

Forgiveness

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Well, as we celebrate Thanksgiving this week, nothing could promote greater gratitude in our hearts than a clear remembrance of the greatest gift that God has given to us in our Lord Jesus Christ, and that is the forgiveness of our sins. That's a gift of eternal consequence. It's a gift that brings peace to our hearts. It is a gift that brings us, even more importantly, peace and reconciliation with a holy God. So for our Communion meditation this evening, I just want to spend a little bit of time reflecting on what Scripture says about the gift of forgiveness and I'm happy to acknowledge my debt in part to J. C. Ryle's book "Old Paths" in some of the things that I'll be saying here this evening.

Let's consider it from this perspective, two perspectives: our need for forgiveness and the way of forgiveness. First of all, our need for forgiveness. By nature, certainly from birth, you and I were people who were prone to flatter ourselves with the thought that we were basically good people, that there was basically goodness in us and that any thoughts of heaven would certainly not trouble us, heaven or hell would not trouble us because we were basically good people expecting to receive a good reward. Proverbs 21:2 speaks of this and says,

2 Every man's way is right in his own eyes,

And we are all prone to that even as believers, we are prone to justify ourselves and to think well of ourselves and certainly sinners everywhere would somehow seek to flatter themselves that they are basically good people, usually comparing themselves to the worst of human examples in order to have a favorable comparison in order to confirm their self-judgment. But you know, beloved, our hearts and our self-assessments are not reliable guides to what is true and your thoughts about your own goodness are certainly not a reliable guide to the true condition of your soul. Scripture tells a different story about us all. God's word says that we are not righteous, that we are not holy people, in fact, it tells us a much different condition. In a passage that we turn to often in Romans 3, I turn there again and I just want to ask you and to ask the Spirit of God to give us fresh eyes to see these words, fresh ears to hear these words again, but somehow in the simplicity and the familiarity of what we're talking about, that it would go deeper in our hearts and deeper in our minds and promote a proper sense of gratitude toward Christ and a proper sense of the magnitude of the gift that God has given us in forgiveness.

Romans 3:10 says.

10 ... "There is none righteous, not even one; 11 There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; 12 All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one."

There are no exceptions to that in the room this evening.

13 "Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, The poison of asps is under their lips; 14 Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; 15 Their feet are swift to shed blood, 16 Destruction and misery are in their paths, 17 And the path of peace they have not known. 18 There is no fear of God before their eyes."

This is universal condemnation of every man, woman and child and the Apostle Paul went on to say, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Here's the thing, beloved, here's the thing: you and I have broken the law of God. Guilty. Some of us in less flagrant ways than others perhaps, but in thought, word and deed, we have not done his will. In violation of the greatest commandment, we have not loved God with all of our heart, soul, strength and mind. In violation of a like commandment, we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves, certainly the bitterness and the grudges that we bear and carry would testify to the truth of what I just said and that means that we are all guilty before a holy God; that a righteous God looks on us in our sin and sees unrighteousness and guilt and that which is only worthy of condemnation. Having received from our forefather, Adam, a position of condemnation, a guilty nature, and then joining in it with our own participation in sin and our rebellion, and not simply in the outward flagrant sins of things like fornication or other things like that, beloved, but a more deeply rooted sinfulness that is rooted just in an indifference to God, a self-willed approach to life, a lack of reverence for his word, a lack of reverence for Christ, a lack of love and devotion to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. These are serious matters because they mean that we are guilty before a holy God and what Scripture says about our condition is this: it says that the soul that sins must die, Ezekiel 18:4. The wages of sin is death. Death and condemnation cling to us and weigh over us because of our sinfulness upon the human race as a whole, upon you and I individually.

Do you ever stop and think, do you ever stop and wonder why it is that people die? Scripture attributes it to the death penalty that God requires for sin. Death entered the world through sin, Romans 5:12 says. If you've ever had someone close to you pass away, someone close to you die and you know that awful feeling of separation and the sorrow and the grief that attends it and the weight of that, well, the measure of that gives us some sort of a measure of the sense with which God views sin. It is a weighty matter of sin and guilt and death and the horror of its guilt, the weight of the severity of the condemnation it deserves, can be measured in part by the effects that it produces, and when we feel that weight of separation that occurs at death, we get a measure of the measure of how much God hates sin and how dark and severe our rebellion is.

Now let me ask you a question. Every one of you, let me ask you a question: does that seem too severe to you? Does that sound like an overreaction on the part of God toward us? I mean, after all, aren't we all kind of trying to do our best and we stumble a couple of times but this is what happens? Well, no. No. If that sounds too severe to you, if the death penalty sounds too severe to you, maybe you have missed a fundamental aspect of the character of God, a fundamental aspect of the character of God found in his holiness, found in his utter righteousness. And another familiar passage can remind us of this, of his holiness, in Isaiah 6, beginning in verse 1. The prophet says,

1 In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. 2 Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." 4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. 5 Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

Isaiah saw a vision of the holiness of God revealed to him and he was shattered and undone. He was immediately convicted of the weight of his sin and the guilt of his tongue when he was exposed to the holiness of God.

In similar manner, the prophet Habakkuk says about this God, he says,

13 Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, And You can not look on wickedness with favor.

You know, you all hear stories from those of a charismatic persuasion, their teachers, their TV personalities, "Oh, I saw the Lord and blah, blah, blah." People write books about how they went to heaven and saw Jesus or whatever. You can know for certain that those things are not true by the reaction that they describe in having seen the Lord. Never in those stories do you get a sense of the majesty and the majestic holiness of God. Never are the purveyors of these false visions saying that, "I fell down at his feet undone by my sin." But that's the scriptural testimony with those who truly see him. Look at the book of Revelation, the Apostle John when he saw, a same reaction, fell at his feet like a dead man.

In light of these truths, the holiness of God and the universality of our guilt and the depth of our guilt, beloved, what are we? What are you and I except miserable sinners in the eyes of such a holy God? Miserable sinners in the eyes of a holy God and we cannot deny that. We cannot deny our condition. Scripture says in 1 John 1,

8 If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

In like manner, in the same chapter it says,

10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

This is the reality of it, our great need for forgiveness, our great need for cleansing, our great need to be washed from sin, to be cleansed from our miserable guilt. And even as Christians, even as Christians God's word says in James 3 that we all stumble in many ways. Some of you of more tender conscience, more tender disposition, feel the weight of that and you weep tears of remorse over the ongoing nature of your sinfulness. You feel that. Some of you perhaps are a little bit too self-confident and cocky in your spiritual life but Scripture would reduce us to utter humility. And you know, if you think about it, my friends, I speak as one needing these words as much as I speak them, needing to hear them as much as I speak them, think with me, if you would: even the best things that we do are marred by sin, are marred by inadequacy. J. C. Ryle says this, he says, "Our faith, how feeble. Our love, how cold. Our works, how few. Our zeal, how small. Our patience, how short-breathed. Our humility, how threadbare. Our self-denial, how dwarfish. Our knowledge, how dim. Our spirituality, how shallow. Our prayers, how formal. Our desires for more grace, how faint." We simply cannot and we do not measure up to this holy God on our own, do we? Do you?

Sin is like a burden that needs to be lifted from our back. Scripture describes it as an arrow missing its mark. It is like a debt that needs to be paid. It is like a terminal disease that needs a miraculous and radical cure. We are all great sinners, we all need a great forgiveness, and why is that? Why do we need a great forgiveness? Because as Scripture says in Hebrews 9, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment." Think of yourself truly and according to Scripture. Submit your mind to the analysis of Scripture of the measure of your soul, beloved, and you will realize how desperately severe your condition is; that apart from the Lord Jesus Christ, you would be heading toward an appointment with God that held nothing but condemnation and eternal punishment in store for you; lost and without hope, guilty and without one to intercede on your behalf. What a sad and miserable condition we are by nature.

Well, that's the condition, that's our need for forgiveness. Somehow you and I need a spiritual bath. Somehow we need a thorough cleansing. Scripture says, in fact, that we need a new birth; that being dead in trespasses and sins, we are not able to wash away our own sin; that not only are you guilty, but you are unable to produce anything that would reverse your guilty condition. Do you see how severe it is? Well, let's turn the corner to the way of forgiveness. In light of your undeniable sin, where can you find forgiveness? Where can you find cleansing? Where can you find the cure? Where can you find someone to lift the burden off of your back that you cannot reach on your own that would crush you into eternal death? Where can you find a pardon and a righteousness that satisfies the perfect standard of God?

Well, let's just remind ourselves, let's just remember, that you cannot find it at the hands of men. You cannot find it from a pastor. I can't forgive your sins. I can't help you in that way, I can't help you directly. A priest can't forgive your sins, no matter what they say to the contrary. There is not a church that can save you. There is not a ritual that you can do. None of that provides the forgiveness of sin. Nothing can remove the stain. And I realize as we say these things that these are weighty matters that we are considering but, beloved, isn't it true that the best thing that we could do is to go to God's word and let it speak to us plainly, let it speak to us truly? To push aside the flattery of the world or the flattery of our own hearts that would tell us, "Oh, it's not that bad. Oh, you're really basically a good person." Why would we listen to that? Why would you listen to that from your own heart or from other voices speaking to you when God's word so plainly tells you something directly the opposite? Why would you do that? You wouldn't let a doctor, you wouldn't reject a doctor who has the reports from all the tests saying you have a terminal disease and say, "Doctor, you don't know what you're talking about. My friend Joe down the street told me I was just fine." You wouldn't do that in the physical realm, why would you do it in the more serious matter of the spiritual realm when you have not a human doctor declaring the diagnosis but God himself telling you the state of your soul? Why would you do that? And God's word says that you cannot do any good works to evade the judgment, all of your righteous deeds are like a filthy garment, Isaiah 64:6.

Beloved, it's not enough for you to be sorry. It's not enough for you to have regret in your heart or to feel remorse over what you have done and who you have been. That's not enough. A criminal may be sorry for his crimes but the court still requires him to go to prison to pay his debt to society. It's not enough to be sorry. There is nothing you can do. You are miserably and helplessly lost apart from Christ. Where then can we find forgiveness? Where can we find a rescue, a deliverance from this miserable condition? Is there even one to be had? What is the way to God?

Well, the words of Isaiah 53 still echo in our minds, don't they, having just read it earlier? Turn back there with me, Isaiah 53, and we sung just moments ago of the deep deep love of Jesus. Isaiah 53, Scripture points us in the direction where there is relief, where there is forgiveness when it says in verse 5 of Isaiah 53,

5 ... He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him ... 6 ... the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him.

At the cross, at the cross where the Lord Jesus Christ stood in the place of sinners just like you, gladly, willingly, voluntarily – mark it deep in your heart – lovingly stood in the place of sinners, as it were, gathered their sins upon his own shoulders and received the stroke of the punishment of God, the eternal punishment of God in his own body so that sinners like you could be forgiven. You realize, right, you understand, don't you, that this was an act of sheer grace and mercy that you did not deserve, that you could not have called down from heaven in your own merit or in your own power? That this was a sheer

gift from a merciful God to provide a way out for sinners like that? A gift at the cost of his own life blood?

And with that accomplished work of Christ, what is the way to God now when you cannot work for it, when you can't be sorry enough? What is the way to God? Again quoting our brother J. C. Ryle, hear me closely. I know some of you perhaps are here visiting, perhaps someone has invited you, perhaps the Gospel is new to you, what you are about to hear is the way that your soul can most certainly be redeemed and it is not through anything that you do with your hands. I quote, "The way is simply to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior. It is to cast your soul with all its sins unreservedly on Christ. You must cease completely from any dependence on your own works, any dependence on your own doings either in whole or in part, and to rest on no other work but Christ's work. You must rest on no other righteousness but Christ's righteousness, no other merit but Christ's merit as your ground of hope. Take this course and you are a pardoned soul." God has provided a perfect salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ and the way that he has assigned and established for you to partake of that forgiveness is to forsake your own righteousness, to forsake any claim to merit, and to cast yourself entirely and without reserve on the Lord Jesus Christ and his work on the cross as your only hope for salvation; to receive him, to receive his work by a simple decisive act of trust in someone else and not in yourself.

The trustworthy word of God confirms this for us. Acts 10:43 says,

43 ... through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.

Acts 13:38,

38 ... through [Christ] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

Colossians 1:14,

14 in [Christ] we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Why are we thankful tonight? Why are we thankful this week? Why do the redeemed in this week of Thanksgiving, why do our voices raise toward heaven in gratitude? Because Jesus Christ in great love and compassion satisfied the demands of the law of God on our behalf. Through his perfect life and redemptive death on the cross, he has provided a way of forgiveness for us that we could not have conceived of in our mind, let alone achieved with our efforts. A gracious God 2,000 years before you were born made complete provision for the eternal well-being of your soul. He had an eternal plan that he accomplished in Christ and now if you are in Christ, you are the beneficiary of a loving and gracious merciful plan of God that you did not invent, you merely received. And in total disproportion to what you deserved, he has instead given you grace and eternal blessing that we are only beginning to taste of which will one day be culminated in the glories of heaven. Sin has been atoned through his blood. All who believe in Christ

receive a perfect pardon. All who believe receive the righteousness of Christ credited to their account as a free gift that reconciles them fully to this holy God.

Who is Jesus Christ? He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the Son of God who came into the world to save sinners. He is the Son of Man who appeared in order to take away sins. In light of his great work, how is this salvation received? Turn to the Gospel of John with me, John 1:12. If you are here and you know that you are not a Christian, you know that your sins are still on your soul, your conscience testifies to you that you have not been reconciled to God, you know in truth that you are still a slave to sin, that you have not lived your life for God's glory, that these thoughts have never even occurred to you before this evening, my friend, let me invite you to this word of God that promises you an immediate, eternal, perfect gift of forgiveness that can be yours right this moment. In John 1:12 it says,

12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Do you see it, my friends? Brothers and sisters in Christ, do you see it? Does it echo and resonate in your heart fresh again this evening that the gift of salvation is not something that you earn, it was something that you received as a free gift from the hand of a gracious God? That God did a work directly on your soul to open your blind eyes, to unstop your deaf ears, to loosen your mute tongue, to see the grandeur of Christ and the gracious gift of a total and complete salvation from all of your sin? A magnificent deliverance that was perfect in every respect and given to you and received as a gift?

Salvation does not come by works but through faith in Christ. What is this faith? What is it like? For those of us that are in Christ, let us remember afresh in what I'm about to read, the simplicity and the beauty of what God gave to us and the manner in which it was received. For those of you that are not yet in Christ, hear the simplicity of the way that all of your sins can be forgiven and you can be reconciled to a holy God, that you can receive new life in Christ and be set free not only from the penalty of sin but to have the power of sin in your life broken like a dry branch, snapped, and a new prevailing principle of holiness established in your heart. I quote again from J. C. Ryle. How do we receive this gift? He says and I quote, "Faith, simple faith, is the only thing required in order that you and I may be forgiven; that we will come by faith to Jesus as sinners with our sins, trust in him, rest on him, lean on him, commit our souls to him, and forsaking all other hope, cleave only to him. This is all and everything that God asks for. Let a man only do this and he shall be saved, 'for it is by grace that you have been saved through faith, and this not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not as a result of works lest any man should boast.'" Do you know Christ by faith? Have you received him by faith in the way in which we have spoken here this evening?

Christian friend, do you remember that point in the past, that time in the past, maybe a season where it dawned on you, recognizing that you could not save yourself,

recognizing and crying out to Christ, and then finding your life changed, finding your heart changed, where darkness had prevailed, now there was light, where before there was confusion and no understanding, now God's word resonated with clarity and understanding and reverberated with life in your soul, do you remember that? Do you remember something of that? Do you remember the sense that whereas before you were dead and alienated to God, now there is reconciliation and peace in your life to him? Do you remember how you received it? You didn't receive it when you walked up to an altar before a priest, did you? You didn't receive it because you had tried hard enough and all of a sudden you passed the bar, you had done enough works to make it happen, you had finally achieved a level of goodness. No, none of you came to Christ that way, did you? Not at all. That magnificent gift of the new birth was bestowed upon you and you received it through simple faith, and the majesty of that, the profundity of the change, the greatness of salvation, having your debt of sin paid, the burden of sin lifted from your shoulders, should fill you with gratitude tonight, should fill you with fresh thanksgiving again this week, and that's what we're going to remember here as we approach the table, free forgiveness of our sins in Christ. That's why we give thanks.

So I have to ask: have you never come to Christ? Let me point you to him. He is a glad and willing Savior of sinners. He delights in saving sinners just like you. You can go to him with absolute assurance that he will receive you if you will approach him in the manner in which we have spoken here today. Not claiming that you deserve it, confessing freely that you don't, but crying out to him and saying, "Lord, you have saved others like me, save me too." He invites you now. You can be immediately and instantly forgiven and saved forever by putting your faith in Christ alone this evening. Friend, oh friend, don't wait thinking that you'll make yourself better before you come to Christ. It doesn't work that way. You cannot, you won't get better. Don't wait until you feel worse about your sin. You can never feel bad enough about your sin in order to come to Christ and deserve it somehow in that way. Just trust Christ at his promise, "If you come to me, I will give you rest." Come on the basis of his promise and be saved. And for those of you that are in Christ, remember afresh that it was entirely on that ground that you came. Christ said, "Come to me and I'll give you rest," and here you are months later, years later, for some of us decades later, and we still have that rest because he saved us to the uttermost.

Friends, if you have truly received Christ, we invite you to join us at the table here in just a moment. If you don't know Christ, maybe you're a visitor and you're not sure of these things, no one is going to look badly at you if you let the elements pass. Think on the words that have been shared with you instead and contemplate the state of your soul. Let the elements pass if you don't know Christ or if you're living in sin or if you have unconfessed sin. It would be far better for you to let these elements pass rather than to take them and profess that, "I know this Christ and he has changed me," when in fact he hasn't. But if you know Christ and you are trusting in his shed blood for the forgiveness, receive these elements with the great sense of gratitude and thanksgiving before your God. He has been merciful to you. He has been gracious to you and your heart should be responding with deep thanksgiving as we come to his table.

Let's bow together in prayer.

Our Father, we thank you for the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ. Lord Jesus, we thank you for your shed blood and for the deep deep love that you had for our souls and that you have for our souls to shed it on our behalf. Help us to receive these elements with thanksgiving, remembering your body and blood as we do. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.

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