

The Apostles' Creed

The Forgiveness of Sins

Selected Texts

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The Forgiveness of Sins

Introduction

As we continue our series in *The Apostles' Creed* I would like to examine today what it means to believe in the forgiveness of sins. Please listen as I recite the Apostles' Creed:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand
of God the Father Almighty.
From there he will come to judge
the living and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

The most important issue in this life is where we will spend eternity. Therefore, one of the most important questions a person can ever ask is the one asked of Jesus by the rich, young ruler. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17).

The Bible teaches us that God created the first man, Adam, without sin (Genesis 1:31). Eventually, however, Adam disobeyed God (Genesis 3:6; cf. 2:16-17). This disobedience resulted in broken fellowship and enmity between God and Adam. The barrier between God and Adam was Adam's sin. Each of Adam's descendants has inherited Adam's sin, and the barrier between God and each individual is sin.

The entire message of the Bible from Genesis 3 onwards can be described as the way in which God removes the barrier of sin between himself and certain individuals, and brings them into a right relationship with himself.

Lesson

Today we want to explore one part of how God removes the barrier of sin, brings us into fellowship with himself, and grants us eternal life. This teaching is summed up in the statement of the *Apostles' Creed* in which we affirm our faith in "*the forgiveness of sins.*"

I would like to examine "*the forgiveness of sins*" by first defining sin and then by examining forgiveness.

I. What Is Sin?

First, what is sin?

The Bible tells us that "sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4).

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* expands on this definition and defines sin as "any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God."¹

According to this definition, sin falls into two categories. On the one hand, we have sins of *omission*, consisting in "any want (an old word for "lack") of conformity unto the law of God."

¹ WSC Q/A 14.

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When we have a duty to perform and do not perform that duty, we lack conformity to the law of God. For example, God commands us to honor our father and mother (Exodus 20:12). If we do not honor our parents, we are guilty of a sin of omission. We are guilty because we have not done that which God requires us to do.

We are guilty because we have not conformed unto the law of God. Many people never think of sins of omission when they think of sin. When they think of sin they are more likely to think of sins of commission. They think of stealing and swearing and murder as sins (which they are), and because they think they are not guilty of such sins, they imagine that they are not great sinners.

This is illustrated in a funny scene from the series *All in the Family* a few years ago. Edith, in her own inimitable way, is kind of a saintly person. Archie is complaining, as Archie commonly did. He says to her, "That's you all right. Edith, the Good. You'll stoop to anything to be good. You never make nobody mad. You think it's easy living with a saint? Even when you cheat you don't cheat to win. You cheat to lose. Edith, you ain't human."

Edith says, "That's a terrible thing to say, Archie Bunker. I am just as human as you are."

Archie retorts, "Oh, yeah? Then prove you're just as human as me. Do something rotten!"

The fact is that sins of omission make us just as guilty before God for transgressing his law.

On the other hand, we have sins of *commission*, consisting of "transgression of the law of God." An example of this sin is the sin of Adam. God clearly commanded Adam, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17).

But sin has other aspects too. Sin is lawlessness in relation to God as a lawgiver.

Sin is rebellion in relation to God as a rightful ruler.

Sin is missing the mark in relation to God as our designer.

Sin is guilt in relation to God as judge.

And sin is uncleanness in relation to God as the Holy One.

Sin is a perversity touching each one of us at every point in our lives. Apart from Jesus Christ, no human being has ever been free of its infection. Sin appears in desires as well as in deeds, in motives as well as in actions.

Billy Sunday was a famous baseball player in the early part of the last century. He was eventually converted to Christ, and became even more famous as an evangelist. In preparation for an evangelistic crusade in a large city, Billy Sunday wrote a letter to the mayor asking for the names of individuals the mayor knew had a spiritual problem, and therefore needed help and prayer. How surprised Billy Sunday was when he received from the mayor a city telephone directory!

The mayor of the city understood that all have sinned, and that no-one is immune from sin's deadly infection.

Some years ago on *60 Minutes* Mike Wallace once interviewed Yehiel Dinur, a survivor of Auschwitz, the German concentration camp during World War II. Dinur was a key witness against Adolf Eichmann, the mastermind of the Holocaust. Upon entering the courtroom and facing Eichmann, Dinur began to tremble. Weeping uncontrollably, he collapsed. When Mike Wallace asked Dinur why he had collapsed—was it reliving the memories, the nightmares, the grief?—Dinur answered: “No. I collapsed because I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am exactly like him, capable of this.”

Rightly does the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* teach us to confess, “We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. . . . We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and (spiritually) there is no health in us.”

Sin is everybody's problem in the sight of God, for the Bible says his “eyes are too pure to look on evil,” and he “cannot tolerate wrong” (Habakkuk 1:13).

But we find life to be a moral minefield for us. The harder we try to avoid sin the more often we find—too late—that we have stepped where we shouldn't, and have been blown to pieces so far as the righteousness of God is concerned.

And where does that leave us? The Bible again is quite clear and explicit about the consequences of sin. Paul says that “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men” (Romans 1:18).

This, then, is the problem of sin. Sin is a barrier between us and God.

But the good news of the gospel is that sin can be forgiven. Central to the gospel is the glorious “but” of Psalm 130:3-4: “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?” The answer, of course, is that no one can stand before God because of his or her sin. “*But,*” the Psalmist continues, “With you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.” That is, God is worshipped with loyalty (for that is what the *fear* of God means here).

II. What Is Forgiveness of Sin?

Second, what is forgiveness of sin?

Theologian J. I. Packer defines forgiveness as “pardon in a personal setting.”² It is taking back into friendship those who went against you, hurt you and put themselves in the wrong with you.

Forgiveness is *compassionate* (showing unmerited kindness to the wrongdoer).

Forgiveness is *creative* (renewing the spoiled relationship).

And forgiveness is inevitably *costly*.

God's forgiveness, of course, is the supreme instance of this, for it is God in love restoring fellowship at the cost of his Son on the cross.

I once received a Christmas card that I'd like to summarize for you:

² J. I. Packer, *I Want to Be a Christian* (Kingsway Publications, Eastbourne, E. Sussex; 1977), 68.

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator.

If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist.

If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist.

But since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent us a Savior.

Imagine if there was no forgiveness of sins. Where would we be?

Apart from the fact that we would all be destined for hell (and consequently have no hope of heaven and eternal life), in this life we would carry around a bad conscience. And a bad conscience is a terrible thing to carry. No outward change relieves it; you carry it with you all your waking hours. The more conscientious you are, the more your knowledge of having failed others and God too will haunt you. Without forgiveness of sins you will have no peace. A bad conscience, working at full strength, tearing you to pieces in the name of God, is hell indeed, both here and hereafter.

A man who was distressed about his sin once wrote to Martin Luther. The Reformer, who himself had suffered long agonies over this problem, replied:

Learn to know Christ and him crucified. Learn to sing to him and say, "Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. You took on you what was mine; you set on me what was yours. You became what you were not so that I might become what I was not."

What Luther was telling this man is the same truth that Paul presented to the Church at Corinth. He told them, "God made him (i.e. Christ) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

In other words, Paul and Luther were saying, “Link up with Jesus, the living Lord, by faith and the great exchange is fulfilled. Through Jesus’ atoning death God accepts you as righteous, and cancels your sins. This is justification, forgiveness and peace.”

Luther and Paul were teaching that great doctrine we call “justification.” The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* defines justification as “an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”³

Paul in Romans and Galatians, and the Reformers after him, spoke of justification rather than of forgiveness. This is because justification is forgiveness *plus*; it signifies not only the forgiveness of all our sins, but also the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to our account.

In other words, there are two parts to justification. The one part has to do with the forgiveness of sins.

But if that is all that happened, we would simply be morally neutral. We need a positive righteousness before God, the righteousness of a life of perfect obedience to him. Since Christ alone has lived a life of perfect obedience, God credits his life of perfect obedience to our account. And this is the other part of justification: the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to our account.

Justification is also final. When God justifies a person—by forgiving his sins and crediting Christ’s righteousness to his account—it is a decision that is irrevocable. God will never overturn his justification of a person, and so you can see then that this becomes the basis of assurance of salvation. A person is assured of his right standing before God because God has made a legal declaration concerning his eternal status.

So, justification, which includes public acquittal and reinstatement before God’s judgment-seat, is a far richer concept than forgiveness.

³ WSC Q/A 33.

The Roman Catholic Church does not grasp the decisiveness of justification. They do not see it as a once-for-all legal act of God. Nor do they see that Christ's righteousness is the entire ground for justification. And neither do they realize that our part is to stop trying to earn justification, but simply receive it as God's free gift of grace. So they insist that sacraments, "good works", and purgatorial pains hereafter are all necessary means of final acceptance with God, because they are among the grounds on which that acceptance is based.

But the Reformers preached, as Paul did, full and final acceptance through a decisive act of God's forgiveness here and now; and this, they said, is by received by faith alone.

Why faith *alone*? Because Christ's righteousness *alone* is the basis of pardon and peace, and Christ and his gifts are received *alone* by faith's embrace. Faith means not only believing God's truth, but trusting Christ, taking what he offers and then resting and rejoicing in the knowledge of what is now yours.

Conclusion

Is God's gift of "*forgiveness of sins*" yours yet?

Have you trusted Christ alone for the gift of eternal life?

God has made a way for us to have the barrier of sin removed. He has made a way for us to receive the "*forgiveness of sins*." He has made a way for us to receive eternal life.

Unfortunately, it is easily missed. The Jews in Paul's day missed "*the forgiveness of sins*" and eternal life. Paul said that their tragedy was that their zeal for God led them to try to establish their own righteousness (i.e. they tried to earn God's acceptance), and *they did not submit to God's righteousness* (i.e. to his way of forgiving and justifying, by faith in Christ only). Listen to what Paul wrote to the Romans: "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that

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comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness" (Romans 10:1-3).

The truth is that we sinners are self-righteous to the core. We are constantly justifying ourselves. We hate admitting that there is anything seriously wrong with us, anything that God or man might seriously hold against us. The fact is that we all struggle with trying to establish our own righteousness before God.

In his book, *Great Themes of the Bible*, Louis Albert Banks told of the time pastor and preacher D. L. Moody visited a prison called "The Tombs" to preach to the inmates. After he had finished speaking, Moody talked with a number of men in their cells.

He asked each prisoner this question, "What brought you here?"

Again and again he received replies like this: "I don't deserve to be here."

"I was framed."

"I was falsely accused."

"I was given an unfair trial."

Not one inmate would admit he was guilty.

Finally, Moody found a man with his face buried in his hands, weeping. "And what's wrong, my friend?" he inquired.

The prisoner responded, "My sins are more than I can bear."

Relieved to find at least one man who would recognize his guilt and his need of forgiveness, the evangelist exclaimed, "Thank God for that!"

Moody then had the joy of pointing him to a saving knowledge of Christ—a knowledge that released him from his shackles of sin.

The teaching of the Bible is very clear regarding God's forgiveness of sin. Only a perfect blood sacrifice satisfies the Father's requirement for the payment of sin.

Robert Lowry was a popular Baptist pastor in various churches throughout the East. In later life he became interested in writing and publishing gospel songs. Today he is best remembered for his many contributions to our hymnal with songs such as

“Nothing But the Blood,” published in 1876. Though simply stated both textually and musically (a five note melodic range and just two chords), this hymn has had an important place in the church’s ministry in teaching the absolute necessity of trusting completely in the precious blood of Christ for this life and for eternity.

*What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

*Refrain:
Oh! Precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

*For my pardon this I see,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
For my cleansing, this my plea,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

*Nothing can for sin atone,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
Naught of good that I have done,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

*This is all my hope and peace,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
This is all my righteousness,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

Friends, do you believe in “*the forgiveness of sins*”? It is yours if you trust in Jesus alone, and believe that nothing but the blood of Jesus saves you. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ and **membership** in his church family, develop them to Christlike **maturity**, equip them for their **ministry** in the church and life **mission** in the world, in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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