

This is the 5<sup>th</sup> message in our series on The Lent Experience. I hope you have been participating in the Lent Experience which has provided us with a weekly challenge to prompt us to greater faith in Christ, as we move toward Easter. The first week we were challenged to fast (from food or entertainment or social media) in order to focus on God. The 2<sup>nd</sup> week it was silence and solitude. The 3<sup>rd</sup> week was about repentance; and last week the focus was almsgiving ... giving to those in need (above and beyond your regular support of the church).

Today my message is on our 5<sup>th</sup> Lenten challenge: forgiveness, which is closely related to repentance, which I spoke of two weeks ago.

### **NOTHING TO FORGIVE?**

We cannot talk about forgiveness without starting with our own need to be forgiven. It should be obvious to anyone that if there is nothing to confess, that if one does not believe they have any sin, then there is nothing to forgive. Yet anyone who is the least bit aware of the news will realize that people do terrible things. Read history if you want the complete story. No wonder Paul wrote: *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, Rom. 3:23*. You may agree with me about the world, but do you agree that you – along with me – are among those who have sinned, do sin, and will sin? G. K. Chesterton once responded to an essay contest in a London newspaper. The paper had posed the question: what is wrong with the world. Chesterton's answer was this: I am.

Let us be well aware that all the little and big things we do that are against God's standards are but downstream from the major flaw we all have: our sinful nature. Until we confess that one, God cannot get to work in earnest on the source of all our little and big sins. *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, 1 Jn. 1:8*. Hence the need to be forgiven.

### **YOU NEED TO BE FORGIVEN**

The world is messed up. We readily recognize this. The mess stems from our built-in sin. This sin is shown in how we ignore, offend, rebel against, speak about, disobey, and mistrust our Creator God. That built-in sin and all its manifestations is what keeps people away from God, and it deserves divine punishment. The wages of sin is death (separation from the Source of life). Jesus took onto himself the rottenness of the sin-sick souls of humanity and destroyed that sin on the Cross. He took the place of every human there. In exchange, we are all offered forgiveness and reconciliation with God. *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness, 1 Jn. 1:9*.

It's a personal transaction each person must make. Not, "Christ died for the world" (which is true); but "Christ died for me." Of his experience, John Wesley said this: "... an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." We each must personally confess our sinful nature, give it up to Christ, who gives us forgiveness and a new beginning. The Prodigal Son is probably the most well-known Bible parable about forgiveness. It is found in Luke 15. Jesus told this story to illustrate how God forgives those who return to Him... we need not fear God's wrath if we confess and repent ... His forgiveness is boundless love.

Forgiveness heals the soul. *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death, 2 Cor. 7:10*. God has given us the ability to feel guilt and shame. Humans are the only animals who can feel guilt or shame (or need to, for that matter). Satan wants to burden us with a load of guilt and shame, forever weighed down, bound to our sinful nature. God wants to free us from our sinful nature, so we can take on the nature of Christ. Confession begins that process. *Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did*

*not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." And you forgave the guilt of my sin, Psalm 32:5*

What have you to confess to God? Have you confessed that your very nature is fallen from God's glory and you need Jesus to save you? That's where it begins. Yet even after we've admitted Christ into our lives as Savior, we still commit sins. Do you have sins to confess? An unhealed relationship with someone? An addiction of some sort? The Bible reminds us of the need to confess sins. ... *when anyone becomes aware that they are guilty in any of these matters, they must confess in what way they have sinned.* Lev. 5:5. Think of the agony, or the lost time and joy you live through with unforgiven sin.

Maybe you remember the true story of Louie Zamperini, the USC track star, 1936 Olympian, who entered the US Army Air Corps in WWII. He was shot down and spent years as a POW in Japan, where he and others were brutally mistreated. He came home emotionally wounded and scarred; filled with explosive anger and hatred and wracked with nightmares of the "Bird," that guard who had so badly persecuted him. His life was a mess and his long-suffering wife, in desperation, took him to a Billy Graham revival in L.A. He resisted and became angry at the preacher's words and bolted out of the tent. But his wife persuaded him to return a second night. Then something wondrously strange happened. He felt words whisper from his swollen lips. It was a promise he had allowed himself to forget until just this instant: *If you will save me, I will serve you forever.* And then, standing under a circus tent on a clear night in downtown Los Angeles, Louie felt rain falling.

What was powerful for Louie now was not the suffering but the divine love that he believed had intervened to save him. In a single, silent moment, his rage, his fear, his humiliation and helplessness, had fallen away. That night in the revival tent, the sense of shame and powerlessness that had driven his need to hate the Bird had vanished. He felt something that he had never felt for his captor before. With a shiver of amazement, he realized that it was compassion. At that moment, something shifted sweetly inside him. It was forgiveness, beautiful and effortless and complete. The next morning he believed. He was a new creation.

Maybe you and I don't have such dramatic stories to tell, but **God's forgiveness** is a dramatic event in our lives for He **has the power to cleanse us of all darkness of soul.** I've kept this newspaper clipping since 1978 (obit of pilot who identified target of Hiroshima) ... Why have I kept this clipping? ... a reminder of the need for forgiveness, from God, and that whether we turn to God out of inspiration or out of desperation, He will receive us. ***Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered, Psalm 31:1.***

## **YOU NEED TO FORGIVE OTHERS**

The Lord's prayer says this: ***forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, Matt. 6:12.*** Peter asked Jesus, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times' Matt. 18:21-22. Then he told a story (Matt. 18:21-35) about a servant who was forgiven a great debt by his master. Yet this servant turned around and demanded and mistreated another who owed him much less. Jesus said that when the master found out he was angered saying, 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow servant, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers...

Jesus concludes by saying, *This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.* God expects us to forgive others.

Those who know they are sinners and know that they've been forgiven by God through Jesus Christ, are the ones who can truly forgive others who wrong them. ... *he who is forgiven little, loves little...* (Luke 7:48). Remember, our heavenly Father is the prodigal father who welcomes home with open arms his wayward son (who's done the worst things imaginable).

God has forgiven all who have been far away from Him, and now expects us to forgive others in the same way.

Sometimes we like to cling to our woundedness and resentment. It gives us some kind of perverse sense of righteousness, “I’m better than he/she is.” But we’re only playing into the devil’s hands. Remember? He wants to keep us burdened and focused on our hurt so that we do not experience the joy of God’s grace.

The first to apologize is the bravest – repentance. The first to forgive is the strongest – forgiveness. You can still forgive, even if they do not admit any guilt. The first to forget is the happiest – peace.

*Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.* James 5:16.

## **WE NEED TO RECONCILE**

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation... 2 Cor. 5:18.* Since we have been reconciled to God, there is a divine expectation that we will reconcile with one another. This ministry of reconciliation extends to those we’ve sinned against as well as those who have sinned against us (as much as it is in our power). When we forgive and bring harmony into the relationship, we are providing a witness to the world to the grace and power we know in Jesus Christ.

Who have you sinned against? Have you prayed to God for forgiveness? Have you asked that person to forgive you? Is there someone who has transgressed against you and you’re holding on to the hurt? Can you be reconciled?

*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you,* Eph. 4:32.

*Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you,* 2 Cor. 13:11.