

Say What?

If you are around me or around Copeland Presbyterian Church or, maybe even, North Alabama Presbytery, you may have met my sister, Ceil Hydrick. Ceil is retired now, but she made her career in computer science. Years ago, when she began her career computers were first becoming available to the general public. In those days computers were text driven. Today, we point and click, but in those days, you had to type in commands. You had to learn to program computers. It could be a pain, because if you mistyped a command the computer couldn't understand what to do. It was called a syntax error, and usually the program was told to tell you that. The computer would say, "Syntax error."

There was a time when Ceil worked at Calhoun Junior College. One time she told me that one of the computers at Calhoun had been programmed so that instead of saying "syntax error" it would respond "Say what?"

I've mentioned many times before in sermons that I've done, that parables are stories that don't make any sense. Sometimes that's easy to see, and sometimes not so much. Sometimes, cultural expectations and understandings between the ancient world and today are so different that we have a hard time seeing it. Sometimes it even takes two or three readings to see it, but not this time. This time the story makes no sense on the first reading.

In this story, the Master has a crooked agent. The master finds out about it. So, he calls his agent in to account for his actions. So, the agent is fired. So, the agent goes out and tries to find people and make quick deals with them, hoping that someone will take him in since he's been fired. For those of you who want to know more I recommend you check out what Bruce Malina has to say on the subject in his book A Social Science Commentary of the Synoptic Gospels. For now, I'm just going to say that the agent calls people in and allows them to change their bill. So, the landlord loses not only the money that his agent has embezzled, but he also loses between twenty and fifty percent of what he's owed. Plus, if the guy has previously cheated his master or other people, they'll remember that. So, this doesn't really make any sense.

Well, let's put this into a little context. It wasn't uncommon in the Ancient World for steward of a household to keep a little of the money that they owed their master. Such individuals were often slaves, who were educated and empowered to make deals for the master. If they weren't slaves, then they would typically be paid by commission. They would get to keep a portion of whatever deal they made. Such fees were usually written into the contracts themselves.

They could rent some of the master's property and collect the rents. They often loaned money to others, or sometimes goods, and collected debts on behalf of the master. Such deals could be for a percentage of the crop, for a set amount of goods or for cash. This transaction is clearly of the second type. Notice, for example, that one deal is for 100 barrels of olive oil.

It wasn't uncommon for this agent to skim a little off the top, but the agent had to be careful. If he extorted too much, it could ruin the reputation of his master. If any of the accounts came up short and he were proven responsible, he was expected to make up the loss. He could also be thrown into prison until his family paid the bill. Any blatant dishonesty would ruin the master's reputation. On the other hand, if the agent were generous, that would reflect positively on the reputation of his master.

So, in that light it doesn't make sense that the master would be pleased with his agent's actions. After all, making back half of what is owed doesn't restore his reputation. So, what does this tell us? It tells us that the master is merciful even though the servant doesn't deserve it. We actually learn that twice. First, we learn it when the master simply dismisses the servant. the servant could have been imprisoned and held until his family paid the bill. The master simply dismisses the servant. We learn it again when the master forgives everything after learning what the servant did- going out and reducing the bill. The servant doesn't deserve to be forgiven, yet he is.

Now, how does this connect with our understanding of God today? Traditional theology talks about Substitution Atonement. The line of reasoning goes like this. Sin is a stain on God's honor. So, God must receive some satisfaction for this stain. But only God is capable of giving sufficient satisfaction. So, God does that through the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

If you think about that for a moment, if you think of sin as a stain on God's honor, then that means that when we sin, it damages God's reputation. God is gracious. God is kind. God wants to forgive, but when we sin it humiliates God. It calls God's reputation into question.

I think this in part has fueled some skepticism about the church in our modern day. God loves us, but when we act with anger or hate or even indifference, it ruins God's reputation. Why? Because we're God's servants and people will assume the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Because, they will see the way that we are acting and say, "They say God is merciful, but they also say they're God's servants, and they aren't being merciful," for example.

I think this is a serious issue for the church. When you and I don't act as servants of God it angers and even humiliates God. But God is merciful, even when we don't deserve mercy. God's people often times don't hear or understand what God is saying, or even who God is, but God's grace is always there.

This passage is really a call from Jesus Christ. It's a call to reach beyond ourselves, to act like God's servants. In fact, I suggest that Jesus is really trying to say that we should be like the agent, in the sense that we show mercy to people who don't deserve it, because we were given mercy by our master that we didn't deserve.

Maybe that's what it means to be Christian. The word Christian literally means "little Christ". We love others who are not very loveable, because we were loved by Jesus when we

didn't deserve to be loved. We forgive others who don't deserve forgiveness, because we were forgiven by Jesus and didn't deserve to be.

Now, you might respond, "Say, what? You don't know what they did to me. How can you ask me to forgive them? How can you ask me to love them? How can you tell me I don't deserve to be forgiven? How can you tell me I don't deserve to be loved? How can you tell me I'm sinful? You don't know me."

You're right. That's how I respond. You're right. I don't. Here's what I do know. I am sinful and Christ loves me. The scripture says that everyone has sinned and fallen short of the grace of God. It also says that Christ loves us. I believe he would want us to love others. I believe that he would want us to forgive others despite whatever they may have done. Maybe that doesn't make sense in this world, but it makes sense in the Kingdom of God.