

Help Us in Our Unbelief – The Apostles’ Creed Part 10:  
“The Forgiveness of Sins”  
Matthew 26:26-30

## INTRODUCTION

In my study across the street I have things all over the wall. It looks more like a university dormitory room than a professional office.

I’ve got pictures that remind me of my travels: of a little colorful village in southern South Korea; of the place where the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates converge in Iceland--where the world’s oldest surviving parliament was founded in 930. Then I have typical pastor stuff. I’ve got a poster from *National Geographic* about the construction of Gaudi’s Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. I’ve got Chagall’s stained-glass windows from the Fraumünster.

Then I’ve got 3 versions of Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*. Two different IPC people donated two different black-and-white interpretations of the iconic painting. And then I have a little postcard of the original color painting- a mural in Milan--shrunk down to a post-card, and stuck on my wall with sticky putty in Zurich.

The painting is striking. There is commotion as the disciples are asking one another who might be the one that Jesus meant when he said that one of them would betray him. But then there is Jesus, calm, contemplative, but definitely thinking about everything that he is about to experience. And he is preparing---in the midst of the Last Supper---to serve the First Supper: the first Lord’s Supper. The bread (26) that is his body, given for his followers; the cup (28) that is the covenant in his blood, poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sins.

## WHAT ARE WE BEING ASKED TO BELIEVE?

“Believe in ... the forgiveness of sins,” the Creed teaches us.

I have been a Christian my whole life. For much of my life, I assumed that “the forgiveness of sins” was the whole point of Christianity. And since I knew that

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Christianity was the meaning of life, I assumed that to be forgiven of our sins was itself the meaning of life.

It's only in the past 10 or 12 years that I've made a stunning discovery. One part of that discovery was learning the first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. It asks: “What is the chief end of man?” (Or, what's the point of human existence?) But the answer is not “to get your sins forgiven.” The answer is “To glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”

In a way, this changed everything. I think it could change everything for you, too. I saw the forgiveness of sins, finally, not as the goal of life, but as the gate into new life; not as the end, but as the means.

But in another way, this realization changed nothing. The forgiveness of sins is still absolutely central.

It's central in the Christian message: God gave his only Son, so that through his life and death and resurrection, we might be, as the hymn says, “ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.”

It's central in the church's worship: the major Protestant Reformers believed we needed to celebrate the Lord's Supper at least once per week, if not more. Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican traditions agree. And in the Supper, the forgiveness of sins is front and center.

The forgiveness of sins is also central in the Christian life, from day to day. We confess our sins to God; to one another. We turn away from them. We receive God's forgiveness. We forgive others. We are forgiven by others.

For as long as people have been learning, doubting, and believing the Christian faith, there's been this question: If God is all good, and all powerful, why did God allow humanity to fall into sin?

The answer has always been pretty much the same. To some people, it's very satisfying; to other people, it's not. But here it is:

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God brought us through the experience of our sin and his forgiveness, because he knew that this would allow us to better fulfill our human purpose---to glorify him and enjoy him. As Jesus is around the table in the upper room with his disciples in John's Gospel (Ch 17), and he starts praying, he cries out to the Father: “Father! Glorify your Son that your Son may glorify you!” “I want the world to know that you loved me, and sent me because you love your own even as you love me!” We better glorify, and better enjoy, God, having sinned and been forgiven, than if we'd never sinned at all.

So the forgiveness of sins is, in one sense, the ABCs of the Christian life. It gets us started. It puts our relationship with God right. When God forgives us in Christ, our lives finally get going. Indeed, as Paul says, it's like being brought back from the dead and living again (Eph 2:5).

But in another sense, in a *glorious* sense, the forgiveness of sins is the A-to-Z of the Christian life. We never graduate from this doctrine. We never “get over” the amazement of this grace---not in this life; not in 10,000 years in heaven.

And here's the marvelous thing: we never stop glorifying and enjoying God as we live our lives, fueled by the energy and resurrection power of this forgiveness. The forgiveness of sins makes our hearts always softer. It makes our determination to obey everything Jesus commands always more firm. It makes our love for one another always more sincere. It makes our knees always bowed low. It makes our hands always held high. It turns our lives into a living sacrifice. It makes what we do with our bodies a spiritual act of worship.

The forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ is not God's Plan B, which he came up with after we ruined his Plan A. The forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ is God's glorious way of bringing humanity back to Plan A---enabling us to glorify God and to enjoy him forever!

HOW DO WE LIVE IT?

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Someone has said that a theology that cannot be sung is not worth having. We've got to live the forgiveness of sins. We've got to sing it with our voices and our lives.

We live “the forgiveness of sins” first by literally singing it. One of my professors pointed out to me that, apart from “happy birthday” and a couple of Christmas songs, Western culture has almost lost the history of singing together in groups. We have professionals perform for us. But we rarely sing together---to entertain ourselves, to pass on stories, to share our hopes and dreams.

But church is the great exception! We encourage each other with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19). These songs don't just praise God. When we sing them, we teach and encourage each other. And, if someone who has not experienced the forgiveness of sins in Jesus happens to be in church, Paul thinks that maybe our praise of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins might just draw them to Jesus---maybe even more than a book or a personal testimony or a sermon (1 Cor 14:24).

But we've got to sing it with our lives, too. Christian believers, if you really believe in the forgiveness of sins, you should be the most ready-to-repent people on earth, and the most ready-to-forgive people anywhere.

The absolute minimum for the Christian life is that you must become great confessors, repenters, and forgivers. You won't always be great at these things right away. But you *will* get great at them. So great that the people around you will say, “what on earth has gotten into you? Nobody says I'm sorry so quickly and so sincerely as you. Nobody absorbs the consequences of other people's hurtful attitudes, words, and actions and turns and forgives them quite like you. What is the reason for the hope that you obviously have inside you?”

And you can say, “listen: there's no one who's been wrongly hurt like my Lord Jesus. And there's nobody who's hurt my Lord Jesus like me. But he has loved me, and he has given himself for me. He's forgiven me. How can I not forgive? How can I not ask for forgiveness from others?”

The Christian life takes time to learn. That's why it's called the Christian life and not the Christian minute, or hour, or day, or month, or year. It takes your life long to grow in

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grace. But every bit of growth in grace that you must go through will start with the forgiveness of sins. Every bit of progress you make will be the fruit of your ongoing realization: “I can’t believe that he knows what I’m really like; that he still loves me; and that he died and forgave me.”

Every time we celebrate the forgiveness of sins---whether it’s in the Lord’s Supper, or in the act of forgiving or being forgiven by our neighbor---we are being transformed from one degree of glory to the next. Our minds are being renewed. Our lives are being conformed to the life of the one who was sinned against like no one else, but who forgave sin like no one else.

Do your words, actions, and attitudes---day by day, year by year, decade by decade---sing more sweetly, more in tune, more skillfully, more joyfully, the central Christian melody of the forgiveness of sins? Can someone point to your life and say: “you are not the same person you were a few years ago. You must have experienced the joy of full forgiveness more deeply, because it is spreading out into your life more widely”?

#### DO YOU BELIEVE IT?

Someone once asked CS Lewis if Christianity is true because it is beautiful. For Lewis, this was an interesting question. Because for his whole adult life he loved the ancient myths of many cultures, especially Norse mythology. In many of these myths, there’s some sort of dying and rising god. These myths made Lewis weep with joy as he read and studied them. They were beautiful to him. But when it came to Christianity, Lewis was unimpressed. He thought that Christian belief was ugly and that Christian practice--especially the Lord’s Supper, eating and drinking Jesus Christ!?

And then JRR Tolkien took a walk around Magdalen College, Oxford, with him. Tolkien asked Lewis why he wept over the beauty of these old myths, which he knew weren’t true. And he asked Lewis why he hated Christianity so much, when it had at its center a dying and rising god. And then he said to Lewis: What if you look at Christianity like this. It’s a myth like all those myths you love. Except for this: it actually came true in history. It really happened. And at the center of this true story is the beauty of a God

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who gives himself to broken and wicked people, that they might be forgiven and renewed.

What finally made Lewis embrace Christianity was that he realized that Jesus, giving himself, his body and blood, his life, for his enemies, was the most beautiful answer to that same question: can I be truly known and truly loved? For him, finally, Christianity was not true because it was beautiful. It was supremely beautiful---way more beautiful than any other story---because it came true in real life.

What about you? Do you believe in the forgiveness of sins?