

Title: "The Forgiveness of Sin"
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Scripture: Gal. 2:15-21
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"The Forgiveness of Sins"

Many of you know of Martin Luther, that he is credited with starting the Protestant reformation, where the church "protested" various Roman Catholic doctrines and practices, and returned to the Scriptures, and recovered in large measure the Biblical shape of Christianity.

There are many interesting stories about Luther, and he is always good for sarcastic or a, sort of, borderline offensive quote. One of my favorite stories about Luther comes from his time in the Augustinian monastery. Having joined the Augustinian monastery and devoted himself fully to learning and practicing Roman Catholic ritual, finally came the occasion to preside over his first Mass. Every priest is nervous when they recite the Mass for the first time, but Luther when he hit the words: "We offer unto Thee, the living, the true, the eternal God" he froze. Later he explained what he was thinking and feeling in that moment:

"At these words I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, 'With what tongue shall I address such majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up my mine eyes or raise my hands to the Divine Majesty? . . . For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal and true God.'"¹

Luther was utterly consumed with the question: how can a sinner stand before an incomprehensibly holy, righteous, God? The Roman Catholic Church, and his experience as a monk had taught him: try harder, do more good works, and so on.

But Luther eventually found his answer, the only true answer, in the Scriptures, in texts like the one we have before us. He found the Scriptural

¹ From Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon 1950) on Susan Verstraete, *By Faith Alone: The Conversion of Martin Luther* accessed May 22, 2015 at <http://www.ccwtoday.org/article/by-faith-alone-the-conversion-of-martin-luther/>

description and basis for the next article of the creed: I believe...in the forgiveness of sins.” The article, and more specifically this text teaches us:

Forgiveness of sins is only found through faith in Christ, and now we must live in the power of God’s forgiveness.

Now, Paul is writing to people, to churches, that, though they are made up of diverse people, but share a similar outlook on the world. One component of that worldview is that they fall short of God’s glory, and they are already asking the question “How can I be right with God?”

Now, I know modern people don’t necessarily have that sort of feeling, in fact our culture often shapes us to believe the opposite, but there are some experiences that almost all of us can relate to that echo this reality of our need for forgiveness.

One would be the outrage we feel when we hear the story of someone else be treated unfairly or unjustly. Why, unless there is such a thing as “Right” and “Wrong” should you feel such strong feelings of outrage, indignation? Unless there is something written in every human heart that whispers, “there should be justice.”

Or another echo would be the grief you feel when you wrong someone. Why, if there is no real “right” or “wrong” should it matter what someone thinks of you or holds against you? And especially what about that person with whom you have tried to make amends, but they won’t engage or forgive you? Why does it eat at you that the relationship be repaired?

Or finally, why do you have a twinge of conscience when you do something wrong? Some will say social conditioning, or try to show that morality is a communal construct. But what about when you come to a totally new situation for which you have no framework? And you still agonize over whether you are making the “right” decision, and what of the enduring uneasiness when you’ve made a decision that you think was right, but you just can’t shake the feeling you were wrong?

More importantly than the argument from experience, is that the Scriptures teach that every person needs forgiveness. Paul says:

First we see that:

I. We see that every type of person, and every single person needs to be forgiven.

A. Every type of person needs forgiveness

In v. 15 he is working with two broad categories of people: Jews and Gentiles. He says “We ourselves” the we is he and Peter—this section is what Paul says to Peter after Peter betrayed the Gospel by acting as if Gentiles were not real Christians if they weren’t keeping the Law’s ordinances about food.

First, notice that phrase “Jews by birth, and not Gentile sinners.” In other words, Peter’s actions implied that Gentiles were sinners by birth and Jews aren’t—he was implying that Jews and Gentiles could be saved by different means. This is one of those cases where when you say something aloud and realize how foolish it sounds—Paul comes right out and says what Peter implied by his actions and everyone can see how foolish it is.

And Paul begins the next clause “yet,” we could say it “even though.” So, Paul says “even though” we are Jews—who, in a sense had every religious advantage: we were given the Law of God, we were God’s chosen people, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—even we needed to be forgiven and not based on anything we can do—even by obeying the commands of the Law. Nothing either Jew or Gentile can do, even trying to follow the God-given Law of Moses, at which you will always fail because of your sinfulness—nothing we do can remove our sins and put us in the right with God.

So you don’t miss it, when we’re talking “Jews” we mean everyone who is ethnically descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and when we say “Gentiles” we mean everyone not descended from Abraham. In other words, there are two types of people in this world: Jews and Gentiles—and

both types of people can be saved only through faith in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Every type of person needs forgiveness.

The Scriptures also teach us:

B. Every person needs forgiveness.

We aren't just speaking in generalities about these big categories of people: Jews and Gentiles. Every single person within those big categories needs forgiveness as well.

Look at the end of v. 16 “because by works of the law no one will be justified.” This is a loose quotation of Psalm 143:2. In Psalm 143 David cries out for God's mercy (v. 1) and asks that God not judge him, saying that (v. 2) no flesh is justified before God.

It's meaning is very straightforward then—no flesh—not anyone can be justified before God based on works of law. This assumes that we need to be justified—if we didn't any discussion of how we can or can't be is pointless. The picture in Ps. 143 is the sinner standing before God pleading for mercy because he knows his works will not stand up to the scrutiny of the Holy God.

The Hebrew (which is what the English translations use for the OT) says “no one living” but Paul shifts it to “all flesh” – not changing the meaning, but making it more explicit that it doesn't matter what fleshly family you were born into—whether Abraham's family or not. And perhaps he is also using the word “flesh” in the more technical sense of the weakness of the sinful flesh, if so he would be highlighting all the more that

I. Every type of person, and every single person, needs to be forgiven.

Paul also tells us:

II. We are forgiven and justified through faith in Christ

A. The meaning of “justified” and “righteousness.”

You may have noticed by now that the word “forgiveness” doesn’t actually appear in this passage, because I like to make things more difficult than they need to be. But really the idea is all through the passage, if you look at this screen, I’ve highlighted every occurrence of a certain word in the text. It occurs A LOT (5 times total: in v. 16, 17, and 21), the first four are from the verb and the last one is the noun. In the Greek the verb and the noun are related, you can hear it in the pronunciation “dikaiow” and “dikaiosyne.” We don’t really have an English word that covers the same ground with both a noun and verb, which is why we usually use “Justify” for the verb and “righteousness” for the noun. There is an old verb “rightwised” but I don’t think the kids are using it these days.

In any event, this recurring word—especially the verb—has its origin in the legal realm, and if you trace its usage from ancient Greek (think the time of Homer) through the Greek version of the Old Testament, into the New Testament it never sheds that legal meaning. It means, that the judge finds in your favor, “to be declared in the right.” A great example where there can really be no doubt is Romans 8:33:

³³ Who shall bring any **charge** against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

You can hear the legal idea in the word “charge.” The context then is that God is the judge, he pronounces the verdict, and for those in Christ through faith he declares that the charges don’t stand—the believer is “justified.”

So, then the idea of “justified” is the picture of the human sinner standing before God, and instead of hearing “guilty” or “in the wrong” he or she hears “forgiven” and “in the right.”

To be justified or “declared in the right” then includes forgiveness—the removal of the penalty of your sins. You don’t hear the verdict “in the right” because you are actually sinless, or because your sins don’t matter, or because you can cover up the wrong you’ve done with good works—we are declared “in the right” only if by faith we are united to Christ who lived a perfect sinless life, and then died to pay the penalty for sin we deserved.

But the Bible adds a further element to justification as forgiveness, which comes to us in the language “counted righteous” as in Gen. 15:6:

“Abraham believe God and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

Paul uses this verse in both Romans and Galatians to teach us that if we have faith in Christ our sins are not counted against us, while Jesus’s righteousness is “counted” as ours.

Think about every decision, every act of your will that you’ve made today from what time to get up, to what to wear, to what to say or not say—everything, there were probably dozens of them if not hundreds. Now ask yourself, Did they all honor God? Did you, at every turn, choose and do that which gave God the maximum glory?

Now think about all the decisions you’ve made this whole week, and you’ll make in the coming week, and last year, and those you’ve made this year—from the miniscule to the massive. Now consider all the decisions a person might make over the course of thirty years or so.²

The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ lived a perfect, sinless, blameless life and died as a sacrifice for our sins (2 Cor. 5:21, Heb. 4:15, 1 Pet. 2:22)—that every moment of Jesus’s life, every act of will and every decision, up to and including his sacrificial death, was right—they were God honoring. Justification is the act of God by which that perfect obedience to God is counted to us when we believe in Jesus (Rom. 5:19, Phil. 3:9). To be justified means to be forgiven for all your wrong, and to receive a new standing based not on what you’ve done, but on what Christ has done.

B. This justification/forgiveness of sins comes through faith in Christ

Now that we know what Paul means by “justified” or “righteousness”, how does he say we access this forgiveness and gift of righteousness? He uses something called a chiasm, which is just a literary form that has for instance an ABBA structure. So Paul’s chiasm looks like this:

² Adapted from Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Comforts From Romans*, 97-99.

A A person is **not** justified by **works of the law**

B but through **faith in Jesus Christ**

C so we also have **believed in Christ Jesus**

B' in order to be justified by **faith in Christ**

A' and **not** by **works of the law**,

But even if you didn't see that structure, you would still get his point just by the sheer repetition "not by works of law" "through faith," "we believed," "by faith in Christ," "not by works of law." And then he gives the reason that forgiveness justification comes by faith and not works: Because by works of the Law no one will be justified. In other words, its by faith that we are declared "in the right" because that is the only possible way it could happen.

Dick Lucas story of the man after a Gospel sermon saying "the Lord helps those who help themselves.

So hear me, you can only be forgiven and declared righteous through faith. You cannot accomplish, or add to it.

God's forgiveness is such a radical concept—it cuts across our way of looking at the world. We want to deserve things, to earn things, to show we are worthy of people's thoughts and attitudes toward us. We want to repay and deserve. But the Gospel says you could absolutely, without question, never deserve God's forgiveness.

God's grace is confounding; it sometimes sounds like foolishness to us. But occasionally something happens in our world that approximates that confounding undeserved forgiveness. One story that illustrates the radical nature of forgiveness is the story of the Amish in Lancaster Pa.

In 2006 a man walked into an Amish schoolhouse and shot and killed 10 girls ages 6-13 and then took his own life.

And on the very same day as the shooting, the grandfather of one of the girls expressed his forgiveness toward the shooter. Also on that day some Amish also visited the shooter's family to comfort them. Later, the Amish invited the shooter's family to the funeral of the victims, and there were more Amish than non-Amish at the shooter's funeral. This is confounding forgiveness, there aren't really words to describe it.

But Paul is telling us that God's forgiveness of our sins is even more astounding and confounding than this description. When he says we are justified by faith, he tells us that though we were in the wrong, and have rebelled against our good and loving creator, and we deserve to be cursed—God sent his own Son to “become a curse for us” so that he might forgive us, and declared us right, through faith in Christ.

This audacious grace comes to us, forgives our sins, and counts all of Christ's perfections as ours through faith

[II. We are forgiven and justified through faith in Christ]

But these truths are not just for the past, or for the moment of conversion—faith and justification/forgiveness of sins empower us to now live a life of holiness not motivated by guilt or condemnation under the Law, but in the freedomgrace of God:

III. We must live in the power of God's forgiveness

A. Because we are forgiven, we die to the Law's legal demands and condemnation.

¹⁷ But, if in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners *(like the Gentiles—because we are not obeying the Law--which is the opposite of seeking justification/forgiveness in Christ)*—is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸ For, if I *(generic I)* rebuild what I tore down *(the Law as covenant obligation)*, I prove myself to be a transgressor. *(It is Paul's opponents, who want to add works of the Law to faith of Gentile Christians, that are the true law breakers).* ¹⁹ For *(because)*, through the Law I myself died to the Law *(in two ways: 1) Because the Law increases my awareness of my inability to keep it,*

and more importantly 2) because the true purpose of the Law is fulfilled by Jesus who removed the Law's curse by dying on the cross), so I might live to God.

In short, there should be no looking over your shoulder at the Law as if it were a hound of hell coming to catch and condemn you in your sins. The just condemnation has been exacted on Christ, and you have once-for-all been justified—forgiven and counted righteous. There is now therefore no condemnation for those who are Christ Jesus!

And also,

B. Because we are forgiven we no longer live in the power of our flesh, but the power of Christ.

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

United to Christ through faith, we have been crucified with him, this is another way of saying that our sins have been paid for, that what is mine is now his and what is his is now mine. Because I'm forgiven, now it is not my sinful self who lives, that guy is dead and crucified with Christ—but *Christ* is living in me by the power of the Spirit (with whom Paul connects justification in the next paragraph).

Finally,

C. The way we live in the power of God's forgiveness is by faith in the Gospel.

Look at v. 21:

And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Paul says the life he now lives (the life to God), he does "by" faith. The word "by" indicates means or manner. It answers the question "how?" So then, how do we now live in the flesh to God? "By faith."

And not just general “faith” positive thinking, but specifically in the “Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” So then, once we have become a Christian we do not then bring in the Law to advance us in sanctification. Rather we live “by faith” in the one who loves us enough to give himself on the cross so we might be saved.

I was thinking about the story of John Wesley, the great Methodist’s, conversion. And when I read his journal from that day, I found something new. The way Wesley tells it this is how he came to faith and assurance of his salvation:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Immediately following this experience, Wesley came under attack from the enemy and was experiencing powerful temptations, but he found that because he knew that God has forgiven him, and saved him from the condemnation of the law—he was a conqueror in God’s grace.

Then the next morning he wrote this in his journal:

Thursday, 25.—The moment I awakened, “Jesus, Master,” was in my heart and in my mouth; and I found all my strength lay in keeping my eye fixed upon Him and my soul waiting on Him continually.³

“I found all my strength lay in keeping my eye fixed upon Him and my soul waiting on Him continually”

³ The Journal of John Wesley, Chapter 2 “I Felt My Heart Strangely Warmed.”

That's what Paul means when he says "the life I now live, I live by faith in the son of God." When you see Christ, and what he has done for you it strengthens you for life.

And look at v. 21 says, by preaching justification by faith in Christ:

²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

This really just clicked for me this morning, if I treat the law as if righteousness came through works: either to be saved, or to empower my living ***I nullify the grace of God***. I won't experience the power of the grace of God, I nullify the power of grace because I'm relying on myself.

C. The way we live in the power of God's forgiveness is by faith in the Gospel.

So let us fight the good fight of faith, clinging to the truth of our forgiveness accomplished by Christ's death on the cross, and may it empower us to as people transformed by the grace of God.