

Can God Forgive Me?

THE NEED FOR FORGIVENESS

All people need forgiveness. In our relationships with others, every one of us has experienced times when we hurt somebody by something we did or did not do. At those times, when our behavior has caused pain in another person's heart, we need to be "let off the hook," to be released from the anger or the punishment that our actions deserve.

The same is true with us and God. All of us live in relationship to the God who made heaven and earth...and us! We may resist or even deny that relationship, but that doesn't change the fact that we are children of God just the same. The Apostle Paul once stood before a gathering of Greek philosophers and said, "*For in him we live and move and have our being.*" *As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring"* (Acts 17:28).

On another occasion, in writing to the Christians in first century Rome, he explained that we are all sinners: "*...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...*" (Romans 3:23).

Today, it is common for people to deal with their sin problem in a number of counterproductive ways:

- Some deny the One against whom they have sinned, thinking that if they can get rid of God they can get rid of their guilt.
- Some justify their sin, hoping that if they can explain it away by blaming it on genetics, family, or society ("My body, my parents, or my culture made me do it!") then they are left without any true guilt.
- Some laugh at sin (Just listen to the laugh track on any recent sitcom!) and scoff at the notion that we have any moral responsibility.
- Some attempt to numb the pain of their sin, hoping to stay busy enough, entertained enough or drunk enough to make them oblivious to the desperate need they have for forgiveness.

Obviously, these foolish approaches to sin are futile and leave us, at the end of the day, still in need of forgiveness.

BUT CAN GOD FORGIVE MY SIN?

The Gospel is the good news that God is willing to forgive our sins because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Listen to the way the Bible repeats this message over and over:

"...forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations..." (Luke 24:47).

"The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men" (Titus 2:11).

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Yet, some have a problem with this wonderful news. You may doubt that it is true in your case. You have little trouble believing God can forgive other people, but you can't bring yourself to believe he can forgive you. You think that because God knows your heart, your secret thoughts, your troubling doubts and your hidden fantasies, there is no way he will forgive you. Yet, the Bible makes very clear that all of this is a devil's lie; God is waiting and ready to forgive you!

HE FORGAVE THEM

Perhaps the best way to see that God can forgive you is to look at the way God has forgiven others.

The Samaritan Woman (John 4:1-42)

Jesus stopped by a well one day and met a woman who had come to draw water. In a time and place where Jews and Samaritans disdained each other and where women were ignored in spiritual matters, Jesus entered into a deeply spiritual conversation with this woman who had been married five times and who was now living with someone else's husband! By the end of this encounter, the woman had found much more than the physical water she had come to draw at the well; she had found the “living water” of God's love and forgiveness in Jesus.

Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10)

One of Jesus' final stops on his trip to Jerusalem where he would die on the Cross was in the ancient city of Jericho. There, surrounded by adoring crowds, Jesus looked up in a tree and called out the name of Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector. Without a doubt, Zacchaeus was the most hated man in Jericho. The Jews despised those who collaborated with the Romans and squeezed tax money out of their own countrymen. In Zacchaeus' wealth they saw their own poverty. Yet, in calling this little man out of a tree and going home to eat with him that day, Jesus demonstrated to everyone in Jericho the scope of God's love. If God was willing to forgive the most hated man in Jericho, then God must surely be willing to forgive them!

Peter (John 18:15-27; 21:1-23)

The Apostle Peter was proud, impetuous and over-confident. He boldly bragged that even if everyone else left Jesus when trouble came, he could be counted on to remain (13:37). However, when Jesus was carried off for trial on the night before his crucifixion, Peter fled like everyone else. Later in the evening, as he waited in the courtyard near the place where Jesus was being questioned and abused, Peter was asked three different times if he was with Jesus. Each time, he denied that he had any connection with him. Surely such a cowardly failure could never be forgiven.

However, following the death and resurrection of Jesus, several of the disciples were one day fishing at the Sea of Tiberias when Jesus appeared to them on the seashore. After the men had

eaten a breakfast of bread and fish, Jesus turned to Peter and asked him three times, “Do you love me?” When Peter, deeply wounded by his own guilt and shame, answered, “Yes,” Jesus responded, “Feed my sheep.” It was a way of saying “You are forgiven, and I have a job for you.”

The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

One day when Jesus was being criticized for the way he welcomed sinners and even ate with them (15:1-2), he told his detractors a story to illustrate how God views those who desperately need forgiveness. It was a parable about a young man who demanded to receive his inheritance early so he could spend it as he wished. When his father consented to do just that, the boy went far away and “squandered his wealth in wild living” (13). In doing this, the young man rejected his father, his people, his training and his God. Finally, his money ran out, and the party was over. Survival became his greatest concern. Desperate to eat, he got a job feeding pigs, animals the Jews regarded as “unclean.” At times he was so hungry that he even envied the swine for the food they ate.

Then one day the boy came to his senses and headed home. Not knowing how he would be received, he practiced a speech as he walked: *Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men* (18-19).

However, he was in for the shock of his life. As he neared his home, his father saw him coming. The older man ran out to meet his son, throwing his arms around him and kissing him. He called to his servants and said, *“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found”* (22-24).

In this beautiful story of forgiveness, Jesus was showing us the way God longs to forgive us when we “come back home.”

The Apostle Paul (1 Timothy 1:12-16)

The Apostle Paul was his own best sermon illustration of forgiveness. If anyone doubted that God could forgive him, Paul could simply point to himself. Earlier in life he had persecuted Christians “to their death” (Acts 22:4) and had said horrible things about Jesus. Later, after God had confronted him on the road to Damascus, Paul was taught the gospel and became a Christian himself. However, Paul never forgot how much he had been forgiven. Near the end of his life, he wrote the following words to a young friend:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: *“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst”* (1 Timothy 1:15).

In other words, the Apostle Paul says to us all, “If God can forgive ME, he can certainly forgive YOU!

NOT BECAUSE WE DESERVE IT

So, are you convinced that God is willing and ready to forgive you? If not, especially after

looking at all these examples, it has to be because you are still thinking you have to deserve forgiveness before you can be forgiven. This is probably to be expected. After all, that is often the way it is in human relationships. However, with God it is different. He forgives, not because we deserve his forgiveness, but because it is his nature to want to forgive us.

“When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy” (Titus 3:4).

So, let’s summarize what we have studied:

- You and I are sinners.
- Our guilt before God is real.
- God stands ready, waiting and longing to forgive us!

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