

The Power of Forgiveness

Whenever we baptize and receive a new member into this congregation we recite the Apostles' Creed. One of the truths we affirm is this: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." The great reformer Martin Luther said this phrase was the most important article in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." He called this truth the gate to heaven. He wrote, "If that is not true, what does it matter whether God is almighty or Jesus Christ was born and died and rose again? It is because these things have a bearing upon my forgiveness that they are important to me."

In many ways this phrase summarizes the entire Christian life. The Creed begins, of course, with God the Father, then Jesus Christ, and then the Holy Spirit. After which the Creed moves on to the nature of the church. But when we come to the realm of the Christian life, it's all summed up in seven words: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." Go to any Christian bookstore and you'll see a small shelf called "Bible Doctrine" or "Theology," and then you'll see a huge section called "The Christian Life." There you will find books on prayer, growing in faith, enduring hard times, spiritual gifts, spiritual growth, overcoming temptation, sharing your faith, and growing in holiness. Then there are books on marriage, books for men, books for women, books on the family, raising children, overcoming addiction, forgiving others, spiritual warfare, singleness, sex, health, the purpose-driven life, and the end times, to name only a few. To us the Christian life is all about these different categories. But the Creed contains this one thing essential to our faith: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." As if to say, "If your sins are forgiven, everything else is details. And if your sins are not forgiven, nothing else really matters."

Are your sins forgiven and do you know it? In answering that question let's look at Psalm 130:3-4, even as we pose three more questions to help us answer the first one.

1) Why do we need forgiveness?

"If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" Psalm 130:3. In the 20th century novelist Franz Kafka wrote in his diary that the problem with modern people is that they feel like sinners, yet independent of guilt. That is, people sense that something is amiss in their lives, or something is wrong, but continue to live without guilt. The reason is that more and more people have rid themselves of guilt by ignoring or destroying the rules that make them feel guilty.

So people do their best to ignore pesky things like the Ten Commandments, and any other rules of morality that are inconvenient. Guilt comes when you

break the rules and you know it. So the best way to get rid of guilt is to get rid of the rules ... or so we think. We do away with the rules, but the rules won't go away because they weren't written by humans in the first place. It's as if they are written in indelible ink. Even when you try to erase them, the image keeps coming back. They nag us because God's character is moral, and His character permeates the human psyche. True moral guilt may go out the window, but we still aren't happy, while shame, restlessness, and dissatisfaction stalk our days. Kafka was right—we know something is wrong with us, but we aren't sure what, and we don't know how to fix it.

Yet even the ancient Hebrews knew where to find help. Psalm 130 begins, *"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord."* The Psalm then tells how we lack the inner resources to solve our own problems, and so we will never fix ourselves. That flies in the face of Oprah and Dr. Phil and a host of other self-help gurus who say that the answer is within us. The Bible says the opposite is true: the problem is within us and the answer lies outside of us. As long as you think you can solve your own problems, you only get worse. When you finally say, "Lord, please help me. I can't do it on my own," then you're a good candidate for salvation.

So why don't we do it? We're afraid that if we own up to our own stupidity the Lord will hold it against us. Deep within there's a lurking fear of punishment. So we pretend that we didn't do what we know we did, or we rationalize, or make excuses - anything, to avoid feeling guilty. Our children learn to make excuses by watching us make excuses. It seems to be human nature to blame everyone except ourselves. But Psalm 130 liberates us from that self-destructive cycle. Verse 3 says that God doesn't keep a record of our sins. But in the Hebrew it literally says that God doesn't keep an eye on our sins. That is, he's not looking for a reason to punish us. Many people picture God as keeping score and so they try to live in a way that proves they are good. Others simply don't believe in sin, or that little sins don't really matter ... especially if done for a good cause. Still others believe there is sin in institutions and organizations but not really in persons (unless, of course, you disagree with them). But that's not the God of the Bible. He is the standard for goodness *and* always willing to forgive those who repent of their sin and cry out for mercy. This is crucial to understand: the God of the Bible offers forgiveness to all who recognize and repent of their "badness." Because He paid the price of our sins himself – in Jesus Christ – we can be free of the guilt and shame. Christianity makes a profound difference in the world and human life because it proclaims forgiveness ... as no other religion can. People need forgiveness.

We need forgiveness because we are sinners – even though we try to change the rules so we can dodge the guilt question. But since the rules can't really be changed, we become extremely messed up on the inside. Here is the bottom line: We need forgiveness because we cannot live without it. Without

forgiveness, we are hollow men and women, empty and conflicted on the inside. The one piece of good news is that God doesn't keep an eye on our sins. If he did, we'd all be condemned already.

2) What hope do we have of forgiveness?

A British writer once wrote: "There is no man who, if all his secret thoughts were made known, would not deserve hanging a dozen times a day." Only a dozen times? Look in the mirror and consider your own soul.

What are the chances that you can be forgiven for all your sins? Is it just a distant dream, some kind of long shot? And the Psalm answers: *"But with you there is forgiveness."* In other words, God makes a habit of forgiving sin. He does not delight in punishing our sin. He looks for chances to forgive us because forgiveness is in His nature.

That's a huge insight because it touches on how you see God. He is eager to forgive. He is ready to forgive. He wants to forgive you. Exodus 34:6-7 says of God, *"...the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."* If you are in the pit, you need to know that sin is real. You can't break the rules and get away with it forever. But whenever you are ready to come clean, the Lord is right there waiting for you. It's never easy to confess your sins, but listen to the invitation God makes in Isaiah 55:7 *"Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon."*

Okay, so maybe you don't like that word "wicked" or the word "evil." Maybe that sounds harsh to you. But that's God's description of the whole human race. That's what you and I are apart from God's grace. We are wicked and evil. Get used to it because that's the plain truth about all of us. Don't get hung up on the negative words and miss the invitation. Turn to the Lord and you will find mercy and pardon.

3) What happens when we are forgiven?

A. Gratitude When we confess our sins and then receive God's great forgiveness there ought to be a great sense of relief and a desire to show our appreciation to God. The last part of verse 4 says it this way: *"Therefore you are feared."* Another way to say it is, "Therefore we worship you." Once we are forgiven, that vague feeling of unease is removed. Our slate is wiped clean. The prison cell swings open and we walk out. We're truly free from the burden of guilt and shame. Sometimes that's the hardest part to accept.

Each week people cross the threshold of this sanctuary with a bit of fear. What if someone finds out all the sinful things I've done and all the sinful thoughts I have? It's the same thing that keeps many people from coming to God. That kind of shame or nagging guilt keeps us in bondage. The devil

whispers to us, “You’re no good. If people knew what you were really like, they’d have nothing to do with you. How can you call yourself a Christian and treat your wife that way? Your children that way? Your husband that way? You hypocrite.”

I sense there are many believers who have moments, days, when they doubt forgiveness ... their own sins haunt them and accuse them. But the best way to deal with Satan’s accusations is go back to the character of God: *“With you there is forgiveness.”* Have you ever worried about the day when you stand before the Lord? Will God project all our sins—even the sins of the mind—on some huge screen for the entire universe to see? How could we endure such a moment? And how could God ever welcome us into his kingdom after putting our depravity on public display? If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, if you gazed on our sins, who could stand? No one. We’d all be doomed and damned. But that’s the whole point of Psalm 130. We cry from the depths of shame and guilt, and God says, “Good news. With me there is forgiveness.” The Bible uses a number of images to describe how God deals with our sins:

- God blots out our sins as a thick cloud (Isaiah 44:22).
- God forgets our sins and remembers them no more (Jeremiah 31:34).
- God puts our sins behind his back (Isaiah 38:17).
- God buries our sins in the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19).
- God removes our sins as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12).
- God demonstrates His forgiveness on the Cross (Romans 5:8).

If you already know the Lord, let me suggest you apply it: Get on your knees and say, “Thank you, Jesus, for forgiving my sins.” Or stand up and say, “I bless the Lord for taking my sins away.” Don’t take your forgiveness for granted. Seek the Lord’s forgiveness every day. Be not afraid to admit it, that you’re a sinner and hypocrite, but thank God you’re forgiven and can do better.

B. Forgiving Others

If God can forgive all my sins I guess He can forgive the sins of others ... including those who do me wrong. *“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven”* Luke 6:37.

But Pastor what if that person never admits, never confesses doing wrong? That’s between that person and God. You can still forgive them for what’s between you two – if you don’t, you’ll carry your anger for a long time and it’ll burn into your soul.

But Pastor if I forgive that person who’s wronged me does that mean I have to be friends with them? Maybe. Maybe not. That depends on the nature of your relationship. You can forgive someone who’s wronged you, but then keep your distance. If you touch a hot stove and get burned you won’t touch it again until you’ve determined it’s no longer hot. I do believe, however, that many broken

relationships would be healed if people would forgive one another as God forgives us. What's that old saying? "The first to apologize is bravest. The first to forgive is the strongest. The first to forget is the happiest."

Jesus taught us to pray: *"Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation."* Luke 11:4.

God's Gaze

A long time ago God fixed his gaze on the cross of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. When we are honest enough to admit that we are wicked and evil, a stream of mercy flows out from the cross of Christ and our sins are covered by His blood. We discover in one shining moment that with God there is forgiveness. That's why Luther said this was the most important part of the Apostles' Creed. That's why this is the only part of the Christian life mentioned in the creed.

If you are full of vague uneasiness because of the way you've been living, if you are guilty and don't know what to do about it, if you are in the pit of despair, you don't have to stay there. Go straight to the cross and lay hold of Jesus Christ. Trust in him as your Lord and Savior.

"...put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.

He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins." Psalm 130:7-8.

So I come back to the question I asked earlier: Are your sins forgiven and do you know it? Sometimes Christians can hear a sermon like this and wonder what to do about it. If you're not sure just go to Christ and ask His forgiveness and assurance that your sins are forgiven. If God has forgiven your sins, rejoice and be exceedingly glad. Then go and forgive others. This is sharing the good news of the gospel.

"But with you [God] there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you." Psalm 130:4