

"The Cost of Forgiveness"  
Joel 2:1-2, 12-27; Matthew 5:23, 24  
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I will bet you never realized that within the past two weeks, members of the Jewish faith celebrated the holiest day on their Jewish calendar- Yom Kippur, also known as their "Day of Atonement." Beginning on the evening of Wednesday, September 15 and ending twenty-four hours later, Jews all over the world went on a fast. While abstaining from all food, they spent that time reflecting upon their past sins and seeking forgiveness for themselves while hoping that their names will be written into the Book of Life in the year to come. The following evening, someone blew the shofar (or ram's horn) to officially announce an end to the holiday and that it was now time for families and friends to break their fast with a large meal together. With the rite completed, the page of the previous year with all its sins and transgressions was turned and the NEW Jewish year was now inaugurated.

Having grown up a Presbyterian, I had never heard of Yom Kippur, that is, until the 1965 baseball World Series was about to get underway. That was the year my favorite baseball team at the time, the Minnesota Twins, was facing the powerful Los Angeles Dodgers and their ace pitching staff led by Sandy Koufax--the greatest pitcher in baseball and some say THE GREATEST LEFT-HANDER WHO EVER LIVED--and the imposing right-hander, Don Drysdale. Now it was naturally taken for granted that Koufax would take the mound for that first game. That year, he not only led the National League in wins but he ALSO led it in earned run average and strikeouts (in what is referred to as pitching's Triple Crown) and he did so in historic fashion. Only three weeks before, he had struck out fourteen in throwing the sixth perfect game in the modern era. It was said by some that if Sandy Koufax was pitching, the Twins might save themselves any embarrassment by not even bothering to show up that day.

Well Dodger fans were shocked when Koufax, a Jew, announced he would not be suiting up for the first game of the Series because that game happened to fall on Yom Kippur, that holiest of Jewish holidays. That evening, his decision was the lead story in all the nightly newcasts and filled the front page in the following morning's newspapers; for the first time in memory, a major sports figure had put his faith before his career and many found it hard to understand. However, for Twins fans such as myself, it suddenly felt that without "Super Jew" (as Koufax was affectionately called) on the mound, we stood a real chance of winning that first game and possibly THE ENTIRE SERIES.

As it happened, it was Don Drysdale who opened the series in his stead. Though a 23-game winner during the 1965 season, he was pummeled by the Twins hitters and couldn't make it through the third inning- Minnesota coasted to a comfortable 8-2 victory. Afterwards, Drysdale was reported to have asked his manager Walter Alton if he had wished that like Koufax, he TOO had been Jewish so that he ALSO would not have pitched on Yom Kippur. But Koufax DID pitch in Game 2 but much to the consternation of the Dodger faithful, the Dodgers lost THAT game AS WELL. Thus down two games to none, Los Angeles found themselves in a hole while the hopes of TWINS FANS were ascendant. However, Koufax would return for game five which he would win quite handily and then, ON ONLY TWO DAYS REST, he would

beat the Twins in the seventh and deciding game. With that, the Dodgers had earned their third championship in seven years.

But Jews aren't the ONLY persons of faith who observe Yom Kippur- MANY CHRISTIANS observe it AS WELL. They feel the need to take deeper scrutiny of their lives, seeking forgiveness for those things they have done to hurt others as well as extending forgiveness to those who may have hurt THEM. If the act of forgiveness lies at the very heart of the Jewish religion, it is NO LESS true for CHRISTIANS. If as followers of Jesus Christ we believe there is no power in the world GREATER than LOVE ITSELF, then we must ALSO believe that the HIGHEST manifestation of such love comes in the act of FORGIVING another person. That's why Martin Luther could say that forgiveness IS the gospel. "Preach nothing else," he said by which he meant preach no other gospel than the good news of God's forgiveness! You see, Jesus was not interested in forgiveness as a doctrine or dogma as though it was just one theme among many in his life and ministry. Rather, FORGIVENESS was for him an ACTION, a RADICAL ACTIVITY that was central to everything he said and did. In fact, were you to take this component out of the Gospel message, you would then have NO "good news" to speak of.

The reason why Christianity has any kind of appeal in the FIRST PLACE is that it is first and foremost ABOUT forgiveness- about having been FORGIVEN our sins, FORGIVEN our past failures and indiscretions, FORGIVEN for all those slights and hurts that injured others over the years. Literally translated, forgiveness means "to let go" or "to put away"; it is the sense that a debt owed is cancelled out. Forgiveness thus clears the way so that we can turn the page in our OWN life and start anew with a fresh clean slate. It liberates us from a painful past to a brand-new future so that we can face each day with joy and hope instead of our guilt and despair constantly weighing us down. Thus forgiveness is the key to moral and spiritual freedom in our lives and what greater gift could we possibly receive than THAT.

Now repentance has been in the news a lot over the past few years and it's no longer unusual for persons, ESPECIALLY politicians, to get up and make apologies for past wrongs and injustices. In 1988, President Reagan apologized to Japanese-Americans for being interned during World War II and a few years later, President Clinton apologized to unwitting participants of the Tuskegee syphilis study which denied treatment to 399 black men. In 2009, both houses of Congress passed resolutions apologizing for two and a half centuries of slavery- a practice that ended here in America in 1863, while that same year, President Obama signed the Native American Apology Resolution for the many injustices our country perpetrated against them. The Catholic Church has only recently asked for forgiveness for not taking more seriously the molestation of younger church members by certain priests or for transferring offending clerics to other parishes without INVESTIGATING, much less PUNISHING them for their offences.

Now I'm not against apologies- that has to be a necessary FIRST STEP towards rectifying a personal or social wrong--but it seems to me that these national *mea culpas* have become little more than political theater, ESPECIALLY when only WORDS and NOT CONCRETE ACTION are offered up. It used to be that an apology was linked with guilt, but somewhere along the line, it's almost as if the apology ITSELF has become the act of contrition and usually for the purpose of letting the apologizer feel good about himself or to protect his political rear end. As Charles Krauthammer of *The Washington Post* put it: "Apology is the EASIEST way out of a wrong. Broke every campaign law on the books? No problem. Just say

you're sorry and then move on."

Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, said in a newspaper interview that "an apology is always more meaningful if it comes from the individuals who have perpetrated the wrong. That's why on Yom Kippur you're supposed to go up to people you've wronged to ask for forgiveness." He went on to say that "what is most central to atonement in Judaism that is missing from atonement in the modern American ethos is an assumption of responsibility without evasion or without excuse. You don't say, 'Sins were committed because, I don't know, I was under a lot of stress at the time.' I do think there's something bracing in an honest assumption of responsibility."

A couple of years ago, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, a center for conservative Judaism in New York City, issued a full-page ad in *The New York Times* calling for persons to assume individual responsibility for their actions. Listed were the common excuses: "She was abused as a child"; "He was driven mad by racial hatred"; "Look what she was wearing! She was asking for it"; "If you didn't defy me, I wouldn't have to beat you"; "He was on sugar overload, so he killed"; "He dissed me! What was I supposed to do? So I wasted him"; "It was because he had a drinking problem"; "He was depressed/obsessed/oppressed, so he stole/stalked/stomped." Then underneath were the words, "It as though we've never heard of free will." The ad went on to say: "As a society we've just about given up expecting people to take personal responsibility for what they do: from petty misconduct to abusive talk to drunk driving to family violence to mass murder, the fault lies beyond the doer of the deed. Certainly there are some psychotic people who lose the ability to control their actions but the vast majority of us know what we are doing, and do it by choice. The vast majority of us can take responsibility for our own deeds; our actions are not predestined by circumstances. We have been given the ability to know right from wrong, and to struggle to do right. Sometimes we'll do wrong, but to refuse responsibility--to shift the blame onto someone else, to walk away and pretend innocence--further debases us. We humans have been given a great gift: We can elect to acknowledge our misdeeds, to do what we can to make things right, and to start over. Accountability is the essence of being human and being free, and every culture, in its own way, recognizes this..."

This ad was taken out to counter the pervading assumption in our culture that there is no longer any more sin- only dysfunction. This has been the growing tendency since the 18th century when Jean Jacques Rousseau declared that humans are basically good and that if they do BAD things, it's because something has happened to them. Charles Sykes, the author of *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character* has written: "Our tendency is to redefine bad behavior as disease and to take behavior we used to regard as a function of character and redefine it as a medical complex. In the old days, if I spent my weekly paycheck on neckties instead of on my family, people would have called me greedy. Now they would say I suffer from compulsive shopping syndrome. If the reason is greed, then I am responsible. If it's compulsive shopping syndrome, then it's a disease and I am responsible to a lesser degree." Bad habits have become transformed into addictions and addictions have been converted into diseases. Furthermore, as science has learned more about the human gene and what is transmitted from one generation to the next, more of our actions have become classified as biologically determined, thus further removing our actions from personal accountability.

Repentance requires that we first accept responsibility for our actions and then we are to do far more than just offer up sweet apologies- rather, CONCRETE ACTION is demanded of us. After all, words can be cheap. Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, challenged the notion that repentance can be a cheap and simple explanation. He said that before atonement can be made with God, you must first reconcile yourself to the person whom you have wronged. Otherwise, you will try to secure a "cheap grace": "So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and THEN come and offer your gift."

Contrary to our feel-good society, the purpose of repentance is NOT to feel good or at least better about ourselves; many of us SHOULDN'T feel good about some of the dastardly and underhanded things we've done in life. Rather, the purpose of repentance is to prepare the ground for a new beginning, to offer the chance to start all over again with a fresh clean slate. It wipes the slate clean for not only ourselves but for the other person as well- for the victim as well as the victimizer.

Over eighty years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German theologian who eventually lost his life at the end of World War II when he got involved in the plot to kill Hitler, wrote these words in what was to eventually become a Christian classic- *The Cost of Discipleship*. He said that "cheap grace" was the deadly enemy of the Church, which he described thusly:

"CHEAP GRACE is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

In other words, because of the personal sacrifice made by Jesus Christ, because it cost him his very life to save us from our sins, we have it in our minds that we don't have to sacrifice anything OURSELVES. We can get salvation on the cheap- having Easter without experiencing the rigors of a Good Friday, enjoying resurrection without any kind of personal crucifixion.

On the other hand, he wrote:

"COSTLY GRACE is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: 'ye were bought at a price,' and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God."

In other words, forgiveness as an act of grace is MORE than something we feel inside, MORE than the sensation that we have been washed clean and our troubled conscience calmed- forgiveness is ABOVE ALL an ACTIVITY. It is a willful event we participate in. It is actively reconciling ourselves with others whom we have hurt or those who have injured us, then having the assurance that as we have taken the steps in re-establishing a broken relationship, God is similarly taking active steps in reconciling US to himself. As we state every Sunday when we recite the Lord's Prayer together, "Father, forgive us our debts, AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS."

Forgiveness is SO essential to the life of the Christian that this is the ONLY part of the prayer about which Jesus thinks it necessary to add a word of interpretation. He says, immediately following his prayer: "For if you forgive others the wrongs they have done, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, then the wrongs you have done will not be forgiven by your Father." Jesus wants there to be no mistake about this- if you cannot find it within your heart to offer mercy and forgiveness even when the other party is not deserving of such mercy, then how can you expect to ever find such mercy and forgiveness from God, your heavenly Father, when YOU are not deserving either.

I have a "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoon which I cut out of a news magazine some years ago. Calvin is a little boy and Hobbes is his tiger sidekick. Both are trudging through the snow with Calvin in the lead and Hobbes close behind carrying a toboggan. Calvin says, "Wow, it really snowed last night! Isn't it wonderful?" Hobbes responds, "Everything familiar has disappeared! The world looks brand-new!" "A new year...a fresh clean start!" says Calvin. Hobbes exclaims, "It's like having a big white sheet of paper to draw on!" "A day full of possibilities!" replies Calvin. Then the young boy sums it all up for his friend, "It's a magical world, Hobbes, Ol' buddy..." In the last frame, both are shown sledding down the hillside with Calvin yelling, "Let's go exploring!"

My friends, what a perfect example of GRACE: waking up one morning to discover that we have actually been forgiven, that the old has passed away and everything has suddenly become brand-new to us. It is to understand that by the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection, we have found forgiveness and now face the world with a fresh, clean start. The world, instead of reminding us of all our failures and mistakes, is suddenly full of new possibilities, and with that, we can now "explore" the future with a new-found faith and hope that wasn't there before. May we therefore go forth and live in the light and knowledge of that grace, knowing that if God loves us and forgives us, how can we ever NOT "forgive those who trespass against us," or just as importantly, NOT forgive OURSELVES. Only THEN will we discover the joy and experience the excitement that comes with seeing everything "brand new"; only THEN will WE see the future full of BRAND NEW POSSIBILITIES and--like Calvin and his good friend Hobbes--"go exploring" TOO! Amen and amen.