

Feb 19th 2012 "Covenant+ Forgiveness=Relationship" 2 Chron 7:11-22

The title of my sermon this morning "Covenant + Forgiveness=Relationship" sounds rather like a scientific equation, and it is obviously a title that requires some explanation.

Let's begin with the word Covenant. When used in the Bible it mainly refers to a contract or agreement made between God and man. An agreement where God as the greater, reaches out to human beings as the lesser, and promises to pour out on them manifold blessings, gifts, friendship, with the expectation that they will give to Him as God, loyalty, obedience, and worship.

Many see the first such covenant being between God and the man and the women He had made in His own image, as recorded at the end of Genesis chapter 1. God promises them an abundance of blessing in the world He has made for them, and all He wants in return is for them to look after this world and all that is in it; to fill it with their offspring, and to respect Him as their God and Creator through obedience and holy fellowship with Him.

That was before sin came into the picture so there was no need of forgiveness. Then it was simply:- "Covenant=Relationship".

Then sin, in the form of disobedience and disrespect of God, enters this world and the covenant is broken. Instead of blessing there is now a curse on the ground, and instead of a strong relationship between man and His God there is now separation.

From that moment onward any new covenant that God chose to make with mankind had to deal with that sin through the act of forgiveness. It can no longer be:- Covenant=Relationship but now becomes Covenant + Forgiveness =Relationship.

The same process is still needed in covenants made today between human beings. Take two men who decide to go into business together. They draw up some sort of contract or covenant, by which they decide on what they will both invest, what they will both do and not do, and what they will both receive in their new business venture together. They also agree to act in a moral and ethically way in all their dealings with one another. So they have a Covenant equaling a Business Relationship.

Then one partner does the wrong thing, the contract/covenant is broken, and the business goes into bankruptcy.

Now supposing after sometime the partner who did the wrong approaches his previous partner and says to him, "How about we make a new business contract. We go into a new venture together." Surprisingly the other partner is actually keen to make this happen but he is no fool. He knows that before a new covenant can be made the old broken one must be dealt with. The partner who did the wrong must be sorry for what he did and show remorse. He must be willing to repatriate for his wrongdoing. And the wronged partner must feel that his old partner has done enough to earn back the trust he previously forfeited.

All of that is the forgiveness package. And before a new contract or covenant can be made between these two men, that Forgiveness package is required.

Now as far as God's dealings with mankind is concerned Paul tells us in Ephesians 1 that God knew from before the creation of the earth that the first covenant would be broken by sin, and would need to be replaced by a new one in which sin would again not exist. So the Lord planned to recreate in the fullness of time this perfect covenant which will one day bring all things together under the headship of Christ(Eph 1:9-10).

And all the other covenants that we go on to read about in the Old Testament lead up to and prepare the world for this coming Covenant.

So there's the Covenant God makes with Noah, the one He makes with Abraham, and especially the covenant God makes with His people in the wilderness after they have escaped from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The Covenant at Mount Sinai. And it is in this Covenant that God promises them the Relationship of being His people—AND—He offers them the forgiveness they need to enter into such a covenant with Him and then to stay in it.

Yet to accept such forgiveness there is a cost. They have first to acknowledge that they have sinned against God and be prepared to offer continual animal sacrifices to cover that sin.

Second, they must be prepared to live before God as His people a life lived according to God's ten commandments, and to the laws relating to how they should worship Him.

So through this Covenant made on Mount Sinai God points out that this covenantal relationship with Him was not automatically theirs because they were His People. Forgiveness was required that involved on their part repentance, sacrifice, and a commitment to keeping His commandments.

From that time on the Nation of Israel often fell into sin and got right away from God and then, when the Spirit of God convicted them of their sin against Him, they realized that they could be cast out of the Covenant—abandoned by God forever. Then they cried out to God in desperation for His mercy, and were prepared to do all they needed to gain His forgiveness.

You see they feared that one day, after they had sinned as a Nation against God, He would not forgive them. They started to see that this forgiveness that they needed in order to regain, restore, or to simply hold on to their covenant was an IF.

So in our Bible reading from 2 Chron:7 we find God meeting with Solomon after the dedication of the Temple. And God lets Solomon know that when He has to alert the Nation to the fact that they have sinned against His covenant by sending some disaster or other, the forgiveness that they will then need, will be dependent upon their response. 7:14 says:

¹⁴ *if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*

And because they valued the blessing of being God's people and feared being excluded from Him, they took that IF direction very seriously, especially after the exile. When they sinned they repented with sackcloth and ashes, they fasted and prayed, and they began to live as God wanted them too, because they needed God's forgiveness and priced it so highly.

Now that's how it was before Christ came into this world. Through Him God now offers us a New Covenant. The Covenant of Grace. Forgiveness is still needed. In fact this Covenant is shown as needing perfect forgiveness that only God can provide. And He has done so through His sinless death upon the cross. A forgiveness that covers our past, present, and future sins.

This forgiveness too, has to be accepted. We also need to acknowledge that we are sinners desperately needing to be made right before God.

But the surprising problem that this Covenant Grace now meets is that because this forgiveness is free to the believer, we can so quickly begin to devalue it. To take it for granted.

Jesus told an interesting parable in Matthew 18 about a servant who owed an immense debt to a king which he was unable to pay. The king was ready to sell off the man and his family in order that the debt could be paid but because of the man's remorse and pleas for mercy, the king cancelled the debt and allowed the servant to leave.

Then came the surprising twist in the story. The forgiven servant went looking for a fellow servant who owed him a fraction of the amount he had been forgiven, grabbed him by the throat and demanded immediate payment. Despite the man's pleas for time to pay he then had him thrown into a debtor's prison.

The amazing thing is that this man should become so complacent about his forgiveness so soon after his debt had been cancelled. He had been forgiven such an enormous amount yet it hardly changes his life at all. The praise for the king; the thankfulness is not there. The change of attitude towards another's debt is not there. Indeed the value of the forgiveness he has received does not seem to factor in his life at all.

But before we sit in judgment upon this unmerciful servant we, who have received such great forgiveness, need to first look at ourselves. Are we still as thankful for it as we were at first or have we started to take it for granted. To easily neglect worship because doing other things has become more important than thanking and praising God for His Grace.

Paul writes in Romans 12:1: ***Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.***

In view of God's mercy...God's forgiveness. Are we doing that? Worshipping God...Living for God...Sacrificing for God, not because we like to, or it's our duty to, but because we continually remember the price He paid to redeem us. Then we also need to ask how the fact that we have been forgiven affects our relationship with others. It didn't with this servant, and we can

justly condemn him for that. But are we more forgiving now than we were before we discovered Christ. Are we less eager to condemn. More ready to be patient.

The forgiveness of Christ that has drawn us into the Covenant of Grace. That has made us children of God, demands that we change in the way we relate to others. If that is not happening then, in a lesser way, we are like that unforgiving servant. We have forgotten how much we have been forgiven and others will not see the presence of Christ in us that God wants them to see.

The other day someone sent me this little story, and I like to close with it:

The light turned amber just in front of him and he did the right thing—stopping even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection. The tailgating woman was furious and honked her horn, screaming in frustration, as she missed her chance to get through the intersection, dropping her cell phone and make-up.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed her in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell, and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk, where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him.

I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Choose Life' license plate holder, the 'Follow Me to Sunday-School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk,

so naturally....I assumed you had stolen the car."

My aim is that the next time I am ready to explode. Or to be judgmental, unforgiving, cruel and unjust in word or deed. I will remember again the great gift of forgiveness I have received and the obligation I have in Christ to live out His love, mercy and forgiveness, before others. I trust you will too.

