Conclusion

How do you see it? Are there limits to God’s mercy? If not, if you trust as I do that ultimately nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, not even sin or death (cf. Rom. 8:38-39), then at the very least Jeremiah 14 should give us pause.

Why? Because, as I said, it teaches us that even if we should bet on a totally gracious God, we should never – ever – take such grace for granted.

Here, then, is the message I take from Jeremiah 14: we are right to hope and trust that in the end, love wins, but we should never expect it or feel entitled to it. We should receive it, rather, as the tax collector does in today’s Gospel reading – humbly. For as Luther said at the end of his life, “We are all beggars.”

May God’s unbounded grace surprise us with joy, free us from our worldly loyalties and their false promises, and purify us so that we may be righteous before God and servants to one another out of gratitude for just how amazing such grace is!

In Jesus’ name,

Amen.