

McCabe United Methodist Church
The Naked Gospel: Crossing the line (Part 3)

Pastor Ray Baker

Ephesians 4:25-32 and Matthew 6:9-15

1-22-12

When I was a little boy I was always around trouble. But it wasn't my fault. I may have been there, I may have been involved; but it wasn't my fault.

The best example I can think of was a day when I knew I should head for home right after school. But it was a beautiful winter day and as I walked out of the school door I saw my friends playing on a mountain of snow that was pushed up at the end of the parking-lot. I ran and climbed the hill with my friends. We pushed each other down the hill and we started a snowball fight. I could hear the little voice in the back of my head reminding me to go straight home, but there was always time for one more snowball.

Finally, I decided to say good-bye to my friends and I walked across the street, so I was only one short block from my house. Of course, there is always time for one more snowball. The snow was perfect. It was just wet enough to stick together. I took the time to pack the snow tightly, to make the snowball perfectly round. Then I turned and threw the snowball high into the air, it was the perfect trajectory for it to carry over the street and land in the middle of my friends. I turned and threw the snowball as hard as I could and then ran for home without watching to see where it landed.

The next morning our teacher told us that someone had thrown a snowball through a car window and it landed in a woman's lap. Can you believe it? Who would do such a thing?

Our first class of the day was in the library, so the teacher asked us to get in line and walk by her desk and answer two questions: Did we through the snowball? Did we know who threw it? When I walked by her desk I said that I didn't throw the snowball and I had no idea who did.

When we reached the library a couple of my friends hustled me to the back of the book shelves and they asked me why I lied to the teacher. What do you mean? I didn't lie to her. The responded by reminding me of the last snowball I threw from across the street. That was the snowball that went through her window.

Now I was the kind of a kid who didn't lie to his teacher, so when we were back in our room and everyone was seated I walked up to her desk and said: I didn't know it was me, but Dave told me it was my snowball that went through her window. I'm sorry, but it was me.

Let me tell you that woman knew the Old Testament. She didn't know anything about grace, she only knew about punishment. So I was stuck inside the building, missing a lot of recesses over that mistake.

Today we're continuing our conversation about the Naked Gospel and we are learning to strip away the legalism of our faith. We are seeking to learn more about what it means to live by faith.

In the Old Testament contained a system of sin, sacrifice, and forgiveness. The only way to be forgiven for a sin was to offer a sacrifice and receive forgiveness. A wealthy person would offer a goat or a sheep and a poor person would offer a dove or a pigeon for their sacrifice. Then the Priest would use your gift to offer a sacrifice on your behalf.

The problem with this system is that you would always need to offer another sacrifice for each time that you sinned. This was a never ending cycle.

In Christianity, we believe in grace and salvation. We hold to a belief these gifts will allow us to enter into Heaven.

The Old Testament taught about forgiveness, but it didn't teach about salvation. The Old Testament taught that when people died their spirit went to the Under World, to Sheol. Eventually an understanding developed that allowed for a separation in Sheol that divided those who knew God from those who didn't know God.

It's important for us to understand forgiveness and be able to offer forgiveness to others. This will help us grow in our understanding of Divine Grace. It helps us understand that we need to forgive for our own sake.

There are some people who have difficulty forgiving themselves. At times I fall in this category. A current event I will dredge something up from twenty years ago and as I remember what happened I will need to give myself one swift kick in the pants before I can let it go.

Something that has helped me with this issue is I take those moments in prayer to God. This helps me let go of the guilt from past events. In turn, I strongly encourage you to grow in your spiritual life to help you let go of the hurts of the past. A strong spiritual life will help us forgive others and ourselves.

I have occasionally talked with people who read devotional materials that are written from the perspective of “The sinfulness of humanity.” One even mentioned “The worm of guilt that eats away at our souls.” I don’t think this is a helpful approach to move someone to an understanding of forgiveness, redemption, and salvation.

I encourage you to read books by authors like Henri Nouwen, who has written on topics of spirituality, forgiveness, and grace. One of the things I like about his books is they are almost all less than a hundred pages, so you can read them in just a few of nights.

Another great author to read is Philip Yancey, who has written a fantastic book on Prayer. He also wrote a book that received quite a bit of notoriety called: What’s so Amazing about Grace? It’s the best book that I’ve read on this topic.

In preparation for today’s message I went back to Yancey’s book to read the chapter titled: Why Forgive? I had trouble putting the book down and before I knew it I had finished three chapters.

There is a man named Lewis Smedes who wrote: “The first and often the only person to be healed by forgiveness is the person who does the forgiveness.... When we genuinely forgive, we set a prisoner free and then discover that the prisoner we set free was us.”

Forgiveness is powerful. It gives us the gift of freedom.

In the early 1990’s there was a UMW Bible Study on Galatians titled: Freedom is for Freeing. It’s based on Galatians 5:1 where the Apostle Paul wrote:

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

Paul compared being tied to the laws of the Old Testament to being bound in slavery. The laws of the Old Testament offered a system based on legalities, guilt, and sacrifice. But it never offered freedom.

When we understand our relationship to God and our relationship through Grace we find freedom. It’s a freedom that is powerful enough to set us free from the past. It offers us freedom for a future with God.

In Philip Yancey’s book “What’s So Amazing about Grace?” he tells a story about a woman who’s married to a man of some prominence. She is married to a minister who is a bit of a local celebrity. He is well known enough that he is invited to speak to churches near their home. He

did a good job and began being asked to speak in churches throughout the region. Once in a while he was asked to speak at a national convention.

His wife learned he was also a man with secrets. He was slipping out of the house to have affairs. He was also soliciting prostitutes. When he was caught he asked his wife for forgiveness and promised that he would never do anything like this again. She was horrified by his actions, but also took her pain to God in prayer and she decided to forgive him believing he would leave that part of his life behind.

But she learned time after time that he was lying to her. He continued his affairs and hiring prostitutes. Before long he divorced her and married one of the women he was seeing. The second wife didn't believe any of the accusations of the first wife.

His first wife was crushed. Her eyes were filled with tears. She was racked by anger and filled with anguish, as she tried to get her life back together. When she prayed she said: God please give my ex-husband what he deserves.

She experienced all those human emotions which we understand all too well.

The bitterness was eating away at her. It was filling her life with poison. But eventually, she found a way to pray for God's help: God please help me. God please save me. God please help me to let go of this bitterness so I can be the person you want me to be.

Through the help of her friends and her prayer she was able to let go of some of her anger. Believe it or not she was eventually able to pick up the phone and call her ex-husband and tell him and his new wife: I forgive you.

He didn't receive her words with grace. He laughed at her. He mocked her and said he did do anything that needed forgiving. Then he hung up the phone. Even though his words hurt, she felt a sense of freedom because she had truly forgiven him. She no longer allowed her anger or his actions to define her.

A few years later this minister was speaking in one of the larger cities in the United States, so he and his second wife were staying in a hotel. That evening he told her: honey I'm going for a walk and I'll be back in about an hour.

An hour and a half later he hadn't returned, but the phone rang. When she answered the phone she learned it was the police. They called to inform her that her husband had been arrested for soliciting a prostitute.

She filled with anguish and burst into tears. She wept and wept. She never believed the things his first wife had accused him of doing. But in that moment she knew they were true. As she lay there sobbing she prayed for help. As the moments passed she made a crazy decision. She would call his first wife to ask for help.

She picked up the phone and called her. She said: I know I have no right to call you. I have no reason to think you want to hear from me. But you did say you forgave me...and I need your help. Then she told her what had happened.

This was the beginning of their friendship. They cried together. They prayed together. They supported each other. They received a gift of grace that was greater than anything they could have imagined. They were able to move beyond the actions of their ex-husband. They were able to define themselves with a sense of forgiveness and freedom.

Remember that FREEDOM IS FOR FREEING. It offers us a tomorrow filled with hope.