



God will forgive them, won't He?

This actually was about 25% question and 75% statement. There was an unspoken worry behind that question/statement. The normal unspoken fear after a question like that would be, "I'm afraid He won't forgive." That was not the case in this situation. The unspoken fear behind this specific question went like this, "I'm afraid that He *will* forgive them."

This question came from a relative of mine and it was asked in the context of a discussion about the recent problems in the banking industry. He had talked about the leaders of banks and lending institutions who "cooked the books" (among other illegal things) then got paid millions to quit their positions - all the while leaving tax payers on the hook to pay for their mistakes. This relative was not only unhappy about what these banking leaders did, he was also unhappy at the thought that God would forgive them for it.

Chances are you've had similar thoughts about people who have hurt you or taken advantage of you. We want justice to be served (at least when it comes to other people). Jesus anticipated those thoughts and gave us this parable: (Matthew 20:1-16)

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. [2] He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

[3] "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. [4] He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' [5] So they went.

"He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. [6] About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

[7] " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

[8] "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

[9] "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. [10] So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. [11] When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. [12] 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

[13] "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? [14] Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. [15] Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

[16] "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

This is really a parable about God's grace and his offer of forgiveness. From the standpoint of those who worked all day (i.e. those who have believed in Jesus since baptism) it just isn't right that those who

worked only an hour (i.e. those who lived a life of blatant sin and then repented and put their trust in Jesus at the "last minute") receive the exact same wage (forgiveness and eternal life). It seems that justice isn't being served. But Jesus reminds us that He really is *not* being unfair, because everyone knew the wage He was offering before they "signed on" and everyone *was* paid the wage they were promised and agreed to.

So, if someone (like, for example, a bank CEO who bilked people out of millions and stuck taxpayers with the bill) in all sincerity of heart asks God for forgiveness, God will forgive them. Jesus *did* take the punishment for *all* sins on the cross. That's grace. But, that doesn't mean that all the earthly consequences will be removed. Even if people *seem* to have escaped earthly consequences for sins, God sees everything and will still see that earthly justice is served. It just may not be served in the way we want or in our timing, but it will be served.

So, the short answer is this: "Yes, God will forgive them if they truly repent. But forgiveness doesn't mean there won't be earthly consequences." And we must keep in mind the saying Jesus ended the parable with: "The last will be first and the first will be last." i.e. The moment we start to think we are "better" and more deserving of God's gifts is the moment we have placed ourselves at the end of the line - behind those who realize they aren't deserving.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net