

# Forgiveness

MANY people have very mixed-up ideas about what is meant by 'sin'. To some people, not all wrongdoing is sin. Very often sin is only sin when it does harm to someone else. For example, they may consider it a sin to rob somebody with violence, but feel it is not a sin to defraud the taxman. There are those who will see some sexual practices to be sin, but not something like pride.

There are also those who do not recognise sin at all. They call it indiscretion, ignorance, selfishness – but not sin. Someone who does not believe in God will not understand sin. Only when you admit the existence of God are you confronted with the existence of sin. If God had not spoken to us, we might well be indifferent about sin – but God has spoken to us. He has preserved His word in the Bible.

## Missing the Mark

The basic meaning of the Greek word which New Testament writers use for 'sin' is the idea of 'missing the mark'. You might fire an arrow and miss the target. You might have an ideal to attain to, but you fall short. In the Bible, God has set the mark and He has revealed the ideal.

God has revealed the ideal in the character of Jesus Christ, and I believe that anyone who has caught a glimpse of it, if they are honest, will know that they have fallen far short of it. Whether they have tried to hit

the mark or not, they will know that they have missed it. When we accept this, we are ready to consider forgiveness.

The forgiveness of sins is something which is right at the centre of the Christian faith. The Bible teaches it clearly. The apostle Paul, speaking of Jesus Christ writes, "*in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins*" (Colossians 1:14).

## The Paradox of Forgiveness

We must understand that God is just. Being 'just' means showing by your actions what is right and true. God is just, or 'righteous'; He always shows things as they are, and He is always true. Because He is righteous, He cannot act unrighteously. Because He is true, He cannot act falsely.

Dwell for a moment now upon the meaning of the word 'forgive'. Primarily it means



to set the prisoner free from prison. To pardon. To treat the offence as though it had never been committed.

So we have a problem. How can God, who must always be true, regard sin as not being committed when it has been committed? How can God be just and yet at the same time acquit people of their guilt?

It is important to understand this because there are those who say there is no problem with God forgiving sins, simply because 'God is love'. But please understand what love is. The love of God is not the sentimental softness which says, "Oh never mind the reality, let's all be friends". At the centre of the love of God there is justice and purity and righteousness. So, forgiving sin means not only acquitting the sinner but putting an end to the sin.

In people with a consciousness of sin, there is heartache and anguish and a real crying out for someone to lift the burden of a great weight on the heart and mind. If forgiveness was just a matter of God saying "Oh never mind, just say no more about it" – would this elicit a heart-felt response from us? Before we come to the solution, there is just one more thing we must understand: humans are inevitably sinners.

## Human Nature

Romans 3:10–18 paints a portrait of you and me. Our nature is shot through with elements which are in active rebellion against God. We are biased towards sin

and away from God. This kind of nature we inherited from our first ancestor Adam. When Adam was created, he was made very good. His nature was balanced. He had the natural appetites of human nature, but they were under control. Over all his desires there was the influence of God.

But he fell under temptation. He chose sin and threw off the influence of God. He became a slave to his own desires. That is what sin really is: it is satisfying the natural desires in the wrong way.

It is right to satisfy hunger but not by robbing another man's larder. Sexual relationship is right, but not by taking another man's wife. In the first example the right way is by work and in the second the right way is by marriage. These examples are crude but illustrate the point. Sin is satisfying the natural appetites outside the realm of God's law.

This innate tendency in us has been inherited from Adam. We have all suffered from his first failure – we have shared in his weakened nature. We are born sinful and we act in a sinful way. We are sin's slaves. We cannot get rid of the tyrant ourselves.

This is now the whole problem in view – it shows us that to be forgiven is to remove not only the estrangement from God but also the effect.

## Redemption

Forgiveness is parallel with 'redemption', and redemption means being brought out of prison or slavery. The Bible reveals

the solution – God’s son. Though born of a virgin on earth, Jesus Christ was unmistakably the son of God. He possessed all our natural appetites and was tempted in all the ways we are tempted. He was tempted to sin – tempted to satisfy his desires outside the realm of God’s law. But he never once failed.

Where Adam failed, Jesus triumphed. He met sin face-to-face, and overcame it. Sin mastered everyone else, but for the first time in the history of the world, sin was mastered by Jesus.

The men of his day hated his goodness. His life rebuked their wickedness. Because he was pure and true, he awakened against himself the rage of impurity and falsehood. They could not tolerate him – and so they had to get rid of him. It was sin which rose against him. But never once did he give way to it. He triumphed over it. The power of sin crucified him and his blood was shed but never once did it conquer him.

The Bible reveals to us a powerful message:

*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them (2 Corinthians 5:19).*

Jesus Christ was a sacrifice – he sacrificed himself in order to defeat sin. God was prepared to expose His holy child to all the bitterness and brutality of sin in order to triumph over it. It was an expression of the amazing love of God.

*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son (John 3:16).*

In Philippians 2:5–11, the apostle Paul writes about the sacrifice of Christ: he was “obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross”. Obedience to God is the opposite of sin. Jesus was victorious over sin even to the extent of dying on the cross rather than be mastered by it.

## The Solution to the Paradox

Now the solution for the problem of our sin can be stated simply and profoundly. God is prepared to count His son’s victory to be our victory, if we will have it so. God is able to be just and at the same time to forgive the person who believes in Jesus. This is because sin has been beaten by our representative, Jesus the perfect man.

The vital thing is that we acknowledge him as our representative – and those who do so are counted as forgiven. In Christ, his triumph is their triumph. It is vital therefore to be ‘in Christ’. If, either through neglect or indifference or through rebellion we are not ‘in Christ’, we miss the mark and miss the pardon.

The Bible is quite emphatic on how this is to be achieved. It is by faith in God’s promises and baptism into Christ. The Apostle Paul says categorically:

*Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (Romans 6:3).*

Nothing could be plainer. By baptism we make his victory our victory. That is why the apostle says:

*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins (Ephesians 1:7).*

When Paul was converted, he was told:

*Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins (Acts 22: 16).*

This is the masterpiece of the Gospel. This is divine love which excels all other love. And can you see that not only is it loving, but it is also lovingly logical?

Just as Adam was our representative in the realm of sin – Christ becomes our representative in the realm of righteousness. Because of Adam’s failure we all were made sinners, so because of Christ’s victory we can be acquitted from sin and made righteous. And the making righteous is not only a matter of status, it is in fact a matter of practical goodness. That indeed is a very important reason why we need Jesus – to produce the transformation of our mind and heart – to begin to hate evil and love goodness. Someone who is pardoned is not acquitted and ready to sin

wilfully again, they are ready to quit sinning and seek goodness.

## The New Life

To those who are in Christ, the power of self is confronted with the forces of the Gospel and the power of a new life. Not suddenly, but gradually, the new life becomes dominant. Slowness is not failure. The New Testament calls it fruit (Galatians 5:22) – the ‘*fruit of the spirit*’, and fruit grows slowly but wonderfully and divinely.

The apostle Paul once wrote, “*Christ lives in me*” (Galatians 2:20). He meant that the life of Christ was being shown in his own life.

This is the call and the power of the Gospel: “*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 2:5).

It does not mean that after you are baptised you will not sin again, but it does mean that you can be forgiven. It does not mean that you will not stumble, but when you do, you will not be alone in the

recovery. It does not mean that you will never have to face hard decisions, but it does mean that you will never have to face them unaided. Jesus Christ will be your guide, saviour and king, now and hereafter. That is why we all need Jesus. He alone can pardon, purify and empower.

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