

# The Power of Forgiveness: How to Be Certain Your Sins Are Forgiven

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*"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Colossians 3:13*

In her book *Tramp for the Lord*, Corrie Ten Boom tells how, several years after her experience in the Ravensbrück concentration camp in Nazi Germany, she met face to face with one of the most cruel and heartless guards from her years of imprisonment. She especially remembered how he had humiliated and degraded her sister, Betsie, and her—jeering as they stood in the delousing shower. Now, at the end of an outreach service in which she had spoken about the power of forgiveness, he stood before her with hand outstretched asking, "Will you forgive me?"

She writes, "I stood there with coldness clutching at my heart, but I know that the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. 'I prayed, Jesus, help me!' Woodenly, mechanically I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me and I experienced an incredible thing. The current started in my shoulder, raced down into my arms and sprang into our clutched hands. Then this warm reconciliation seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother,' I cried with my whole heart. For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard, the former prisoner. I have never known the love of God so intensely as I did in that moment!" Corrie ten Boom went on to say that to forgive is to set a prisoner free and then you may discover the prisoner was you.

John R.W. Stott, in his book *Confess Your Sins*, quotes the head of a large British mental home as saying: "I could dismiss half my patients tomorrow if they could be assured of forgiveness." Deliverance from guilt by real forgiveness is humanity's deepest spiritual need. Apart from it, we cannot experience a relationship with God that produces peace and hope. That is why our Lord makes it a primary topic in His pattern for prayer: "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12).

I think this may be one of the most misunderstood verses in the entire Bible. Though we have been completely forgiven the punishment for our sin by God the Righteous Judge through salvation in Christ, we need regularly to experience God's parental forgiveness for the sins we continue to commit as Christians. The importance of this distinction will become clearer as we look at the two kinds of forgiveness that we might label judicial and fatherly. In this issue of *Covenant* we will examine the first and in the next issue we will study the latter.

## Sin is Forgotten

We received God's judicial forgiveness the moment we were enabled of the Holy Spirit to trust Christ as our Savior from sin. Our forgiveness is complete because of our justification in Christ, by which God declared us

righteous in His Son. Therefore it is proper to say that God has completely forgiven all our sin—past, present and even the future sins we have not yet committed. As a result, we are not under wrath and judgment, condemned to die, nor from the point of our salvation destined for hell. Paul says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). The Righteous Judge has declared us pardoned, justified, and righteous. No one—any human (including ourselves) or demonic—can condemn us or lay any charge against us (vv. 33–34).

The breadth, length, depth, and height of this forgiveness is astounding. God says, “Their sin I will remember no more” (Jer. 31:34). David wrote, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:12). And Isaiah gives the reason: “The Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on him [Christ]” (Isa. 53:6).

The God of Justice could not pass over our sin unless He first placed the full punishment for every single sin we would ever commit on someone else, and that someone was His Son, Jesus. God has forgiven us our sins based on the one-time sacrifice of Christ on the cross. It was there that He bore our punishment on His body on the tree (1 Peter 2:24), thereby taking our guilt in our place, and paying the penalty for our sin. The moment we were enabled of the Spirit to place our faith in Christ, the reality of the one-time finished work of Christ was put on Him and His righteousness was placed on us (Rom. 3:24–26). By God’s act of judicial forgiveness, all our sins—past, present, and future—were completely forgiven.

Jeremiah 31:34 tells us, “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” This is what God wants us to know about the forgiveness He freely provides us in Christ. When our sins are forgiven, they are forgotten by God forevermore. The past is over, crucified in Christ, remembered by God no more. What God forgives, He forgets.

## Sin is Taken Away

The Christian concept of atonement comes from the Old Testament Day of Atonement, where the sacrifice prescribed for this holy day required two goats. One goat was killed in the usual manner. The second goat was led outside the camp of the Israelites. Sin was confessed over him and he was set free in order to picture the removal of sin from God’s presence (Lev. 16). In the New Testament this scapegoat concept was carried over. Christ’s death was seen as not only covering our sins but taking them away. The Greek word designating forgiveness, *aphiemi*, provides a good picture of the meaning of forgiveness—it literally means “sent away.”

As John Stott points out in *The Cross of Christ*, each goat represented a different aspect of the same sacrifice, the one exhibited the means of our forgiveness, and the other the results of our forgiveness.

## The Sinner Learns To Forgive

A Japanese soldier by the name of Shoichi Yokoi lived in a cave on the island of Guam to which he fled in 1944 when the tides of war began to change. Fearing for his life, he stayed hidden for 28 years in the jungle cave, coming out only at night. During this self-imposed exile he lived on frogs, rats, snails, shrimp, nuts and mangoes. Even when he figured out the war was over, he was afraid to come out for fear he would be executed. Two hunters found him one day and escorted him to freedom. He was living all this time under the penalty of sins that had all been dealt with through punishment already inflicted upon the Japanese leader, Tojo, and the other warlords who had led Japan into the war—but he simply had not appropriated the forgiveness that had already been provided even though the forgiveness was already his.

But what if when Shoichi Yokoi was led by the hunters back to civilization he immediately began shooting at Americans. If this transpired, we would surmise that Shoichi did not truly understand that he had been forgiven by the Americans through the punishment already fully spent upon Tojo and the warlords.

This is what Jesus means in Luke 7 when He speaks about the woman who had lived a sinful life. Christ says, "I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little" (Luke 7:47). Jesus is saying that we demonstrate how fully we grasp our forgiveness in Christ by how fully we love and forgive others. Those who have little comprehension of the forgiveness made available to them in Christ will love and forgive little. Therefore Jesus can make the statement that concludes the parable of the ungrateful servant, "In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:34-35). Those who do not forgive their brothers and sisters from their heart have not been gripped by the Gospel—which is to say they have not yet received salvation.

The principle is that we forgive others when they sin against us to the same degree that we recognize we have been forgiven in Christ of the sins we have committed. But this is not to imply that completely letting go of our grievances against others happens overnight. It usually takes weeks, months and sometimes years—depending upon how damaged we were by the sin inflicted upon us.

The story with which we began about Corrie ten Boom forgiving the Nazi guard had not fully concluded. In an article in *Guideposts*, she told of not being able to completely forget the wrongs that had been done to Betsie and her by the Nazi guard even after forgiving him at the outreach service. Yes, she had forgiven him, but in the months that followed she kept rehashing the incident and so, could not sleep.

Finally Corrie cried out to God for help in putting the problem to rest. "His help came in the form of a kindly Lutheran pastor," Corrie wrote, "to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks. 'Up in that church tower,' he said, nodding out the window, 'is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope the bell keeps on swinging. First "ding," then "dong." Slower and slower until there's a final dong, and it stops. I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down.'

"And so it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversations. But the force—which was my willingness in the matter—had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at last stopped altogether."

So Corrie learned that she had to keep forgiving that Nazi guard even as she had been completely forgiven of her sins through Christ at the cross. The more she exercised her will to remember her total forgiveness in Christ, the more she found the angry reverberations in her heart subsiding. Then she was able to be merciful as her heavenly Father had been merciful to her.

True peace is only found in knowing the freedom of God's judicial forgiveness. And we will find that this freedom does more than bring peace to our own lives, it transforms our relationships with others as well. My friend, are you able to be merciful as your heavenly Father has been merciful to you? If you are, it is a good sign that you can be assured that your sins are forgiven.

My wife and I are blessed with three godly sons who are now in their twenties. But when they were aged 6, 8 and 10 and our family was planting a church in northern Virginia, our three boys were particularly unruly one Sunday during the fellowship time after our morning worship service. Their mother had already spoken to them but met with little result. I then spoke to them a little more forcefully, and they quieted down for a few minutes. When they later returned to their former level of boisterous behavior, I decided not to say anything more to them until we were in our family car driving home.

We approached a post office next to the highway, so I pulled into a section of the lot that was not visible to the road. I then marched our three sons out of the car and inflicted discipline upon the three until I detected "godly sorrow (that) brings repentance" (2 Cor. 7:10).

In order for those boys to repent and turn away from disobedience, there had to be discipline from a father who loved them deeply and was fully committed to their spiritual and social development. I was then able to discuss with them the importance of obeying their parents "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth" (Ephesians 6:3). I know the experience made a lasting impression because several years later we were driving as a family along that same highway and the boys pointed in unison at that post office and said, "We remember that parking lot."

Our sons have never doubted my deep love and affection for them, my full commitment to their ongoing development, nor that anything they could ever do would diminish my devotion to them. But it was necessary for them to confess their sin to me as a step in the ongoing process of needed change. Their willingness to confess could not affect my care for them, but it would enhance their growth towards the likeness of Christ (Rom. 8:29). Because they were my sons, there was never an issue of demanding payback -- justice never had to be satisfied. My discipline of them was for the purpose of their discipleship, not for the satisfaction of my wrath.

To an infinitely greater degree, there is nothing we as children of God can do to cause the Father to love us more -- or less -- than He does now in Christ. The reason? Astounding as it may seem, according to the prayer of the Lord in John 17:23, the Father loves us "as much as" (kathos) He loves His own Son, Christ Jesus. Such perfect love cannot be improved upon. Justice concerning our transgressions has already been served fully through the wrath of God being inflicted upon our Substitute at the cross.

Part one of this article presented a distinction between judicial vs. Fatherly forgiveness. It examined judicial forgiveness more deeply. Now we take a deeper look at Fatherly forgiveness.

Contrary to what many suppose, the petition our Lord includes in His model prayer, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12) refers to Fatherly, not judicial forgiveness. It is not a matter of losing our salvation or having the condemnation of the Righteous God inflicted upon us if we do not forgive. Rather, the context is the Lord teaching His saved disciples how to pray. He is instructing them (and us) to avoid loving but firm discipline (our prayers not being answered) by forgiving others even as all our sins have been forgiven at the cross. As the Apostle Paul exhorts us, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13).

The issue of forgiveness is especially important because the level to which we forgive others -- rather than demanding that our wrath be satisfied -- is the clearest indication of how fully our hearts have been gripped by the Gospel. I term this principle the "Platinum Rules" Do unto others as God in Christ has already done unto you. We are to be mirrors of God's forgiving grace to us, reflecting to others the forgiveness we our-

selves have already received.

I recently read of a pastor who was visited by a member of the church he served. The man complained to the pastor, "I know that I am a Christian, but so-and-so did this thing to me, and I can't forget, and I can't forgive him." The pastor responded, "Are you sure that you can't forgive him?" He said, "No. I can't. I have really tried to forgive this man but what he did keeps coming back, and I simply can't forgive him." The pastor said, "You know, if it is really true that you cannot forgive this man, then it indicates that you yourself have never been forgiven -- that you are only kidding yourself about being a Christian whom Christ has made able to forgive others." This shook the man a bit. He thought it through, and then, with rather a sheepish grin he said, "Well, I guess it is 'won't' forgive." It was not long before there was a real forgiveness extended to the man who had injured him.

## The Purpose of Confession

If we remember that nothing we ever do can fundamentally alter the way the Father lovingly relates to us as His children in Christ, then we recognize that confession of sin is not for the Father's benefit but for ours. There are three steps we take in confessing not only our own sin but in helping other Christians deal with their sin:

Acknowledge the sin and take responsibility for the negative impact it had upon others.

Appropriate by faith the forgiveness that has already been provided in Christ at the cross.

Ask the Holy Spirit to provide "godly sorrow (that) brings repentance" (2 Cor. 7:10). This includes looking for ways to make restitution if necessary.

When I was eighteen years old, my cousin called me to ask if I would be willing to drive his MG sports car from western Tennessee, where we lived, to the eastern side of the state where he was. Since I was a typical teenager, I jumped at the opportunity and on the appointed day set off across the state in my cousin's "hot rod." Everything proceeded normally until I got to the Tennessee River and was forced to slow down for construction on the bridge. When I moved past the construction, I should have shifted back to 4th gear, but I forgot. Unfortunately, I could not tell the car was straining because of my unfamiliarity with the normal sound of the engine. So after travelling another fifty miles the MG began to shudder. I was barely able to coax the vehicle into a service station where it completely died. I called my uncle to tell him the car had simply stopped functioning for reasons unknown to me. I caught a ride the rest of the way back to college and my uncle later picked up the MG to take it for repairs. A month later my cousin informed me the engine had overheated to the point that it suffered a "meltdown" and had to be rebuilt at considerable expense. It was only then that I began piecing together what had happened.

Sadly, even after I became convinced it was my carelessness that overheated the engine I still did not acknowledge to my cousin what I had done. Even when I became a Christian a half-year later and the Holy Spirit began to convict me about my transgression, I still did not call my cousin to confess my wrongdoing. Of course, the Spirit would convict me occasionally over the next several years about my unconfessed sin, but I did my best to ignore His prompting. Finally, six years later when I told my fiancée (now my wife of 27 years) about my MG "meltdown" story, she lovingly rebuked me and exhorted me to call my cousin and confess my transgression (as you might guess, she possesses the gift of exhortation). I knew she was right so I called my cousin, told him the entire story, asked his forgiveness and inquired how much the repair had cost so I could make restitution. He was quite gracious about the entire incident, refused to tell me the repair cost

and would not allow me to make any payment because my uncle had paid the bill in full. In other words, he did not want any "payback" for my transgression because payment had already been made for me.

However, as I reflected back over the previous six years I recognized that from my side of the relationship my unconfessed sin had created a barrier between my cousin and me. I felt distant from him although there was no barrier erected from his side. There was no issue of unsatisfied justice that separated him from me because the bill had already been paid. As far as he was concerned, the relationship was as strong as ever. However, I did not want to confess and restore our friendship because I imagined that a restitution price for the MG repair would be demanded that I could not pay. For six years I had erected an unnecessary barrier between us. How sad.

This is why the Lord exhorts us in Matthew 5:23-24, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." Just as the Holy Spirit takes the initiative with us -- "He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin" (John 16:8) -- to bring us to the point of confession of our sin for our good -- so we need to help our Christian brothers and sisters acknowledge their sin and repent. It is for their benefit not for ours. Our anger should not have to be satisfied any more than the wrath of the Righteous God needs to be satisfied for our sins as believers. Justice has already been served fully at the cross for our transgressions, as well as for the trespasses of those Christians who have sinned against us.

That "payback" for their sins, as well as ours, was fully inflicted on the Savior as our substitute at the cross. As Jesus cried from the cross at the conclusion of His six-hour punishment for our sins, "It is finished -- paid in full." The reality of this finished work of Christ on our behalf means we should eagerly look for opportunities to be forgiving toward others in Christ, even as an expression of our gratitude for our having been graciously forgiven.

Our challenge is to believe the Gospel-- "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). Then you will be able increasingly to, "bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13)

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