



Forgiveness

"To err is human, to forgive divine." This saying has become so famous that probably most people think it comes from the Bible. Actually, it came from the pen of the famous English poet Alexander Pope (1688-1744). Pope's pithy saying gives us an excellent introduction to the topic of forgiveness. As humans we do indeed err. We wrong other people, even if unintentionally. We sin against God. We have limitations in our judgment and perspective. If mistakes and limitations and sin mark the human condition, then Alexander Pope aptly chose forgiveness as the signature of God. God has a remedy for the human problem of sin. It's called forgiveness.

We can compare forgiveness to the legal practice of pardoning. In granting a pardon, whoever does the pardoning (a judge or government) does not call the person innocent. The crime stands, but the punishment is lifted. For instance, a government might set a political prisoner free - a person who committed a crime against the country. He might get a pardon for reasons of goodwill. He's still a criminal, but he goes free. Likewise, when God forgives our sins, we are still sinners, but we don't receive the penalty for the sin. Unlike the legal pardon, however, God's forgiveness has another dimension. A legal authority can suspend the penalty against someone, but the legal authority doesn't make any attempt to change the verdict itself. God goes beyond just lifting the just punishment for our sins. He can declare us pure and innocent. He can - and will - even solve the problem of the sinful human nature that gets us into so much trouble. This forgiveness far exceeds human forgiveness. It is more wonderful than anything else we can have on earth. How do we get it? How does it work? How does God forgive our sins? If we all knew how much God's forgiveness means to us, we would all want it very much. We really do want to know the answers to these questions. So let's start with the basics.

OUR NEED FOR GOD'S FORGIVENESS

As is the case in approaching many problems, the most important first step comes in stating the problem accurately. In our consideration of forgiveness, we need to have an accurate assessment of our need for forgiveness. What do we need forgiveness for? Does everyone need forgiveness? What about good people? What about people who lead holy lives - do they need forgiveness, too?

The answer to these questions might not please us at first. However, when we think further, we realise that the truth about ourselves, while not very flattering, gives us a refreshing and liberating perspective on life. We come to realise that all of us--rich or poor, young or old, have an enormous need for forgiveness. It doesn't make any difference how good or how bad a life we have led. We all desperately need forgiveness. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." That's a quote from the Bible, from Paul's letter to the Romans (Romans 3:23). When we realise the divine standard of a perfect loving all-knowing God, we see how needful we are. No one comes close to God. We can't because we are human. No matter how many good deeds and acts of love we do for other people, we still remain mortal sinners. If everyone sins, does that mean that it's okay to sin? If we all fall short of the glory of God, why even try to do good? What's the point? If we all need forgiveness, and we can't do enough good to change our innate humanity, what's the point of doing good at all?

People have asked these questions for centuries. Paul also dealt with them in his letter to the Romans. We can answer these questions several ways. For now, we will summarise quickly and get back to our main subject. We still strive to do good because that's how we demonstrate our love for God. We love God because he has provided forgiveness for us. Because he forgives us, we accept his forgiveness and lead lives of purity to show our love for him. Sin hurts people. We would not want to hurt anyone, ourselves included. So we always want to do the right thing and have godly attitudes and values. Even so, we can't make ourselves so good that we don't need forgiveness. Everyone needs forgiveness.

WHAT IS SIN?

Sin is a Bible word that refers to people disobeying God. Sometimes we think of sin as awful things that people do to each other, like steal and lie. Preachers at some churches warn against sins like drunkenness, adultery, and cheating. Sin includes all these, and much more. Many think of sin only as something that harms other people, but the word of God goes much further than that. Jesus taught that even the thought of doing harm or evil was also sin. God requires that we have pure minds as well as pure deeds. In other words, if it is sinful to harm someone, it is also a sin to want to harm someone. Just thinking about doing a sin, even if we never actually commit the deed, is still a sin. The standard of "Does it hurt someone?" has no Biblical basis. We aren't free to choose evil even if we think we aren't hurting anyone.

For instance, some people think that if two people both agree to have sex before they are married, then that's not sin. No one is getting hurt, they would argue, if both the man and the woman agree to the arrangement. It's a personal expression of their mutual love for each other, they say. God tells us otherwise, and God is much smarter than we are. God knows that we are happier and more faithful to each other as spouses when we save our sexual acts until we marry. As to the idea that no one is getting hurt, maybe it doesn't seem so directly, but indirectly, there's a lot of harm going on. When unmarried

people have sex outside of marriage they approve of that for themselves, and they make it look "okay" for others to do the same. But think of how much disease is transmitted this way, and how many unwanted pregnancies occur, which lead to much tragedy and heartache. While this pamphlet is about forgiveness, and not about the sanctity of marriage, we use this example to show that God has a different standard than we do when it comes to measuring sin.

Sin occurs when people do things against God's principles, and also when we think about doing these things. However, there's still more to sin. Sin also happens when we don't do what we ought to do. We call such sins "sins of omission," referring to the lack of doing good. When we have an opportunity to good, and we don't, that's a sin of omission. If we could help someone out with a problem and we don't, that's a sin. If we have some special service to offer God, and we fail to do so, we have sinned. We sin when we don't thank God for all his blessings to us. We sin when we don't think of others' needs. We sin when we only look at our side of a dispute, and don't try to see the other person's point of view. We are so involved in meeting our own needs and desires that we usually fail to notice the needs of others. This is selfishness, and this is a great sin also. We can avoid doing horrible things to people, like killing or stealing, and we can lead lives free from vices, but we can still sin greatly if we don't see the needs of others and the blessings of God in our lives. We can say that sins of omission are usually a much worse problem than our sins of commission. When we don't do the good we ought to, we need forgiveness as much as if we had committed a heinous crime.

GUILT AND A MERCIFUL GOD

Suppose you wronged someone. Maybe you got angry at someone at work. Maybe you accidentally damaged something belonging to your neighbour. Maybe you had a weak moment, a needy time, and you lied about your income to the government tax collectors. We all know what happens if we have any conscience at all; sooner or later, the recognition of something wrong we have done leads to a very unpleasant feeling called guilt. If you have ever felt guilty, or ashamed of something you did, you know how bad this feels. Certainly you would like a remedy for that feeling, wouldn't you?

Fortunately, God offers a way for us to find relief from the guilt of our sins. God will remove our guilt by pardoning us and forgiving our sins. If you have ever wronged someone and then cleared the air by asking for their forgiveness, you have experienced the power of forgiveness, at least at a human level. When you admit your error and then request forgiveness, you have done the right thing to restore the relationship. Now the offended person can complete the restoration by saying, "I forgive you." Forgiveness returns harmony and love to damaged relationships. It has wonderful power between people, and it has even more power when we ask God to forgive our sins. God has a simple and elegant plan to remove the guilt of our sins. The Bible frequently describes God as merciful and forgiving; Psalm 103 is a good example. The Bible says that God desires people to confess their sins to him so he can forgive those sins. God very much wants people to live free from the burden and guilt of sin. He wants us to know that we have forgiveness of our sins, and he wants us to live lives that honour and reflect his loving and merciful nature, so that we don't have a continual burden of sin in our lives. Nevertheless, even the most charitable and saintly person knows that his or her character is still human, and needs God's forgiveness.

HOW WE GET GOD'S FORGIVENESS?

God's forgiveness comes to us through an amazing principle called "grace." We can describe grace as "a free gift or unmerited favour." God's grace gives us a wonderful free gift, despite our complete undeservedness. We can't earn God's forgiveness, and this is such an important topic that we will discuss it a few paragraphs below. For now, let's consider God's grace. It comes as a free gift, and that makes it very special. Let's look at an illustration of grace. If you offer your child a birthday present only if her behaviour has pleased you, is this really a gift? Sure, you chose it and bought it and gave it, but it had a condition attached. If she's a "good little girl," she gets the gift. If she's a naughty girl, then no gift. So the child really makes the decision--not you. The gift comes with strings attached. We call this a reward, or payoff, rather than a gift.

But suppose you buy a gift for your child simply because you love her. Sometimes she does sweet things, and sometimes she's a naughty little girl, but you give her a nice gift. No strings attached. You just gave it to her simply because you love her. Now that's a free gift. God's forgiveness is like the free gift. He just gives it to us, with nothing we can do to earn it. There is something unusual about this gift, though. God gives us this gift whenever we ask for it! Who ever heard of a child asking a parent for a gift and the parent saying, "Oh, of course, sure - I'll give you all you want." What parent would give a child a gift whenever he asked for it, no matter how often? This sounds unusual, and it makes God's gift of forgiveness something very special. This is a gift that God wants us to ask for, and a gift he wants us to have as often as we ask!

HOW CAN WE THANK GOD FOR HIS GIFT?

Even though we can't do anything to earn God's forgiveness, he does want us to appreciate his gift. In fact, the measure of our appreciation shows God--and us-- if we really understand what he has done for us. Going back to our earlier example, imagine that you did give your little girl something really special, and she didn't even say thank you. Would you think that maybe she didn't appreciate either the value of your gift or your love for her? Would you want to give her another gift? What if she continually failed to acknowledge your gift, or to return your love? You'd probably feel pretty disappointed. The Bible has an account of a similar situation. The Gospel writer Luke tells about a time when Jesus went to a village and healed ten men who had leprosy. They had asked Jesus to have pity on them.

Jesus told them to go the temple and show themselves to the priests (those who would decide if they still had leprosy). On their way to the temple, they were all healed. But only one of them came back to Jesus to thank him. That healed leper praised God and "threw himself at Jesus' feet, thanking him." Jesus said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." (Luke 17:19)

What happened to the other nine? Did their leprosy come back? We don't know, but the point of the story is that God's gift of healing only really meant something to one of them. Maybe the others stayed healthy, but they didn't have an attitude of thankfulness that pleased God. God's only measure of our acceptance of his forgiveness comes from how we live our lives after receiving his forgiveness. While we can't earn forgiveness, we can fail to show we appreciate God's forgiveness. In that case, did we really ask for forgiveness in the first place? Did we really have the faith to believe that God's forgiveness, while a free gift, comes only to those who ask for it in true faith?

God won't give us his gifts if we ask for them thinking we can misuse them. We misuse forgiveness if we esteem it as only a quick way to get right with God - so we can sin again! God won't accept that attitude. God's free gift comes to people who truly want to live holy lives, but they know that because of their human nature they simply can't. When we confess our limitations and sins to God, he's ready and quick to bless us with forgiveness. And if God forgives our sins, we have a clean conscience. We can forgive ourselves and release the guilt that makes our lives miserable.

WHAT DO I NEED TO DO SO THAT GOD WILL FORGIVE MY SINS?

At one level, the answer to this question comes as simply as saying, "Ask him." If you confess your sins to God, he will forgive them. The Bible tells us that in several places. One passage says this: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have no sin, we make him out to be a liar, and his word has no place in us." (1 John 1:8-10). When the writer, John the Apostle, tells us that if we claim not to need God's forgiveness, we have lied, and we have also made it seem like God is a liar, because God said that we are all sinful. On the other hand, if we recognise the truth about our sinful lives and confess our sins, God will forgive them. So the first step in finding forgiveness is acknowledging our need. The second step is asking God for forgiveness. We call this confession. The third step is leading a life that shows our appreciation of his love for us. There's one more important point about forgiveness, and we'll talk about that right now. It's called baptism.

THE PLACE OF BAPTISM IN FORGIVENESS

It seems natural that if we want something valuable, we should pay for it. Thus, many religions throughout the world have sacred rituals to please God. They believe that by doing these rituals, they have done what God asked, and now God "owes" them something. They believe that their ritual observance has entitled them to God's blessing. If they don't do the ritual, then God will be angry with them and punish them. Some religions have ritual washing and some have pilgrimages to please God. Other acts of penitence include periods of fasting, animal sacrifices, and alms given to the poor. At one time the Catholic church sold indulgences by which people could literally pay money to the church to have certain sins removed. However, we can do nothing to earn God's forgiveness.

That means we can't do any act of penance that requires God to forgive us. As humans, we can never put God in our debt. The Bible has a substantially different view than the natural, human view. The Bible presents God as loving and merciful. He wants to give us forgiveness if we would just ask. We can't buy or earn this forgiveness by doing any sort of ritual deed or good works. He's not impressed with food sacrifices. He's not bought off with any trivial good work we might do once, just to get his approval. God wants our hearts and our love. He wants us, and he wants us to be pure and holy, like his son, Jesus. He wants us to be in his Kingdom, which he will establish on Earth when Jesus returns. He offers us so much, we couldn't possibly do anything to earn the great gift of forgiveness.

If God forgives our sins, we will have eternal life in his kingdom. If he doesn't forgive our sins, we will die, and that will be the end of us. We need his forgiveness if we want to live forever with Jesus in the Kingdom of God. While we have said that we can do nothing to buy or earn such a great gift, we nonetheless have to give our hearts and lives to God to show that we appreciate the depth of his love for us. Jesus died on the cross so that we can have our sins forgiven—that's a huge gift of love. Do we appreciate what God's own son did for us? The way we show our love for God is to commit our lives to him.

When we ask for forgiveness, we recognise the truth about our lives. As we said above, it's not a pleasant truth, but it's a truth that sets us on the right track. It's a truth that gives us freedom from our sins. Shortly after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, a community of people arose who all believed firmly in God's grace. This community comprised the first Christian church. When people heard the message of God's grace, they were cut to the heart. They knew they needed forgiveness, and they wanted God's grace upon them. They committed their lives to God. They started this commitment with a ritual known as Christian baptism.

Now this baptism is not at all like the ritual cleansings or washings of some religions. Christian baptism is not an act one does to earn God's favor. It's not a special act of penitence or devotion that one does once a year. Baptism (immersion in water) is a way of signifying our understanding of God's righteousness. God has declared us sinners, worthy of death. He's willing to suspend that sentence—to pardon us—and give us eternal life.

In baptism, we undergo a symbolic burial and resurrection with Christ. By proclaiming our belief in God's plan for the forgiveness of our sins in Christ, we become part of God's family. The value of baptism is no more than the understanding and commitment we put into it. It's not an act to earn credit with God, it's an act to mark our commitment and appreciation of God's great gift. By identifying with the death and resurrection of Jesus, we become part of God's family. We have shown God that we are eager to live a life of appreciation for his love.

We know that we are still human, and we will still sin. But now we have a way of forgiveness, for we have sought for the forgiveness that God provides for us through Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross.

THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST

Christ's death has much to do with the forgiveness of our sins. The crucifixion of Jesus wrought the death of a holy and pure man who had never sinned. God raised him from the dead because his sinless life meant that the "grave could not hold him" (Acts 2:24). "The wages of sin is death," says the Bible (Romans 6:23), "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord." Jesus did nothing to deserve death. But he died for our sins, that we would have an avenue of forgiveness (Isaiah 53: 5,6; I Cor. 15:3).

Baptism for the forgiveness of sins marks our entry into God's family, and it marks the beginning of our commitment to live in appreciation of God's love. We read accounts of many people who took this step when Christianity first started. Peter, one of the leading apostles who carried on the work of Christ, said, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, for the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 2:38).

A CHANCE FOR US

God hasn't changed, and his plan hasn't changed. We still need forgiveness, and it's still abundantly available in Christ. If we confess our sins, he will forgive. Confession means we fully acknowledge our sinful nature, the sins we commit, the sins of our mind, the sins of omission and the sins of commission. That's quite a bit, but God will put them all aside if we have faith in his word, and in the cleansing of sin provided through the sacrificial death of Jesus. No sin is too great for God to forgive. The Bible records God's forgiveness of, thieves, and adulterers. No matter who you are or what you have done, God will accept your sincere and faithful repentance. So we have message to you as Peter had to his audience: "Repent and be baptized for the remission of your sins".

DAVID LEVIN