

Jesus, Forgiveness, & Hugs Galore

Steve Burchett

I got an “S minus” in the category of “plays well with others” on my second grade report card. “S” stood for “satisfactory,” so you now understand why I was in trouble with my parents—the dreaded minus symbol! Why the poor grade? I was a kickball bully. I thought I was more knowledgeable than my peers about *whatever* sport we were playing, so I meanly refused to accept alternative opinions.

From schoolyard spats to marital strife to church disagreements, we have all known the difficulties associated with maintaining relationships. But there is hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Philemon’s relationship with his slave Onesimus was broken. Onesimus had run away from Philemon. They were at enmity with each other. But then, while hiding in Rome, Onesimus became a follower of Jesus. Apparently the apostle Paul, under house arrest in Rome, led Onesimus to Christ (see v. 10). Philemon was already a believer, known by Paul as one who had a “love...toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints” (v. 5). So once Onesimus became a saint, Paul wrote to Philemon about how he should think of his absence, and what he should do when Onesimus returned to Colossae:

For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. (vv. 15-17)

What does the story of Philemon and Onesimus teach us about the gospel’s impact on relationships? *First, the gospel promotes forgiveness and reconciliation.* Onesimus would return to Philemon as a repentant man, so he was to “receive him,” clearly implying forgiveness and reconciliation.

Corrie Ten Boom was faced with a similar (and more difficult) situation. She had been imprisoned with her family by the Nazis during World War II. After the war she went throughout the world and spoke of God’s grace and love in Christ. While testifying in Germany, she encountered one of the shower room guards from the Nazi concentration camp. “And suddenly it was all there—the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie’s pain-blانched face.” When she finished speaking, the man happily came up to her and said, “How grateful I am for your message. To think that, as you say, he has washed my sins away!” Ten Boom explains what happened next:



His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often . . . the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. So I discovered that it is not our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on Him. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself. (*The Hiding Place*, 238).

Actually, the man she forgave was no longer her enemy, but her brother. We all have this responsibility: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:32).

Second, the gospel unites the radically diverse. Think of it: A master and a slave, now brothers in Christ! We don’t *endure* believers who are different than us. We should warmly greet each other and respect one another in the Lord. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

Greg Lucas’ son, Jake, was born with multiple disabilities (including intellectual). One Sunday morning, their pastor was finishing a series through Romans, speaking specifically about the need to apply “Greet one another with a holy kiss” by hugging someone at the end of the meeting. Jake sat on the edge of his seat, excited at the prospect of kissing and hugging! The final “amen” was said, and people started to apply the message with some half-hearted hugs. And then it happened. Jake bolted across the aisle and nearly tackled an old man in a suit who was apparently trying to escape the application time. The old man let him hang on, but wanted free. Jake buried his head in the man’s chest. The man relented and hugged back as tears filled his eyes. Everybody was watching these two radically different men hold on to one another. Jake finally released the old man and quickly found another person to embrace, and then another. Everyone in the church started hugging and laughing and crying. The gospel was uniting them. Greg said it was as if a mini-revival broke out in the church that morning.

Who do you need to hug this Sunday? Who do you need to forgive?