

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE GOD!

PSALM 103

NEED: WE NEED TO KNOW THE GREATNESS OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS.

PROPOSITION: WE HAVE A TENDENCY TO UNDERESTIMATE THE FORGIVENESS OF GOD.

OBJECTIVE: TO LEAD SINNERS TO RECEIVE GOD'S FORGIVENESS.

INTRODUCTION:

Leonard Griffith suggested to me a title for this sermon. He suggested that the theme of this favorite Psalm could be, "Don't underestimate God!" His suggestion stuck in my mind. Do we not have a tendency to underestimate God? I confess that I do. In fact it is a continuing shortcoming in my life. Because of this tendency to underestimate God, I am continually being surprised at what He does. He constantly surprises me in the people He chooses to forgive and save. He is always amazing me at some display of his power.

Another problem with underestimating God is that it places limits on what I may seek from the Lord or what I may ask Him to do. A preventative for this problem of underestimating God is to become aware what God has done in the past. From His past acts we can learn something of His behavior. David points to this: “He made known his ways to Moses, and his deeds to the people of Israel.” He has in mind both the things that God did and the things that God said. The verse that follows is a restatement of something God said to Moses in Exodus 34:6. As Moses met with God on the mountain to seek the restoration of the sinful nation to the favor of God, God said, “ The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”

Evidently this Psalm grew out of the meditation of David on that statement of the Lord to Moses. What does this mean in my experience if this is who God is? O we must not underestimate the forgiveness and mercy of the Lord God of Israel!

It is probable that the Psalmist focused on the mercy and forgiveness of God because that is what we are most likely to underestimate. This is also the

most serious underestimation. If you underestimate the power of God, this would be serious—but not necessarily eternally fatal. To underestimate the forgiveness of God could affect you eternally and could have serious consequences for all of those that you love. So let's us meditate with David on this great reality.

I. DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE READINESS OF GOD TO FORGIVE.

This was the heart of the word that Yahweh spoke to Moses on the mountain. Israel had committed a terrible transgression against the Lord. While Moses was on the mountain receiving the law of the Lord written on the tablets of stone, Aaron had allowed the people to make a golden calf and to defile themselves in the sensual worship of the idol. Moses knew of the judgment of the Lord and knew that the transgressors deserved all that Lord might pour out. He came to the Lord with an appeal for mercy. God has granted mercy and has re-written the tablets of the law. Moses is still not sure so he appeals again for the Lord to go with His people on their journey. It is then that the Lord speaks this revealing word. The heart of it is that the Lord is ready to forgive always.

1. We know of His readiness to forgive because He is compassionate.

The older version translates the word “merciful”. It is a word that is used of the feelings of a parent toward a child. Are we not inclined to deal with our own child with more compassion than we are the children of a stranger?

Have you not noticed how a mother can distinguish the cry of her child from that of any other child. So it is with the Lord. Israel was His son as we are so He would be compassionate toward them and us.

2. We know He is ready to forgive because He is gracious.

This word is obviously related to the word “grace”. This means that He is inclined to forgive us what we do not deserve. It is because that He is gracious that “he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.” Have you not found this to be true? If He had dealt with Israel, as they deserved, they would have been destroyed before the golden calf. O he is ready to forgive!

3. We know He is ready to forgive because He is slow to anger.

This does not mean that the Lord is incapable anger. Rather it means that anger is never His first response. He is slow to anger. Paul described agape

love as being “not easily provoked”. This is surely true of the love of the Lord for us.

Because this is true, “nor will he harbor his anger forever”. Are you not glad that the Lord is not like some people you know? Once you offend them, they never forget. They have a memory longer than the proverbial elephant. They will always harbor a little anger in their hearts against you.

4. We know He is ready to forgive because of the greatness of His love.

The reason for all of this is stated so grandly: “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.” This is a poetic attempt to state just how great God’s love is for His people. The word translated “love” is one of the great words of the Old Testament. It is sometimes translated “mercy”, or “lovingkindness”, or just as love in this case. When you consider everything that is involved, it is the basic explanation of God’s readiness to forgive. It is rooted in his lovingkindness.

Our parents probably influence us more than we realize at this point. Some of you grew up in a home that was full of anger. You were constantly in fear of provoking your parents to anger. They would become angry at the least

provocation. You tend to project that parental image on to God so you are inclined to underestimate how ready God is to forgive you. You tend to think that He will forgive only if you do something outstanding to deserve His forgiveness. You cannot imagine that He would forgive you freely and gladly. But He does.

Jesus illustrated this truth about God in an unforgettable way in the parable of the Waiting Father. When the prodigal son fearfully returned home, rehearsing his speech as he walked along, to his surprise the Father ran to meet him. The Father had bestowed forgiveness upon him almost before he could ask for it. Do not underestimate the readiness of God to forgive.

II. DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE COMPLETENESS OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS.

When God forgives, He forgives completely. In beautiful poetic language David puts this truth before us in a manner that we can never forget. We have a tendency to underestimate the completeness of God's forgiveness.

1. He removes the sin completely.

“As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgression from us.” The thing removed in this case is our transgressions. This word

that is commonly used for sin in the Old Testament is a relational word—it almost always has reference to our relationship to God. It refers to “a willful deviation from, and therefore rebellion against the path of godly living”. So the thing removed is not some mistake that we may have made. Rather it is some deed of rebellion that deliberately went against what we knew to be the will of God in the matter. In this case the person has personally done something they knew to be wrong.

God so completely removes that it will never be found. How far is from the east to the west? You know that we can measure the distance from the north to the south, but the distance from east to west is eternal, infinite. If you start on a journey to east, unless you turn around, you will return to your starting point and will still be going east. God will move it so far from you that it will never be found.

Your memory may find it. Your accuser may find the memory of it in order to bring an accusation against you, but the sin itself is gone, gone forever.

Bruce Larson tells a true story about a priest in the Philippines who was bothered almost continually by the memory of a sin that he committed while

he was in seminary. He only did it once, but it left him with such a sense of guilt. He had confessed it to God again and again, but he could not get free from this terrible memory.

He had a godly lady in his parish who claimed that she had personal visions of Jesus and that she carried on conversations with him. The priest thought that he would put her visions to the test. He told her that he wanted her to ask Jesus about the terrible sin he had committed in seminary.

After she had experienced her next vision, he asked her, “Did you talk to Jesus?” She answered, “Yes”.

“Did you ask him about the sin I committed while I was in seminary?” “Yes, but He said that he could not remember it.” How can He remember it if it is gone!

2. God removes the punishment for the sin completely.

In his Expository Dictionary, W. E. Vine, indicates that this word can be used for the punishment for the transgression as well as the transgression itself. Surely the Lord intends for us to see both here. When he removes the transgression, the punishment for that transgression goes with it.

When we apply the light of the New Testament to this Old Testament statement, this makes a lot of sense. We know that Jesus Christ bore our sins in His body on the tree, and that there He suffered the punishment that our sin deserved. So indeed, God has completely removed the punishment for the transgression.

3. God restores the relationship that sin has broken completely.

It is noteworthy that the next statement in the Psalm refers to our relationship with the Father. “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.”

Jesus illustrated this truth so beautifully in the parable of the Waiting Father. When the Father forgave the prodigal, he was restored fully to his position as a son in the family. The robe, the shoes, and the ring symbolized this to him and to all the family. He was back in the full favor of the Father. All of the privileges of sonship were restored to him. Don't underestimate the completeness of the Lord's forgiveness.

III. DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE IMPACT OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS.

In the word that God spoke to Moses on the mountain that became the basis for the Psalmist's thoughts, there was one ominous note that has frightening implications. After the clear word about His readiness to forgive, God added: "Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished, he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." (Exodus 34:7) Is that not a frightening possibility? If you do not receive the forgiveness, which God is so ready to give, then the punishment for the sin will extend to our children and grandchildren for as many as four generations.

Contrast this word from the mountain that Moses received with the word written by the Psalmist. "But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children—with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts". Is this a reference to those who have experienced God's forgiveness? If so, then your children and grandchildren feel the impact of God forgiving you just as they feel the impact of your not being forgiven by God.

1. His forgiveness will impact your personal life.

This psalm opens with a call for praise and thanksgiving to be offered to God. One of the blessings to be celebrated before the Lord with thanksgiving is that of forgiveness. God is the One who “forgives all your sins”. To know His forgiveness is to have your heart filled with peace and joy before the Lord. It will set your heart to singing of the goodness of the Lord.

A man was rehired to fill a position from which he had been fired. There was such a radical change in the man, that a fellow-worker asked him what had made the difference.

The man shared with his fellow-worker a tragic story. While he was in college, he was a participant in an initiation for some freshmen. They took them out to an isolated country road, and made them stand in the middle of the road. He was to drive a car toward them at a high rate of speed. The freshmen were to stand in the road until they received a signal to jump. He had the car going about a hundred miles per hour as he approached the young men. He could see the terror in their eyes. When the signal was given, they all jumped out of the way except one. He left college the next day and never went back. The memory of that boy’s death was with him continually. It affected everything about his life.

One day some months earlier, after he was fired from his job, a strange woman came to his home. She looked faintly familiar but he did not recognize her. She introduced herself as being the mother of the boy that he had ran down. She said to him, “For years I have hated you for what you did to my son. Recently however I gave my life to Jesus Christ, and he forgave my sins. I have come to tell you that I forgive you for what you did to my son, and that I want you to forgive me.”

He explained to his fellow-worker, “What I saw in that woman’s eyes so touched me that it gave me permission to become the person I might have been if I had not killed the student.” It was something that changed his life for good.

Don’t underestimate the power of forgiveness to impact you for good.

2. His forgiveness will impact your family.

Are you aware of how negatively your lack of forgiveness impacts your family? You are not a free person within. Guilt and shame bind you. You are void of the activity of the Holy Spirit in your life and He is the one blesses others through you. Your grandchildren may not know of your transgression, but they will know that something is wrong in your life. When God forgives

you, they will be able to see that the lights of heaven have been turned on in your soul.

3. His forgiveness will impact your ministry to others.

In another Psalm David acknowledges that he will not be able to help others until the Lord has forgiven him. He will not be able to teach transgressors their ways. But when you are forgiven, you will be restored to a place of service.

Don't underestimate the impact His forgiveness will have on you!

In 1830 George Wilson was caught robbing a mail train. He was tried and sentenced to death. President Andrew Jackson decided to pardon him, and sent an official pardon to him. But Wilson refused the pardon. The officials did not know what to do with the man so the case was sent to the Supreme Court and Chief Justice Marshall decided that the pardon was null and void. He wrote that the pardon was just a piece of paper until the person being pardoned received it. If that person refused it, then there was no pardon.

The only thing that will keep you from receiving this wonderful forgiveness from God is your unwillingness to receive it.