



14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.



Chris Carrier visited David McAllister in the nursing home and sometimes brought his two daughters with him. David was blind from glaucoma and was nearing his death. There's nothing unusual about visiting someone in a nursing home, is there. People makes trips to the nursing home all of the time to visit their friends and family. But the interesting thing about this story is that prior to visiting David in the nursing home, they had met only once before when Chris was ten years old. The good news about this story is that Chris eventually led David to the Lord. David had lived a rough life and without Chris' concern and gospel witness, it is doubtful that David would have ever met Jesus. The tragic but amazing thing about this story is that David had abused and tried to kill Chris when he was ten.¹

Five days before Christmas, David abducted Chris, put him in his motor home and drove into the Florida Everglades. David pinned Chris down and repeatedly stabbed him in the chest with an ice pick and burned him with a cigarette. The David shot Chris in the head, left him for dead and drove away. With all of his wounds, Chris somehow survived

in the everglades for six days. Miraculously, none of the wounds from the ice pick were deep enough to kill him. The doctors didn't even discover the bullet wound until Chris was in the hospital for two days. The entry and exit wounds were under his hair and there was no blood. This is the reason Chris is blind in his left eye.²

Chris exemplified the impossible commands of love for one's enemy and blessing for one's persecutors and abusers. How was this possible? What did Chris possess that so many do not? If Chris can forgive, reconcile with and deeply love the man who traumatized him and tried to kill him, can we do the same for our own enemies, all of which are less of an enemy that David was to Chris? A question we should ask about a story like this is where is the justice? Why was David being comforted in a nursing home and not locked up in prison? Does this kind of forgiveness mean that justice is merely thrown out the window?

Last week I gave you the first point in our outline.

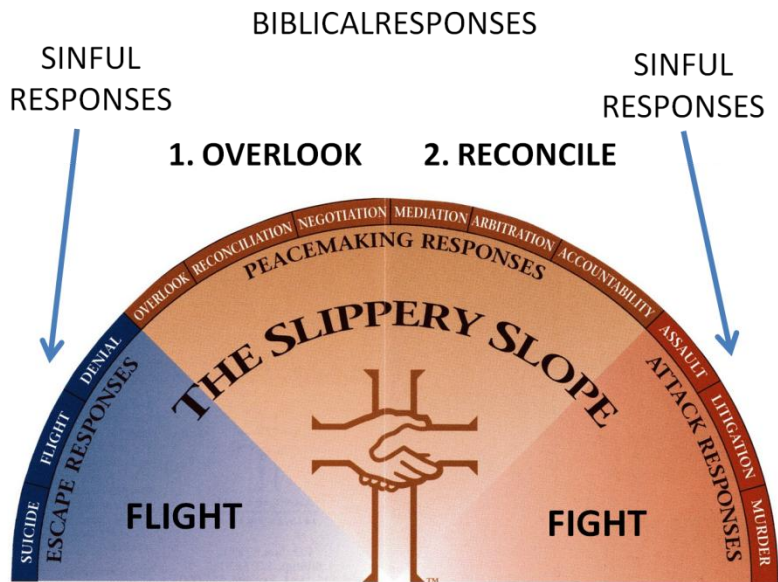
1. Trust in the gospel to cover your sins.

We looked carefully at the parable of the unmerciful servant. We were reminded of the shock and awe verse at the end. *So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*"(Matthew 18:35). If Christ has covered your sins and given you 10,000 talents worth of mercy, how can we not give out a few dollars of mercy to others who need it.

The stumbling block with this principle is the fact that we are really bad mercy mathematicians. How many people absolutely love math? Wow, not to many. Most of us do not excel at math and most of us really stink at mercy math. What is mercy math? Maybe you could call it mercy banking. You see, we look at the hurt that someone has caused us and we assign a level of hurt to that. Unknowingly, we basically assign a number value to it. If someone fails to "like" your facebook status, that may be \$1 of hurt. If someone gossips about you, that might be \$50 worth of hurt. If your spouse has an affair, that might reach into the million dollar range. It's really bad. It's very costly. What amount would you assign to Chris's hurt? It feels like we are in the billion dollar range, doesn't it? It feels like a 10,000 talent kind of hurt.

Now is it acceptable to view hurts in this way? If you are persecuted and abused by your enemy, the very words that Jesus and Paul use, is it OK to think of these offenses in terms of scale? Some are worse than others? Some are minor and some are really costly? It might surprise you that I would say that it is OK to view offenses in this way. First of all, common sense will tell you that failing to say hi to someone is not as hurtful as a divorce. I am not going to even attempt to decide the difference between tragedies such as a divorce and attempted murder. I think many of us would say that what Chris Carrier endured was worse than a typical divorce. It was tragic and almost unspeakable. But then again many divorces continue to cause pain to entire families years or decades later, so who is to say which one is really worse than another?

But we should at least distinguish between major and minor offenses. This is where the Slippery Slope from Peacemaker's Ministries is so helpful. On either end of the slippery slope are the flight and fight responses. When we have a conflict with someone, we are tempted to flee from the conflict or get angry and do battle. Both extremes are clearly sinful responses. You always



want to stay away from the flight or fight responses. But we also need to know that these will be where we want to go. Our flesh tells us to run from a conflict or fight and win at all costs. Some people might appear peaceful because they run from all conflict and that's not good. Others will often appear angry. On the surface we would rather have a room full of people who run from conflict because at least we have the semblance of peace. But do we really? I would rather have someone get mad at me and let me know than to have it brew under the surface and not know

what is happening. So both extremes would be wrong.

The middle section are the Biblical responses. Rather than concern ourselves with the six types listed here, the Biblical responses can be simplified into two basic responses: overlook or reconcile. This is why we should take the time and assign a value to our perceived hurt. If you had been handed a \$10 hurt, chances are that you can overlook that hurt. So the first step is to determine if it's a relatively minor hurt or is it more significant. But even here we tend to stumble. Some people are really over sensitive and think that every \$10 hurt is actually a \$100 hurt or more.

This is part of what I meant when I said we are bad at mercy mathematics. We don't count very well. Our thin skin changes our perception of a hurt. If \$1 hurts always feel like \$100 hurts, you have a problem. If you can't tell the difference, maybe you need to ask a trusted friend or two if your perceptions are accurate. On the other hand, even if you should overlook a \$10 hurt, if you are on the receiving end of a series of \$10 hurts from the same person, then you should probably not overlook that. It's time to begin the process of reconciliation.

We need to distinguish between lesser hurts and more major hurts. First, as we have already said, we need to determine the relative value of the hurt so we can choose to apply one of two Biblical responses--overlook the offense or reconcile with the other person. But the second reason to distinguish between minor and major hurts is to face up to the actual hurt. Hurts really do hurt. It doesn't do any good to pretend that it doesn't hurt or to downplay the real offense. That's what a flight response looks like. If you deny the hurt caused to you, can you really ever fully reconcile with the other person? If someone causes you a significant hurt and they come to you and apologize, we often say, "Oh, it's OK. Don't worry about it." We do that because we are trying to be "nice." Listen, the pastor is telling you in such circumstances not to be nice because that's really not "niceness" after all. That's a flight response. That's a form of cowardice. Now that is what you do with a \$10 hurt but don't ever do that with a \$100 hurt.

If someone has caused us a \$100 hurt and you say, "That's OK, it was no big deal," several problems will inevitably result. First, if the other person believes you when you say it was no big deal, you are implicitly teaching them that they can hurt others and not have any consequences. If you downgrade a \$100 hurt to a \$10 hurt, the other person will never know that they are actually causing \$100 hurts. It doesn't do you or the other person any good. Second, if you say it was no big deal and the other person doesn't believe you, then you are short-circuiting the reconciliation process. In a real sense, you are denying them the opportunity to fully repent and receive your forgiveness. By downgrading the hurt you are in reality refusing to forgive the other person. The third reason not to downgrade a real hurt is that deep down you don't even believe your own words. You may say that it was no big deal but deep down you know that it was a big deal. If you don't acknowledge that hurt, then you haven't reconciled with that person. And if you haven't reconciled, what will happen to that hurt? It will stay with you. You haven't applied mercy to the hurt. You haven't released the hurt so it will continue to cling to you.

We have all had the experience of walking through the woods and at some point you look down and see that you are covered with those sticky briar things. I don't know what they are called but I do know they stick to your clothes like a super magnet and they come in bunches. You never get just one. They attach themselves in large clumps. This is how your hurt clings to you if you don't acknowledge it. The hurt sticks to you but the problem is that the briars are invisible. You may be covered with prickly hurts from the past and not even know it. There is relational distance between you and this other person but you don't know why. Eventually you decide that there must be something wrong with the other person and you accept the fact that your relationship will never be the same when all the while you may have invisible pricklies stuck to you.

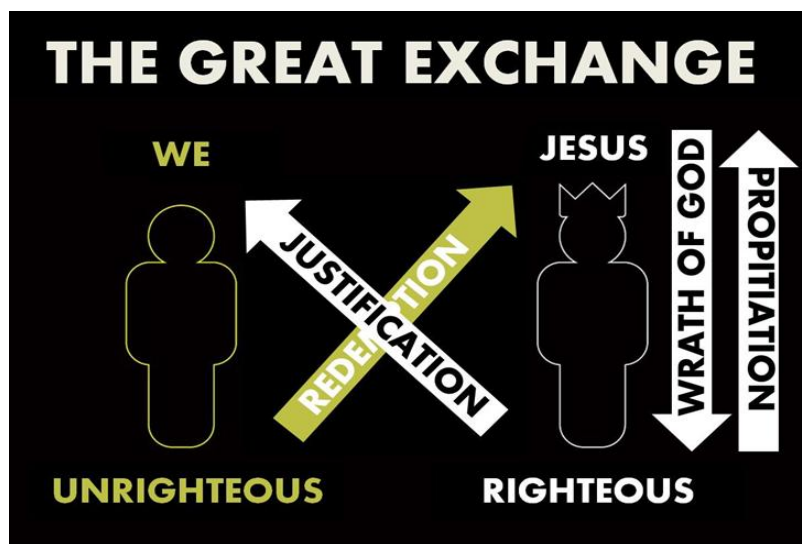
The greater the "dollar value" of the hurt, the greater amount of mercy which is required. A \$100 hurt requires \$100 of mercy. A 10,000 talent hurt requires 10,000 talents worth of mercy. But here's the other way we are bad at mercy mathematics or again, maybe I should call it mercy banking. We simply don't realize that we have more than enough in our mercy bank account to cover any amount of hurt charged against our account. We are used to living this way with the rest of our lives. Our typical experience is that we have too much money left at the end of our money. Our expenses continually exceed our income and we get progressively deeper into debt, especially around the holidays when we all tend to spend more money.

What we need to understand is that for the true believer, there is no such thing as a mercy debt. No one can ever cause you more hurt than you have mercy to cover. How did Chris Carrier cover the debt of sin caused by David McAllister? Is he some kind of super Christian, a freak of nature, one in a million kind of Christian? Or is he just an ordinary believer who really understands the gospel and the mercy in his account? By God's miraculous grace, Chris got out of the tragedy with his life but it's not as if he were free from consequences. As a ten-year-old boy, he began to experience a type of post-traumatic stress disorder that plagued him for a long time. He has been blind in his left eye ever since which has affected everything he does, including the way he looks. Every day of his life he carries the physical and real consequences of McAllister's sins against him. If Chris hadn't continued to visit McAllister on his death bed you might be able to make the claim that this forgiveness was fake or merely cathartic. This is the way that

unbelievers are able to forgive their enemies. They realize the cathartic nature of letting go of the hurt. They come to realize that if they don't let go, that they are punishing no one but themselves. But Chris Carrier's forgiveness was so much deeper than that. He offered his own mercy to his man who severely abused him and then he offered God's mercy to him.

This is clearly supernatural in origin but it need not be rare. Every believer has an infinite supply of mercy at his or her disposal. But that's not the way we handle our mercy banking, is it? Even if we do accurately assess the hurt caused to us, we don't think we have the funds to cover the debt. If a \$10,000 hurt comes our way it feels like there is no possible way that we can cover it. This is why I spent so much time last week on the parable of the unmerciful servant. Until we grasp the fact that our sin against God was infinitely greater than any sin that can be dealt to us, we will fail to understand God's mercy. McAllister's sins were grievous and evil but my sin against God was so much worse. The Muslims who deny Christ and chop off the heads of innocent people should disgust us, but we should be more disgusted with our sin against God, apart from Christ.

Remember that the chapters 12-16 of Romans is supposed to be the practical part of the letter. The first eleven chapters have all of the heavy theological stuff in them. What we are supposed to do is take the practical commands in the last four chapters and give them the theological foundation they need from the first eleven chapters. So for example, Paul commanded us to *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them*. But why should we do this? Last week I connected the dots for you from Jesus teaching when he said, *Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful* (Luke 6:36). Because God is so merciful toward us, we are expected to offer mercy to others. That's some of Jesus' teaching on the subject but what is Paul's reasoning? Why should we bless those who persecute us? What is Paul's foundation for such an audacious statement?



Do you remember this-the Great Exchange? This is a summary of the truths in chapter three. In our sinful state, we are unrighteous and Christ is sinless and perfectly righteous. The great exchange is a 2 fold process. Christ redeems us by taking our sin upon himself. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us. On the cross, our unrighteousness became his. By so doing, Jesus also incurred the wrath of the Father.

If you were here on Christmas Eve I explained that the humble birth of Christ, though real and though very humble in itself, paled in comparison to the spiritual reality that Christ took on human flesh. When infinity clothed itself in humanity it was the height of humility. In this sense, Jesus' humble birth in a stable was a physical representation of a deeper spiritual humility. As it was at Christ's birth, so it was at his death. The physical suffering that he endured, though very

real and terribly brutal, paled in comparison to the spiritual suffering of having taken on our sins and absorbing the Father's wrath. His physical suffering was a representation of a much deeper spiritual suffering which culminated in his death. He dies in our sin and killed sin in the process.

Often an explanation of salvation stops there but that's not an exchange, is it? That's just a one way transfer. Our sin was transferred to Christ but thankfully, his righteousness was transferred to us. If you recall, these were also banking terms. Our sin was credited to his account and his righteousness was credited to our account. In the last month, two of Ryan's friends got such good deals on car purchases that I told them they should get down on their knees and repent for ripping off the former owner. All purchases require a transaction. The terms dictate that we give a certain amount of money and in return we get a car, or whatever. This is an exchange of money for goods. But in the Great Exchange, we are the sole benefactor and God is the sole Giver. We do nothing but get everything.

You see the banking in this exchange, don't you? What if there wasn't a full exchange? What if God had stopped at a single transfer? What if Christ had only take the debt of our sin? Where would that have left us? Well what happens if someone paid 100% of a million dollar debt that we owed. Where would that leave us? We'd still be broke, wouldn't we? Our bank account balance would be zero. But God did not merely take our debt and leave us at a zero spiritual balance. he also credited the righteousness of Christ to our account. He gave us a positive balance--not of our own goodness but of the pure righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the Great Exchange and it is the foundation for the simple command: *Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them.* We are not working from a state of spiritual poverty but of ultimate spiritual prosperity. But here is the point where our mercy bank breaks down. The hurt caused to us sometimes feels greater than anything we ever did to God. But we must see this for the lie that it is. The enemy and our flesh convince us that the other person not only doesn't deserve a blessing but he actually deserves to be cursed.

Join me in calling such thought a lie from the pit of hell. If you don't call it a lie it will continue to stick to you like a bunch of prickly briars. If you don't call it a lie you will never see the fullness of the Great Exchange. You will never see how the gospel which lifted you from the miry clay and set your foot on a rock applies to the \$1,000 hurts and the \$10,000 hurts done to you. Preachers are supposed to preach the gospel, right? True, but we are all supposed to be preaching the gospel to others and we all need to preach the gospel to ourselves. The gospel is not just for salvation but if we allow it, it continues to work its way through our heart and mind until our dying breath. It transforms us day by day, hurt by hurt, mercy by mercy.

As amazing as this is, you may still have some lingering questions about the application of God's mercy to others. A common question is, "But where is the justice in this?" David McAllister never had to spend a single day in prison for what he did to an innocent 10 year old boy. How is that fair? Where is the justice in that? And what about the person who abused me? This brings us to the second point in our outline.

2. Trust in God's wrath for justice.

There is real justice. God is a God of love and a God of wrath and next Sunday we will delve into the question of justice.

Rich Maurer
January 4, 2015

¹ <http://www.christianity.com/11622274/>

² Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, Crossway: Wheaton, © 2008, pp. 51-59.