

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

© Christ Community Church, Larry Kirk

Resources for Christ-Centered Discipleship

In our “Riches of Redemption” class last Wednesday night I told how God worked in my life to bring me to faith in Christ. I think it is interesting that the first thing the Spirit of God did was not so much that He showed me my guilt as it was that He showed me my emptiness. I found myself wanting something more in life, feeling as if something was missing. I began to think about the question of God. I found myself slowly, through a series of events and circumstances and insights, coming to believe in God more clearly.

I began to realize that what was missing in my life was a relationship with Him. It wasn't until I began to think about really connecting to God that the issue of forgiveness became a concern. Previously I had never struggled much with guilt or felt much regret. It was only when I really wanted to connect with God that I realized how much I needed forgiveness.

The Bible tells us that we all need forgiveness, even when we don't realize it. All of us fail in some way in life. We make bad decisions. We make mistakes. We fail morally. We lie. We cheat. We steal. We kill, with our hands or with our words. We're unfaithful. We're impatient. We're unreliable. We get angry. We get jealous. We get hooked. We get even. The Bible calls it sin. We haven't all done all of that, but we've all done some of that. It's the reason we need forgiveness, and it is the reason God's offer of forgiveness for our failures is such very good news.

I like the way one author describes the forgiveness clause in the Apostles' Creed. He writes:

When Christians confess together their belief in the forgiveness of sin, it is like pinching themselves to make sure that what they heard is not a dream. Absolution seems somehow illicit, frightening, and joyful all at once. Can this be? May God just forgive? Can a word of promise accomplish what is promised? Is it right? Is it binding? Lasting? Legal? Is it even possible for the God who knows all things and counts the hairs on our heads to forget something-

-especially something as obvious as our sins? (Steven Paulson in *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed*, edited by Roger E. Van Harn [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 240].)

Whether you are the kind of person who doesn't feel he needs forgiveness, or you're the kind of person who can hardly believe that you could receive forgiveness, the Bible has a lot to say to you. First of all the Bible says . .

All of Us Need the Forgiveness of God If We Want to Receive Eternal Salvation

We read this morning Ephesians 1:7, which says, "In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace."

Paul makes that statement in the context of praising God for His amazing grace. He goes on to speak of this same grace in the second chapter of Ephesians: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Eternal salvation is not the only thing the Bible is concerned with, but it is huge. It is where everything begins. We need eternal salvation, and in order to receive it we need the forgiveness of sins. What do you have to do to receive forgiveness? The Bible says . . .

The Only Thing You Can Do to Receive God's Forgiveness Is to Turn to Christ and Trust in Him

This week I read the testimony of a girl called Sherri. She was twenty-five years old when she put her faith in the Lord. A graduate student at Stanford University, she had been perpetually mired down in guilt, with an overriding sense of powerlessness and confusion. She was the daughter of a minister, but for four years she had been involved with one man after another, with drugs, and a totally dishonest and confused life. She writes:

Finally I became sick of my deceptions and began to reform myself. I went to work as a waitress and supported myself through the local university and graduated with honors, winning a fellowship to work on my doctorate at Stanford. But one thing I could not do: be at peace. Sins from the past really bothered me. But I couldn't figure out what to do about them or how to get Christ's help. So I prayed. It was pretty simple. I asked Jesus to show Himself to me. That was the beginning of my faith. Then I trusted that He died for me. Nothing more and without any big emotional thing I was set free. I knew He had taken away all my sins. There were no big feelings, but I knew my sins were all forgiven.

That simple testimony is like many that you have heard, and some of you could give a very similar testimony of how you received forgiveness through faith in Christ. The important thing to understand is what the Bible tells us: that when this girl said, "I knew my sins were forgiven," it was not merely a psychological experience but a spiritual reality. God truly grants the complete forgiveness of sins, His grace, and the assurance of forgiveness by His Holy Spirit to anyone and everyone who receives Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

The essence of that faith is dependent trust in Jesus as the one who died to completely pay the penalty for your sins, trusting Him to freely give you a forgiveness you cannot earn or deserve.

You have to trust in Christ alone. The Bible says that you cannot do a single thing, you cannot make the smallest contribution, to your own salvation. You cannot compensate or pay for your own sins by any amount of religion or human effort in any form.

That sounds like a negative thing to say, but there is a deep psychological and spiritual insight behind this. In our deepest heart we know that nothing but perfection can satisfy an infinitely perfect God. And we know we are not perfect. That's why when we try to feel all right about ourselves based on

comparing ourselves to others, or achieving certain goals in the world, or by trying to be religious or spiritual, our confidence is undercut by deep currents of uncertainty.

God offers us something better: the freedom to give up trying to please Him by being better and trying harder and instead receiving His gracious gift of complete forgiveness through faith in Christ.

When You Trust in Christ As Your Savior, God Forgives All Your Sins

Colossians 2:13 says, “[God] has made us alive together with Christ, having forgiven us all our transgressions.” Ephesians 1:7: “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.”

Suppose you are collecting money for a worthy cause. You go to a multimillionaire who listens and says, "Well, I think I can do something for you." He opens his wallet and gives you a ten-dollar bill. Perhaps you had hoped to receive a thousand dollars, but he gives you a ten. He has given out of his riches but not according to his riches. If he gave a large sum he would be giving according to his riches. When God gives forgiveness, He does not dig down into a pocket and bring out a little and say, "There's a little. Now make sure it lasts." He pours it out "according to the riches of His grace.”

A pastor got a call after midnight from a man who was desperate for counsel. He had committed what he said was a serious sin and pleaded with this pastor to come and talk with him. When the pastor came, the man kept on admitting what he had done. He kept on admitting his sinfulness, but he also kept on making all kinds of pledges so that God would forgive him.

Finally the pastor said, "Friend, you are wasting your breath. You can't keep the commitments you're making. And no matter what you promise, that doesn't change the sin you have committed. You have to entrust the problem of

your sin and your forgiveness to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only one who can and will forgive it, blot it out, and cleanse it."

The man finally seemed to understand and prayed, with the pastor, a prayer of faith, accepting God's forgiveness and receiving Christ as his Lord and Savior. The next day he called the pastor at his office. He said; "On the way home I turned on the car radio, found a Christian station, and heard 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.' I pulled over, rested my head on the dashboard, and cried. I finally understood. I can't earn forgiveness. I receive it as a gift. Because God loves me, He forgives me by His grace."

That man had understood that the forgiveness God gives is complete because it is "according to the riches of his grace."

You need to know the forgiveness of God the same way. You are not going to know the power of that forgiveness unless you intentionally and personally receive it. And you have to make sure that you *have* received it. Don't think that just because you come to church you are a Christian and you've really received the gift of forgiveness from God. It doesn't just grow on you like a barnacle or a beard or a few extra pounds. You have to pick it up and take it to heart personally, intentionally, and humbly. You have to very definitely turn to Christ and receive Him as *your* Savior, entrusting *your* salvation to him. Have you done that? Have you received forgiveness? He's offering it to you. Come and get it.

We all need it. All of us need the forgiveness of God if we want to receive eternal salvation. But forgiveness is not just about eternal salvation; it's also about our daily fellowship with God in this life.

We Must Continually Receive Forgiveness in Order to Enjoy Fellowship with God

The Bible not only teaches about a forgiveness that is complete, which we receive once and for all and that brings us eternal salvation. It also teaches about a forgiveness that is continual, which we need to constantly receive in order to live a life of fellowship, or closeness, with God.

We need to clearly distinguish between these two different kinds of forgiveness, or cleansing. Both are taught in the Scriptures.

The apostle John writes about a forgiveness that is complete because you have believed and are born again. Look at 1 John 2:12: "My little children, I write unto you because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake."

The same apostle writes about a forgiveness that is conditional and requires your continual confession. Look at 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

There is no contradiction here. The complete forgiveness that we already have has to do with our eternal salvation. The forgiveness that we continually need to receive through confession has to do with our daily walk with Christ, our daily experience of closeness to Him.

Imagine I'm a teenager, and my father is a judge in the local traffic court. One night I take his car without permission, go joyriding with my friends, crash into a tree, and total his car. I'm brought before him in court. As the judge, he can't just let me off, and he wouldn't want to, so he sentences me to a fine that I could never pay. But then he steps down from the bench and writes the check to pay my fine. I go free. The court is satisfied; the penalty has been paid. But later that night my father comes home, and then we have to talk. My relationship with the judge has been resolved, but my relationship to my father still needs to be renewed.

God has paid for our sins through the sacrifice of Christ. He offers us complete judicial forgiveness for the asking and receiving. But paternal forgiveness, the relational forgiveness that we need to receive daily to keep close to God as our Father--that requires honest talk and resolution. Because what we have with God the Father and with Christ and with the Holy Spirit, who indwells us, is a real relationship.

There was a place in the life of Jesus where both kinds of forgiveness were powerfully pictured. It is recorded in John 13, where Jesus washes the feet of the disciples. They are gathered in a borrowed, torch-lit upstairs room for their last supper. Jesus does an amazing thing. He gets up, wraps a towel around His waist, and begins to wash the disciples' feet.

In biblical times the sandals people wore were really just soles attached to the feet with leather straps. No one wore shoes or socks to keep his feet clean. The streets were not paved, and there were no sidewalks. It was dirty, dusty, and sometimes muddy. The streets were shared with horses, donkeys, goats, sheep, oxen, and camels. No matter how clean you were at the beginning of the day, when you went out and walked through that world your feet got filthy.

What a picture Jesus gives us. The God to whom the angels cry, "Holy, holy, holy," the creator of the sea and the skies, the mountains and stars, the master and creator of the universe, humbles Himself in human flesh, enters our world, and kneels at our feet and washes away our filth. In washing the disciples' feet, Jesus dramatically shows us the truth about His love and God's forgiveness, love that came down, down from heaven to earth, from the earth to the cross, from the cross to the grave.

John 13:6-8 reads: "He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus replied, 'You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' 'No,' said Peter, 'you shall never wash my

feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.' 'Then, Lord,' Simon Peter replied, 'not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!' Jesus answered, 'A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.' For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean."

As Jesus interacts with Peter, He's really teaching us that there are two kinds of cleansing, or forgiveness, that we all need. According to verse 10, one kind of cleansing is like a total bath, and the other is like washing your feet. What does this mean?

We All Need a Radical and Total Washing Away of Our Sins

Jesus talks about this in verse 10, where He says that when a person has had a bath, his whole body is clean. This is the total cleansing of forgiveness through faith in Him.

The Total Washing of a New Birth Gives Us Eternal Salvation, but Daily Fellowship with Christ Requires Continual Cleansing

In verse 10, Jesus says, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean." He is saying that through faith in Him you are spiritually clean. You have eternal salvation. That is not something that has to be repeated over and over again. But as you walk through this world, your feet get dirty. You pick up the dirt of the world, and you need your walk to be washed so that you can enjoy fellowship with Christ and closeness to Him.

The Bible says when you live with unconfessed sin, you are walking in the darkness instead of in the light. Your prayers are hindered by the sins you have not confessed. Your ability to receive, experience, and rejoice in the love and power of God at work in your life is diminished.

In the same way that Jesus could say to Peter, “You are completely clean, but you need to let Me wash your feet,” Christ can say to you, “You are completely forgiven once and for all through faith in Me, but you need to confess your sins to Me each and every day so that I can go on cleansing you and so that you can go on walking in fellowship with Me and experiencing My presence in your life.”

When, as the Apostles' Creed says, we confess faith in the forgiveness of sins, we are confessing faith in the complete forgiveness that brings us eternal life and which can never be lost or lessened, and we are also confessing faith in the ongoing forgiveness that keeps us right with God the Father and close to Him in our daily lives. We need to live in the light of both kinds of forgiveness.

You need to be able to face your own weakness and sin with a profound confidence in the complete forgiveness of God that brings the assurance of eternal life. Strong faith in complete forgiveness through faith in Christ will awaken all kinds of good impulses in your heart and spirit. It will awaken the joy of the Lord, which is your strength. It will free you up to love God and others without pretense and to be better men and women in your world, better moms and dads in your homes, and better brothers and sisters in the church.

Do you know how to fight the fight of faith in your own heart? Do you know how to find peace with God? You find it through understanding, receiving, and believing in the gift of complete forgiveness. You learn to speak the truth of Scripture to your heart. Ephesians 1:7 says: “In him, we have redemption, through His blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace.” So make that your meditation and your personal confession of faith. Say, “In Christ I have redemption, through His blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace.”

We need to be able to say that with confidence and yet also continually come to God with the honest ongoing daily confession of sin that keeps us close to Him.

Yes, it is humbling to have to confess your sins over and over again throughout the day, even for years and years after you first came to Christ. But that is what we have to do if we want to have continual fellowship with Him and an ongoing closeness to God.

I find that once I quit making excuses and begin being honest in confession about even one sin, Christ will often gently begin to show me more sins and deeper sins to be confessed and faced and brought to Him for cleansing. Continual renewal in our hearts, growth in grace, and fellowship with Christ require that we admit the truth, the whole truth, about ourselves, honestly confess our sins, and ask Christ to go on cleansing us by His grace.

Don't think that the way to deal with sin is to deny it or repress it or excuse it or compensate for it. God says the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all our sins. So make confession of sin a daily spiritual discipline. Ask God to show you areas in your life that you may have ignored or denied. Look not only at the obvious sins but at the deeper sins of the heart.

Confess the big sin that lies deep beneath all the other sins, the sin of not fully trusting Christ and finding in His love the source of your life, the sin of turning from Him to try to find your life in other places or people or circumstances.

When God speaks of forgiveness in the Scriptures, He is showing you how much He wants you to be able to live in relationship with Him. He's calling you back to Himself. Come to Him and keep coming to Him and walking with Him in the freedom of forgiveness.