



Eugene Peterson tells a story from his childhood in Montana when he encountered a Norwegian farmer named Leonard Storm. When he was 5 years old he'd walk across the meadow between his backyard and his fenced fields. He'd stand at the barbed wire strand and watch the farmer plow the field with his enormous tractor. The thing he wished for the most was to get a ride on that John Deere tractor. One summer day he was standing at the fence, watching Brother Storm (that's what they called him) plow the field. He was probably 100 yards away when he spotted Eugene. He stopped the tractor, stood up from the seat and made strong waving motions with his arm.

Eugene writes, "I never had seen anyone use gestures like that. He looked mean and angry; he was large and ominous in his big overalls and straw hat. He was yelling at me, but the wind was blowing against him and I could hear nothing. I knew that I was probably where I shouldn't be. Five-year-old boys often are. I turned and left, sadly. I hadn't felt I was doing anything wrong -- I was only watching from what I thought was a safe distance and wishing that someday, somehow, I could get to ride that tractor. I went home feeling rejected, rebuked."

Peterson made some assumptions about Leonard Storm. His large frame, booming voice and strange gestures were interpreted as anger and displeasure, so the boy ran off scared to death. He never stopped to consider the fact that maybe Brother Storm wanted him to come closer and ride the tractor. I think many of us relate to God the same way. We view him from a safe distance. We long to come near and jump on the tractor, but we're afraid. We question his intentions. We read the Scripture and we see how big he really is; we hear his booming voice and see his strange gestures, and we wonder: Is he inviting me to come closer or is he angry and telling me to get lost?

Of course, prayer is all about coming closer. In prayer we assume God is saying, "Come closer. Talk to me. I want to know you." One of the things that often complicates that is sin. Someone said, "Most of us are too Christian to really enjoy sinning, and too fond of sinning to really enjoy Christianity." Knowing that, how can I approach a holy God?

Moses had a similar problem. Only his problem wasn't just his own sin, it was the sin of those he was called to lead. This morning we're looking at Exodus 32. Moses has been up on Mt. Sinai for 40 days. He has the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments etched on them by the finger of God, but before he goes down

and meets with the people of Israel he has some business to take care of. While Moses has been meeting with God, the people down below had fallen into sin; breaking the covenant while the ink was yet to even dry. It's against this backdrop of Israel's sin that Moses will dive deeper than ever before into the unfathomable mystery of prayer.

The people of Israel fall into sin

Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." Now when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play (verses 1–6).

The people of Israel were getting restless. Where's Moses? He's our leader. Has he abandoned us? What do we pay this guy for anyway? Doesn't he keep office hours? Why isn't he down here with us?

Somehow these folks have become dependent on the visible presence of Moses. Notice they describe him as, "*this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt*" (v.1). Who brought them out of Egypt? Were they beginning to confuse Moses with God? "No Moses, no God," they thought. So they fashion a golden calf to symbolize God, using the gold that was supposed to be used for the Tabernacle. They do the very thing God said not to do in the 2nd commandment: they made an idol, and they worshiped it. Look what they say, "*This is your god... who brought you up from the land of Egypt*" (v.4). Then they get carried away. When it says they "*sat down to eat and to drink, and they rose up to play*" (v.6), it's not describing a church picnic; it's describing a drunken orgy. The word "play" refers to

sexual immorality. The breaking of the 2nd commandment led to breaking the 7th commandment. Idolatry led to immorality.

God informs Moses of the the people's sin

All this goes on while Moses is up on the mountain with God. This forms the background for Moses' prayer and interaction with God. Moses has no idea what's happening down below. But God knows what's going on, and God wants Moses to know as well.

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!'" The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. "Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation" (verses 7–10).

Moses has been having a great time up there on the mountain with God. Forty days of heaven. But now God spoils the fun. He tells him to go down at once because of the corruption of the people. Have you ever had that happen? Things are going great, you're sky high, and then something brings you right back to earth? It smacks you upside the head. Notice God calls them *"YOUR people, whom YOU have brought up from the land of Egypt"* (v.7). It's as if God is disowning them. Whose people are they? Are they God's people or are they Moses' people? It seems God isn't so sure he wants them as his people any more.

God says, *"I have seen this people..."* (v.9). These people seem to have no idea that God sees exactly what they're up to. It seems like such an obvious thing to say: God knows; God sees. The golden calf can't see, but God can. He knows what these people are doing. When we come to God in prayer we have to remember—God knows; God sees. He sees our sin. We may fool others, but not God. The best thing to do is confess it; bring it into the open with him. But he also sees the sin of those we love and those we lead. That was the situation Moses was in. How do we deal with that in prayer?

Before Moses went down the mountain, God said one more thing to him. He makes Moses a proposal for how to deal with this situation. Look again at v.10.

Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.

God is angry with these people. He announces his intention to destroy them and start over with Moses. This had to be a tempting offer for Moses. From the very start these people had

proved to be unfit to represent God. They were a cowardly, faithless, whining people. Why not start over? It was also tempting because it meant for Moses that he'd become a legend. God says *"I will make of you a great nation."* This is what God promised Abraham. God is telling Moses that he can be the new Abraham, the father of a new nation. What an opportunity!

But there is something curious about what God says here. He says *"Let me alone..."* It's as if he's asking Moses to allow him to destroy these people. *"Let me alone..."* It's like God is saying, "If you don't leave me alone I will do something that right now I don't want to do. If you don't let me alone I may have to forgive these people." What's going on here? It's clear God is open to the possibility of Moses **not** letting him alone. God is subtly inviting Moses to intervene on behalf of these people. Perhaps God would rather not destroy them. You see, God had not made a final decision to destroy the people. The threat to destroy the people is conditional. He'll destroy the people only if Moses leaves him alone to do so.

Moses prays for the people and God changes his mind

Moses takes his cue. Immediately he launches into prayer for God to spare these people.

Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever'" (verses 11–13).

Moses' prayer for them is a classic example of how to pray for people you love; people who you care about who have fallen into sin and destructive living. Moses appeals to God on three grounds.

First, he appeals to him on the basis of God's past actions. God had already brought them out of Egypt. Notice what he says in v.11. He calls them, *"YOUR people whom YOU have brought out of the land of Egypt."* God said, "They're your people." Moses says, "No. They're your people." When our kids were small and they acted up I would say to Lynn, "Do you know what **your** child did today?" And she would say, "What do you mean **my** child, it's **your** child!" Moses and God are doing the same thing. It's like a game of hot potato. Who's right? They're both right. They're Moses' people, and they're God's people. Moses reminds God that they're his people, too, and that he purchased them as a

people when he delivered them from the land of Egypt. When you come to God, remind him of what he has done for you in the past. Remember his past faithfulness.

Second, he appeals to him on the basis of God's reputation. He says, "What will the Egyptians say? They'll say that you brought us out here to kill us. They'll think you're just like any other capricious god whom they serve." Moses cares about God's reputation. This can be a wonderful help in prayer. We know God loves us, but we also know that he's protective of his name. So we can come to him and say, "Lord, I'm praying this for **your** name's sake. This is not all about me; it's about you. What will people think of **you**?" The question is, do we really care about the reputation of his name?

Finally, he appeals to God on the basis of his promises. In v.13 he reminds God of the promises he made to Abraham, Isaac and Israel. He says, "You swore God. You swore by yourself that you make them a great nation and bring them into the land. You can't go back on your word." Do you know how many promises God has made to you? As one who trusts Christ, he's promised to never leave you or forsake you. He's promised to forgive all your sins. He's promised to give you his Spirit to live in you to teach you and comfort you and empower you. He's promised to provide for your needs. He's promised to complete the work he began in you. He's promised to give you eternal life. When you pray, come to God with those promises on your lips.

Moses is done praying for now. He's poured his heart out. He's staked his prayer on what he knows about God. When he's finished, the writer says, "*The Lord changed his mind about the harm which he said he would do to this people.*" Some translations say "*the Lord relented.*" What does it mean that God changed his mind or relented? How could a sovereign God who knows and determines the future do such a thing? To say that God changed his mind means he embarked on a different course of action than what was previously a possibility. God was open to that new possibility from the very start. That's why he said to Moses, "*Leave me alone.*" In his sovereignty, God chooses at times to be open to new possibilities. Why is that? Because he wants us to pray. He wants us to participate with him in the fulfilling of his purposes through prayer.

Prayer makes a difference. Prayer changes things. Prayer impacts God. Have you ever thought, "Why should I pray when God is going to do what God is going to do? God is sovereign, isn't he? How can my prayers change anything he's planned from before eternity?" But this is telling us that our prayers can and do make a difference.

It's like a father who announced one day that a long-awaited family vacation would have to be canceled. Things had gotten so busy at work he just didn't see how he could take the time off. In the back of his mind, he wondered if his family really wanted to

go at all. But as his family listened, there was something about the way he said it. "He just couldn't see how..." Maybe that was an invitation to show him how. His son says, "Dad, perhaps we could just knock a day or two off the length of the trip." His daughter says, "Dad, you've always told us we came before your work." His wife says, "Honey, I'll be extra patient if you have to work weekends between now and then." The father changes his mind; something he was open to doing from the start.

Moses caught a glimpse that day of God's willingness to respond to prayer. God invites us to pray because he wants us to join with him in accomplishing his will.

Moses confronts the people about their sin

In v.15 Moses heads down the mountain with the stone tablets in hand. I can almost hear his stomach churning over the prospect of what he would have to confront at the bottom. When Moses gets there a number of things happen which display God's anger towards the sin of his people; an anger reflected in Moses. First, he shatters the stone tablets. Next, he takes the golden calf, burns it, grinds it to powder, throws it in water and makes them drink it. Then he confronts Aaron who in turn blames the people. Finally, he has the tribe of Levi execute 3,000 of their fellow-Israelites.

Maybe it seems strange to see such a display of anger right after Moses' prayer on their behalf and God's gracious willingness to change his mind about destroying them. But this is a small thing, a little spanking compared to what God said he was going to do, which was to destroy every last one of them. This is the discipline of a father that's a direct result of love. If someone I love falls into a destructive pattern of behavior, shouldn't I be do something? Shouldn't I hate what sin does to that person? Shouldn't I be willing to even establish some consequences so they learn? God's discipline is entirely consistent with his love.

Moses offers to make atonement for the people

But Moses isn't done with them. Look at v.30.

On the next day Moses said to the people, 'You yourselves have committed a great sin; and now I am going up to the LORD, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.'

Moses tells the people they've committed a "*great sin.*" Because of that, he says he'll go up and try to "*make atonement*" for it. Despite his anger, Moses is still for these people. He still loves them. Yet he also knows a holy God can't just overlook sin. There has to be a payment-atonement.

Then Moses climbs back up the mountain and look what he says in verses 31–32.

Then Moses returned to the LORD, and said, 'Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. But now,

if You will, forgive their sin--and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!

He makes a rather shocking offer. He offers to have his own life "*blotted out*" from God's book. He'll be the atonement. He's not being melodramatic. He's offering to give his life in exchange for their forgiveness. Unlike Aaron who blamed them, Moses was willing to take their blame on himself. He's willing to pay for their sin with his own life.

This is a different Moses than in the past. Back in ch 17:4 Moses was fed up with these people and said to the Lord, "*What shall I do to these people?*" He wanted to wash his hands of them. Now he can't bear the thought of losing them. What has changed him? Could it be that spending all that time up on the mountain has had an effect on Moses? Could it be catching a glimpse of the heart of God made him a different man? Prayer changes things, and the biggest thing that changes is **us**. When we spend time in the presence of God, we become more like God. Our heart begins to reflect his heart.

You and I love our families. We pray for our kids, our spouses, our brothers and sisters, our parents. We love our church. We pray for our pastors and elders and fellow believers here at CPC. But here's the question, when we pray, is it "they" or is it "we?" Do we care enough about them to stand with them if judgment falls? Do you know what Paul said in Romans 9:3? He was thinking of his fellow Jews when he said, "*For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race.*" This is pretty much what Moses was saying. This is the posture of a true intercessor. It's a reflection of the very heart of God.

But God turns his offer down. There are times God is open to negotiate, and there are times when he's not. In verses 33–34 he tells Moses those who have sinned will bear the consequences of their own sin. Do you know why God refuses his offer? Because Moses isn't qualified for the job. Later, as God gives Moses all the laws about sacrifices he learns that acceptable sacrifices had to be spotless; without defect. That was saying that in order for

atonement to be made, a sinless, perfect sacrifice had to be offered. We know several hundred years later, one would come who was qualified. Jesus, the Son of God, the spotless lamb of God, made the same offer Moses did, and this time God said yes. God's love is such that he does want to forgive, and he does so at the greatest cost to himself. As he offers himself up to God, Moses reflects that pure love of God for his wayward people, which was perfected in the person of Jesus. A love that's willing to die to set us free.

There are times when like Moses we sort of stand in the gap for those we love. We stand between them and God. We intercede for them. We may even care so deeply for them that we would gladly offer our own lives for theirs. But here's the difference between us and Moses: For us that work has already been done. The Bible says Jesus himself lives today "*to make intercession for us.*" That means Jesus stands in that gap and he pleads for us and he's already offered himself up for the forgiveness of not just our sin but the sin of the whole world. In a way, Jesus himself, at the cross, was blotted out from God's book so we and those we love could really be forgiven.

Conclusion

Prayer changes things. Through prayer God invites us to participate with him in shaping the future. Through prayer we're transformed into the kind of people who reflect God's own love and compassion. And in those times we're called to stand in the gap for those we love, the good news is now we know a perfect atonement has been made. The problem is no longer the need for sin to be paid for; the problem is our lack of faith that **it** has been paid for.

John wrote, "*My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate (one who pleads our case) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world*" (1 Jn 2:1-2).

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.