



## What Makes God Great—The Second Trait

Years ago when I was in graduate school, I had two part time jobs on campus. One was working at the school preschool caring for the children of fellow students and the other was supervising the campus gym several hours each week. One afternoon, a teenager who happened to be the son of one of the most popular of the professors threw a basketball and broke a window that faced into the indoor basketball court. The professor was going to have to pay for the window but instead he got me fired, claiming I wasn't being observant enough of what was happening on the court. I was devastated for two reasons. One, all my fellow students knew I worked there and would find out I was fired for not doing my job well enough. More than that, I desperately needed the part time job as it was what covered my meals. Later that week, the director of the preschool called me into her office. She worked for the same administrator who had ordered my firing. Mrs. Kemp had heard what happened to me and she kindly offered to give me the hours I lost from the job at the gym. I have never forgotten her mercy. She certainly owed me nothing and the hours she gave me to work at her school she didn't need covered. I was shown mercy in a practical way.

As we mentioned previously, Jesus Christ is God and so if we give thought to how God is, our best way of knowing is learning more about Jesus. Here is the question we are considering. What makes God great? As I began to explore how to approach this, a moment from Jesus' past came to mind. When Jesus was crucified, He was nailed to a cross between two truly evil men who also were being crucified. **Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.** (Matthew 27: 38 NIV) As He hung on the cross, Jesus was an object of excoriating ridicule. Jewish leaders came past Him and cursed and mocked Jesus. They laughed at the fact that Jesus "saved others" but could not "save Himself". "Just call on God to rescue you", the scorners challenged Him. It is understandable perhaps that they would laugh at Jesus because the Jewish leaders hated Him and rejoiced at His suffering and certain death on the cross. What is stunning is who joined in on the mocking. It was the two terrible men suffering the same fate as Him on their own crosses. **Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.** (Mark 15: 32b NIV) This is really an astounding detail included in the account of Jesus' public execution. Both thieves on either side of Him nailed to crosses themselves mocked Jesus and cursed Him. Why would that be? Human behavior is not easy to understand, especially given the impact sin has on the warping of our personalities. We do things that we can neither justify nor explain. Why should the thieves be any different in their hateful spite of Jesus.

There is another detail of those few hours the two thieves had left in life that is recounted millions of times these past two thousand years that has never been forgotten. You may not be aware that for a certain part of time on the cross, each of the thieves or rebels as some translate it, ripped Jesus and tore into Him, ridiculing and cursing Him. At some point though, one of the thieves changed course. He spoke kindly and respectfully to Jesus, beseeching Him for help. **One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."** (Luke 23: 39-42 NIV) How Jesus replied has been detailed countless times since. **Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."** (Luke 23: 43 NIV) Do you see the mercy in this? The man who just spent an hour or more laughing at Jesus our Lord was kindly told he would be soon in paradise with him. That robber, that murderer and ugly hearted criminal, Jesus gave the gift of eternal life. I dare you to find a god pictured in any world religion who is described as being like this. Allah? No way. Shiva? Vishnu? Not them. Does Karma work that way? Of course it doesn't. Where do you find true mercy in God? In Jesus Christ!

Perhaps this about Jesus has caught your attention. One of the most despised occupations in the Roman world and especially among the Jewish people was tax collecting. Appointed by Roman authorities, they were given the task of gathering taxes from the people living in their region. A certain amount of money was expected of the people who lived in a particular area and the Roman rulers required they receive it. However, the tax collectors could demand whatever amounts of money they wanted, and they had the backing of the Roman law enforcement network to insure they got it from the people. Thus, the tax collectors could ask for far more than what the Romans demanded and keep the extra for themselves, making them fabulously wealthy...at least compared to the poor Hebrews who made up the majority of people in Israel. You can see how despised the tax collectors were by nearly everyone and how corrupt they generally became. Psychologically it works like this. The more you are hated, the greater your greed to make up for the loss of respect and value given you. Yet, it was to this reviled corner of society Jesus developed some of His closest friends and brought the Good News of salvation.

This inclination toward the most scorned members of society was God's normal response to them. **While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"** (Matthew 9: 10-11 NIV) The Pharisees expressed the common view. These people deserved nothing because they were wicked and in their minds worthless. Yet it was God's habit to eat with them, befriend them and show them the way of salvation. The response of Jesus to the criticism of the Pharisees tells us all we need to know about God's way of life. **On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."** (Matthew 9: 12-13 NIV) You be the judge. What sort of God would you want? This one, Jesus Christ, or some other god who turns his nose up to the stench of immorality certain despised people emit?

Who can ever forget the immortal words uttered by God as He hung on the Cross, suffering such terrible pain. About the very ones who tortured, mocked and brutalized Him, Jesus' response is commemorated by those who repeat the account of His death. **Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."** (Luke 23: 34 NIV) Let's take a closer look at what Jesus is making clear He wants done. The Greek term translated "forgive" is *aphiemi* and means to put away. Put away what? The ones who hurt Him so badly? No! It is the sins they have committed in hating and crucifying Him. God wanted the sins of the ones who crucified Him put away, removed. Let us be clear on why precisely God came to us born of a virgin, living as a fully human God. The Apostle John spells it out for you. **But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin.** (1 John 3: 5 NIV) Pay careful attention to this. John is not using the term "forgive" which means to send away but the Greek word "*airo*" which is defined as "take away, remove, destroy". Jesus did not come to pretend as if we have never done anything wrong. He knows how bad our sins are and how much evil is in us. Jesus never denied how awful the tax-collectors were or the other "sinners" with whom He ate dinner. He came to take away our sins from us and destroy them, no matter how terrible they are. He has done so because of the mercy that makes up who He is.

Forgiveness is not ignoring sin; it is forcefully removing and destroying sin. Consider this statement by the Apostle Paul. **In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.** (Ephesians 1: 7-8 NIV) This was not a spur of the moment decision on God's part. He did not just feel sorry for us and in a time of weakness give in to the urge to let us go free as if we did nothing. He thought it through in His great wisdom and decided to make it possible to by dying on the Cross, take away all of our sins, from the smallest to the greatest. Does Allah or any of the Hindu gods act in this sort of mercy? Of course not! What makes God great? The mercy of God is unmatched here or in the heavens. Rejoice that God is full of mercy!