

We Believe: In the Forgiveness of Sins

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1 ESV)

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Hebrews 11:6 ESV)

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13 ESV)

I Believe In The Forgiveness Of Sins

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1 John 1:8-2:2

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 John 1:8. This morning we are continuing our series in the Apostles Creed and today we are looking at the line:

I believe in the forgiveness of sins

Now if you are like me, maybe you are thinking, 'didn't we cover this when we talked about Jesus' crucifixion, death, burial and resurrection? Plus, we just celebrated Easter! Of course we believe in the forgiveness of sins!' Are any of you thinking that way? Well that was me when I first looked at this line of the creed.

But this line is about *more* than just the forgiveness of sins brought about through Jesus' sacrifice; it is *also* about how we the Church are to be a *forgiving* people. This line was a LATE ADDITION to the creed because the early Church was faced with a huge controversy. They were just coming out of arguably the most violent persecution where many Christians stood firm but many also gave in. In the face of violent threats to their livelihood and even their very lives they denied Christ. Even some of the Church leaders gave in! They offered sacrifices to the Roman gods and renounced their Christian faith.

But then something drastic happened. Constantine came to power and all of the sudden Christianity was no longer on the fringes of society. It was widely accepted in the Roman pluralistic society. This was a huge reversal. Christians could again worship without fear of persecution.

Can you see why this might have led to some conflict in the church? Ben Myers comments on what happened:

Predictably, the apostate believers, known as “traitors,” soon came back to church as if nothing much had happened.¹

Put yourself in the shoes of those who stood firm. You’ve been living in fear and misery for as long as you could remember. Perhaps your father had been taken away by the mob and murdered for his faith in the last year. What it would be like to gather together again and to worship next to a man who had publicly recanted in order to avoid his own death? How would it feel to pass the communion plate to him? After all, Jesus said these startling words:

whoever denies me before men, **I also will deny** before my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:33 ESV)

Well known Church historian Justo Gonzalez comments on the Church’s response at this crucial time:

After due proof of sincerity, most of them (those who had recanted) were readmitted to the church, after all the church is supposed to be a people of love and forgiveness. But others protested. They insisted that the church is supposed to be holy and to witness to the truth of Christ. How then could it accept within its bosom those who were such clear sinners and who had denied the faith?²

That is the background to this line being added to the Creed. This crisis brought about a GLORIOUS REMINDER that God’s people are not only the RECEIVERS but also that we are to be THE EXTENDERS. You can’t experience the forgiveness of God and then withhold it from those who wrong you. THE CHURCH is to be the FORGIVEN AND FORGIVING PEOPLE. They go hand in hand. Church we cannot lose sight of this all important doctrine.

With these things in mind, look with me now to 1 John 1. We’re going to begin reading in verse 8. Hear now from the Holy Word of God:

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 1:8-2:2 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

¹ Ben Myers, *The Apostles’ Creed: A Guide To The Ancient Catechism*, (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2018), 114.

² Justo Gonzalez, *The Apostle’s Creed for Today* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2007) 83.

These five simple verses teach us some basic, yet profound truths about sin and forgiveness. This passage helps us to understand what we're really saying when we confess "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

So, what then are we saying? What does it mean to believe in the forgiveness of sins?

What Does it Mean to Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins?

When we say that we believe in the forgiveness of sins we are saying we believe in:

1. The Real Problem of Sin

Sin is a real problem. And when we claim to believe in the forgiveness of sins as the creed says, we are declaring that sin really exists. Because for there to be forgiveness of sins, there has to be sin! And if we deny sin's presence, John is as bold to call us deceived, unsaved, and guilty of calling God a liar! He says:

⁸ If we say we have **no sin**, we deceive ourselves, and the **truth** is not in us...¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:8, 10)

So when we say 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins' we are acknowledging that we believe that when Adam and Eve rebelled against God sin came in and tainted EVERYTHING. EVERYTHING was spoiled.

Sin entered the fabric of humanity and exists across all people and cultures. And it has been perpetuated by each and everyone of us. You and I have constantly turned OUR backs on God. We have constantly neglected His good commands in favour of our own desires. And just like Adam and Eve, we have more than overstepped the good fences God put for us. You probably remember the story of the fall in the garden easily, but do you remember what happened after God rebuked them? Genesis tells us this:

²⁴ He **drove** out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:24 ESV)

God DROVE out Adam and Eve from paradise. That is how serious sin is! They could no longer be there in His perfect presence. They were marred and had to go. And since then the whole history of mankind has been marked with the stain of sin. Cain killed his brother Abel. Generations later the hearts of men and women were only set on evil so God brought the flood to wipe them out. Then we see the wickedness in Sodom and Gomorrah which drove God to destroy them.

What's the point? The point is that sin is a real problem that exists across the whole world. Our current culture may not accept it but that doesn't mean that we have to go along with them. We can't deny the universality of sin nor should we ever be ashamed to believe it.

Other cultures in the past understood this doctrine well. Even ours affirmed it in the past. But not so anymore.

C.S Lewis agreed with this. He said:

The greatest barrier I have met is the almost total **absence from the minds of my audience of any sense of sin.**

Then he goes on to say that the Gospel when preached in the past:

promised healing to those who **knew they were sick.** We have to convince our hearers of the unwelcome diagnosis before we can expect them to welcome the news of the remedy.³

Have you felt the culture's dullness to the reality of their sin? They deny the very sin they see in others and perpetuate THEMSELVES. But the Christian believes in the forgiveness of sins. That means that we affirm the universality of sin. It is the reason why we are separated from God. It is the reason why relationships are strained. It is the reason why unity is hard. It is the reason why things are so broken. Sin is THE problem facing our world.

Secondly, when the Christian says I believe in the forgiveness of sins, they are also saying I believe in:

2. The Power of the Cross

The forgiveness of sins means just that, that God has made a way for us to be forgiven! And in affirming this line in the creed we are proclaiming that Jesus is the ANSWER to the problem of sin. We would be without hope of ever entering the presence of God if it were not for these marvelous words:

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to **forgive** us our sins and to **cleanse** us from all unrighteousness...

¹My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 1:9, 2:1-2 ESV)

John reminds the Church that perfect holiness on this side of eternity is not possible. So he comforts them by reminding them of the power of the Cross. He says in effect:

Remember Jesus' righteous life in YOUR PLACE. Remember His death in YOUR PLACE. And precious

³ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, Accessed May 9,2021.

Christian, remember Jesus seated at the right hand of the father interceding for *you*. Pleading HIS righteous life and death on *your* behalf.

Jesus' blood was spilled for YOU AND ME so that we could be restored to right relationship to God. So that we could walk in His presence in Eden like Adam and Eve did. John could write to the Church with such assurance of their forgiveness because He understood the POWER OF THE CROSS. He had no doubt that God would forgive and cleanse the sinner BECAUSE Jesus paid it all ONCE and for all. Hear what John says about Christ.

² **He is the propitiation for our sins**, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.
(1 John 2:2 ESV)

That big word propitiation carries the idea of averting the wrath of God by the offering of a gift. John is saying that Jesus *is* the sacrifice that once and for all put away the enmity that was between us and God. The roadblock is gone. The dam is removed and we can now rush into the presence of God through Jesus Christ. Hallelujah!

Think about that sin that you have been battling. How many times have you fallen and repented and fallen again? How many times did you SWEAR you wouldn't do it again? These verses remind us that God's grace didn't just deal with your former sins but your future sins too. The sins you are fighting against this very day. That's the power of the Cross.

Do you believe that the blood of Jesus is powerful to wash away the sins of the person who wronged you? Do you believe it is powerful to wash away the careless words that have been spoken against you? Do you believe that there is POWER in the blood of Christ to wash away even the vilest sin?

Friends, when we declare that we believe in the forgiveness of sins THAT is what we are declaring. Let's stop insisting on others paying for their sin when Christ paid for ours! That is the power of the Cross.

Thirdly, the forgiveness of sins means that we believe in the:

3. The Awesome Scope of Grace

John reminds the church here of the awesome scope of God's grace. Not only is Jesus the propitiation for OUR sins, but:

Also for the **sins of the whole world**. (1 John 2:2b ESV)

This is a reminder to the Church that Jesus' atoning sacrifice is sufficient for all who will claim Him as their Saviour. He is not saying that *all people will be saved* but that Jesus' sacrifice was enough to cover the sins of the *whole world*. Sufficient for *all* but *efficient* for the Church. The scope of God's grace stretches way farther than you and I can imagine. Matthew Henry comments on this:

The extent and intent of the Mediator's death reach to **all tribes, nations, and countries**. As he is the only, so he is the **universal** atonement and propitiation for all that are saved and brought home to God, and to his favour and forgiveness.⁴

Do we think about this enough? Do we truly ponder the insane and scandalous forgiveness that God offers to the world? Remember, this isn't a world that has longed for Him. This isn't a world that has strived to keep His commands. This is a world that has REJECTED Him. And yet he modelled for us what radical forgiveness looks like. He showed us it even extends to our enemies. Paul tells us this staggering truth:

But God shows love for us in that while we were still **sinners**, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8 ESV)

The world isn't full of saints. It's full of *rebels*. Rebels who were against God. Rebels like you and me. And yet God sent His one and only Son for us. For you and me. For people who have hurt you. For those who hurt others. The forgiveness of sins is offered to people who the world would say deserve to rot in jail and deserve no second chance. It is sufficient for ALL! And oh, we pray and we labour that all would repent and believe and RECEIVE this unfathomable grace!

Believing in the forgiveness of sins means you believe that.

Do you believe that? Do you believe the Cross of Christ was sufficient to cover the sins of the world?

Friends, when we declare that we believe in the forgiveness of sins we are saying:

We believe in the real problem of sin.

We believe in the power of the Cross to defeat sin.

And we are declaring we believe in the awesome scope of God's grace.

⁴Matthew Henry, *An Exposition, with Practical Observations, of the First Epistle General of John*, Matthew Henry's Complete Commentary, (Public Domain), (Digital).

That is the forgiveness of sins. Thanks be to God.

But how does one receive this? How does one come to know and experience this great gift of God?

How do we receive the forgiveness of sins?

The answer is:

1. By grace, through faith in Christ alone

John reminded us of this in our text. He said:

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9 ESV)

Confess and repent, and you put your faith in Christ. Place ALL of your trust in the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus Christ. BELIEVE that Jesus paid the debt you owed. BELIEVE it and GLORY ONLY in this: Jesus paid it all. Believing in THAT is how we receive the forgiveness of sins.

Those brothers and sisters who held strong during the persecution, *humanly speaking*, were justified in their questioning of the returning Christians. We can all empathize with what they felt.

Humanly speaking, forgiveness WAS impossible. But not with God. By grace, through faith, even the vilest sinner can be made clean. There is a way home – even for the prodigals – and his name is JESUS!

You are never going to be perfect in this life. Your brothers and sisters around you are never going to be perfect in this life. But Jesus IS. He IS the righteous one who lived the life you couldn't live! And he died in your place as a sinner, though he never sinned. And it is ONLY through faith in Him that you can receive the forgiveness of sins. So sinner come. God's forgiveness goes beyond what you could imagine. See Christ on the Cross bearing the sins of the WORLD. See Christ being cursed of God so that rebels could be accepted as children of God.

Receive the forgiveness of sins by grace, through faith in Christ alone.

But we can't stop here. Many of us are tempted to, but Jesus compels us to press forward. Having received this forgiveness, we are now called to extend it. But how do we do that? How do we extend the forgiveness of sins?

How do we Extend the Forgiveness of Sins?

We extend it by offering it:

1. As generously as we have received it

In receiving such grace the Christian is called to extend generous forgiveness to others. Jesus wonderfully taught this through a parable. He spoke of a King who forgave one of his servants a massive and crushing debt. It was an incredible act of mercy! But then this same servant went and beat someone who owed him a tiny fraction of what he owed. When the King found out what happened, he was furious and had the man thrown into prison until he should pay all of his debt. Jesus then ended the teaching with the following words:

So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:35 ESV)

The point of that story is to illustrate the all-important truth that FORGIVEN PEOPLE FORGIVE.

Remember the backstory to this line of the creed being added? The Church didn't know if they *should* receive back those who fell away. They didn't know if GOD WOULD forgive the traitors. And if God wouldn't how could they? But then the Church landed on the forgiveness of sins. They understood that this line of the creed reiterated the awesome scope of God's forgiveness. And that they themselves were to offer the same. God's pardoning of *our* sin is *the* basis for forgiving others. That's why Jesus taught us to pray this way:

forgive us our debts, **as we also** have forgiven our debtors. (Matthew 6:12 ESV)

That's who you are Christian! You are the RECEIVER and EXTENDER of great forgiveness! That is what the early Church was conveying when they added this line to the creed.

In a world that sees forgiveness as a weakness. That sees it as cowardly. We are to be the people who offer it as a reflection of God's gracious mercy towards us. At this cultural moment there is very little room for repentance and forgiveness. Have you felt that? Well the good news is that this isn't new! We are just getting a large dose of it at this time. Ligon Duncan comments on how the ancient pagan world viewed forgiveness:

Pagans often mocked the Christian teaching that sins could be forgiven by another, even by God. As far as a pagan was concerned, you either make up for your misdeeds ... or you're forever guilty. And pagans did not consider forgiveness a virtue ... Only the weak spirited—the weak willed—would forgive. **We need to realize just how radical the Bible's message is of the forgiveness of sins.**⁵

We aren't the first generation to see forgiveness as cowardly. As something to be mocked. But this is WHO WE ARE TO BE. We are to be the radical and generous forgivers. Just think how awesome would it be if your co-workers saw you forgive those who wronged you at work? Or if your kids saw you forgive your spouse? Or if your family saw that you were able to forgive them for the many hurts they've given you.

A longing for justice is a good thing but sometimes we cling way too closely to it. We demand justice to be done and only then do we choose to forgive. But that is not the Gospel way. The Gospel way remembers the forgiveness that was offered through Christ. It remembers that it was NOT DESERVED.

Forgiveness acknowledges the wrong done but chooses to forgive and surrender the outcome to God. That's what you are called to do EVEN when it seems impossible. Even when our enemies are nailing us to the Cross. Jesus modelled for us what to do in that moment. He asked the Father to forgive those who put the nails in his body. And when Stephen was being stoned he asked the same. They who were literally being abused and murdered did what seems unthinkable. What seems impossible. They forgave their enemies and entrusted the outcome to their Father who is in Heaven. The One who will ensure justice is done.

That justice that you are longing for was either paid in the body of Christ or *will* be in Hell. That hurt done to you will be punished. It will NOT be swept under the rug. We serve a Holy and Righteous God who says these words:

Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. (Romans 12:19b ESV)

Dear hurting Christian your Holy, heavenly Father will ensure that every wrong done will be paid for. He loves justice. He loves righteousness. And God says to His children, 'you forgive, and leave justice to ME.' That may not always be the easiest truth to submit to, but it is God's design for us.

⁵ J. Ligon Duncan, "I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins," First Presbyterian Church Jackson Mississippi. <https://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/i-believe-in-the-for...> (Accessed May 10, 2021).

But before we close this morning, I am sure many of you have questions that you would love to ask. So I want to end by addressing some of the practical nitty gritty questions regarding forgiveness.

Common Questions About Forgiveness

So first of all, you may be asking:

1. How many times do I need to forgive someone?

We are in good company when we ask this question because the disciples asked it as well. Matthew 18 tells us:

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. (Matthew 18:21-22 ESV)

Jesus is saying that our forgiveness should know no bounds. I know that sounds impossible for some of you. You have been treated unfairly treated or lied to by the same person and you don't think they deserve forgiveness anymore. Or maybe it is someone at work who is constantly degrading you. You Christian, by the grace of God, are called to forget the many times you have forgiven them and keep offering it. Now this doesn't mean that you are naïve. It doesn't mean you set yourself up to be constantly hurt by the same person. No. You should set boundaries. You should use wisdom. You should and can rebuke and try and help that person who has hurt you see the pain they have caused. But the Christian doesn't stop forgiving after the 10th hurt. That's the key. Remember, we are called to extend forgiveness as generously as we have received it.

Secondly,

2. Does forgiveness mean staying in abusive situations?

This is an important question that needs to be addressed. And we can answer it with an emphatic NO. No. Forgiveness does not mean staying in abusive situations. Hear that. Dear brother or sister, if you are in a situation where you feel physically unsafe in your home call 911. Or if you are being emotionally abused we would plead with you to reach out. Reach out to the elders here or to a fellow member in the congregation. Full stop.

Christian assistant prosecuting Attorney has this helpful advice:

God's forgiveness doesn't forego the sword of the government or the repercussions of sin. God can forgive a murderer of his sin and save him from eternal punishment, but the murderer still must face the punishment of men.⁶

Friends, there will be time when space is NECESSARY. And when that is the case, it doesn't mean you that you get withhold forgiveness. It means you give it from a safe distance. You pray for them. You seek help for yourself. You pray for the grace and mercy of God to be able to forgive that person against the odds. And it may even be that forgiveness is given with no chance or hope of reconciliation.

God hates abuse. And so do we! As his people we need to be clear on this. And we need to be a safe place for those who have been hurt. We are not the cover it up people. Again, I will repeat myself, forgiveness is not a lack of concern for justice. It is not a sweeping under the rug of wrongs done. The Christian is in the amazing place of being able to both scandalously forgive WHILE LONGING for justice to be done by the proper authorities. We need to remember that and hold both of these.

And I think it must be said. We should be the people who long to see reconciliation. Just like Levi mentioned last week with the man who was sleeping with his mother in law. Paul said, if he has repented, BRING HIM HOME. Don't keep loved ones out who have truly repented and want to come back. Use wisdom, put up good and safe boundaries, and if possible, be reconciled.

And finally,

3. Is forgiveness a feeling or a choice?

Forgiveness is a choice. Sure, you may feel like forgiving someone but if we are honest most of the time we will *choose* to forgive and the feeling will follow. You choose to do what you know is *right*. Forgiveness is like any other virtue that we are called to. It takes work! It takes initiative. We don't wake up each morning and long for righteousness the way we should. No most of us would rather hit snooze 10 times over then get up early and read The Word and pray. And forgiveness is the same.

⁶ Christopher Pierre, *Sexual Abuse Among Us*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/sexual-abuse-among-us/> (accessed May 15, 2021).

When you are wronged in whatever form, you will have to remind yourself of what God has called you to.

Remember these words:

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. (1 Thessalonians 5:15 ESV)

Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27 ESV)

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, **forgiving** one another, **as God in Christ forgave you.** (Ephesians 4:32 ESV)

You will have to CHOOSE to do the right thing. And forgiveness is that right choice. Even when it seems impossible.

Friends, as we come to a close this morning, I know for certain that there are things that have been left unsaid and you may have questions about. So please reach out to Pastor Levi or one of the elders. This is an amazing doctrine but also a difficult one. Our lives are messy and working out this doctrine will be messy too sometimes. But it is necessary.

It's necessary because when we declare it, we are affirming that once and for all Jesus paid for our sins. That they are as far as the east is from the west. And BECAUSE of that, we can generously offer it to others. Through the glorious redemption of Jesus Christ, we are both the *recipients* and the *extenders* of this glorious forgiveness. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray.