

## The New Covenant and the Forgiveness of Sins

June 20, 2021

In recent weeks, we have given our attention to two stories in the early chapters of Luke's Gospel that are anchored by the dramatic pronouncement of Jesus that your sins are forgiven. He utters these words, first, to a man who was suffering from a complete body paralysis having lost the use of his arms and legs. He was what we today call a quadriplegic. Then two chapters later, Jesus utters these same words to a woman who was a notorious "sinner" snared in the dark, dirty, and diseased life of prostitution.

So early in Jesus' ministry we see demonstrated what we know from Jeremiah's prophecy of the New Covenant is the foundational truth upon which all the other blessings of the New Covenant are founded. The final and foundational promise of the New Covenant declares, "For I will forgive all your iniquity, and your sins I will remember no more." Luke showcases in the early ministry of Jesus this foundational promise upon which all the other promises of the New Covenant are based by, first, telling the story of a paralytic brought to Jesus to be healed.

The crowd is so large that the entrance to the house is jammed with people, and many are standing outside the house. So Jesus was teaching this massive crowd that had overwhelmed the house where He was staying, and arriving late were four men carrying a quadriplegic on his pallet. But because of the crowd, there was no way they could get to Jesus carrying a man on a pallet.

So, as we noted last week, they innovatively determine that the best way to gain access to Jesus was through the roof of the house. And they take their paralyzed friend up on top of the roof, proceed to tear a hole in the roof (not an easy task because it was a roof of heavy earthenware tiles), and then lower the man slowly by ropes down in front of Jesus. All their efforts were geared toward one end—that Jesus would heal their friend. Jesus saw the faith of these men, but oddly, as this man now lies on the floor in front of Jesus, His first words to the man are, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." But these opening words don't seem to fit the occasion. This man was obviously brought to Jesus to be healed of his devastating paralysis. His life was nothing but a 24-hour-a-day struggle to survive. Every need in his life had to be attended and cared for by the uninterrupted compassion and sacrifice of others, and Jesus turns and announces to him, "your sins are forgiven you."

But Jesus knows exactly what he is doing. **His pronouncement of sins forgiven triggered an immediate reaction from the scribes and Pharisees who had come from all over Galilee and Judea and even from Jerusalem.** They had arrived early enough to be sitting in the house. When they hear Jesus' first words to the man, they began reasoning in their hearts, "*Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?*"

**Jesus** knows the thoughts of these scribes and Pharisees, and so He challenges them, "*Which is easier to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven you, or to say, 'Arise, take up your bed and walk?'*" And Jesus doesn't wait for the reply because the answer is obvious. So He continues, "*But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.*" He turns and says to the paralytic, "I

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say to you, arise, take up your pallet, and go to your house.” And Luke reports, “Immediately he arose before them, took up his pallet, and departed to his own house, glorifying God, and all were amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We never saw anything like this!’”

***Jesus makes His power to heal evidence of His authority to forgive sin, and in the process joins together two blessings that David had earlier declared to be the first benefits that belonged to those in covenant union with the God of Israel.*** In Psalm 103:2-3, David writes, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits, who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases. ” Jesus takes these same two benefits and ties them together at the very beginning of His ministry as He proves He can forgive sins by healing a quadriplegic whose limbs are totally paralyzed.

Similarly, two chapters later in Luke 7, we looked at the story of this woman who wears the notorious title of “sinner” for her reprehensible lifestyle of prostitution. It seems she had recently heard Jesus teach on the forgiveness of sins and hope was stirred in her heart that it was possible that her sins, which were many, could be forgiven. Then she learns that this same Jesus, who had ignited the hope of forgiveness that she had thought she was long passed, had been invited to dinner in, of all places, the home of this well-known Galilean Pharisee. So she hastens to the Pharisee’s residence to join the crowd in an attempt to see and hear the dinnertime exchanges that will soon transpire between Jesus and this Pharisee and his friends.

However, before the dinner even begins, she is shocked to behold the way Jesus is being treated by this proud Pharisee. He had neglected the common courtesies that were due Jesus as an invited guest. The dishonor and neglect being shown to Jesus stirs her deeply, and she erupts in an uncontrollable sea of tears that moves her to burst in upon the dinner to do nothing more than bestow on Jesus the honor that his host had neglected to give Him. She had recently heard Jesus’ message of sins forgiven and she hoped against hope that somehow she might find that forgiveness for her shameful life of harlotry, which was her only means of survival. In this moment, she only wants to honor the One who had ignited this hope of forgiveness in her heart!

Let’s do a quick anatomy of what was going on in this woman’s heart. Her bold but humble display reveals a heart in which a new hope is merging with gratitude that her sins can be forgiven and cleansed. When true faith is awakened in the human heart, it begins as a developing hope that grows stronger as it merges with irresistible waves of gratitude for a grace that sweeps in upon the soul. This was happening to this woman in this moment in the home of a self-righteous Pharisee, all unbeknownst to him, because he had no eyes to see what was truly happening. Then Jesus turns to address Simon the Pharisee, and he rehearses his failures as a host when measured against the humble details of this woman’s honor that in no way suggested the hidden tricks she had used in her profession to draw men into her seductive web. Ironically, there was nothing impure in the actions of this well-known and well-trafficked prostitute!

But Jesus, as He looks upon the tears and the humble actions of this woman, turns to her and says, “Your sins, which are many, have been forgiven.” The immediate response of Simon and his guests

reflects the same response as the Pharisees in Luke 5, “Who does this man think he is that he can forgive sins!” And with this passing note of Pharisaical contempt for Jesus’ announcement of sins forgiven, Luke immediately returns to Jesus’ words over this broken woman. He says, “your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” Jesus’ closing words, “Go in peace,” are more than a mere benedictory dismissal. The powerful Hebrew word, *shalom*, gave to her the firm assurance that her life from this moment forward would be walked out in the confident assurance of a protective covering of peace that would provide a sure rescue from the condemning memories and horrors and ravages of her past. She will walk the rest of her days in the realm of grace-given well-being that will communicate a quiet rest to her soul. She will live in peace because she had been drawn out of the miry pit of her sin and the dungeon of her despair. Paul pointed out to me two weeks ago that Luke’s report of the women who provided a support structure for Jesus’ ministry may have included this woman rescued from a life of prostitution (Lk 8:2-3).

These stories that Luke places in the early months of Jesus’ ministry are intended to show us two things: (1) how corrupted with ceremonial legalism of Old Covenant Judaism had become by the time Christ arrives in the first century, and (2) there is a new hope that is being previewed in this man and this woman. They are the firstfruits of a new community being assembled under the provisions of a new covenant. They are the early representatives of a new community that is on the drawing boards known as “the community of the forgiven.” This community will also be known as the Church of Jesus Christ and the New Israel of God, established as the new people of God living under a glorious New Covenant.

Thus, these two stories of “forgiven ones” in Luke 5 and Luke 7 become types of the vast multitude that will be gathered in from every nation, tribe, and tongue to be established as called out assemblies of God’s people known uniquely as “the community of the forgiven.” These two stories present a man and a woman who become types of the church, demonstrating ahead of schedule the kinds of people that God in His grace intends to number as those whose sins are forgiven. It will be the “not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble,” that Paul describes in I Corinthians 1. These are the ones who receive this gift of sins forgiven because they are the ones who have been awakened to want it. Forgiveness will never be known and experienced among the proud who imagined that they have earned it. It can only be found among those who come to Christ with the empty hands of faith declaring their own bankruptcy of righteousness, and their need of righteousness of Christ alone.

The forgiveness of sins is the critically necessary foundation for the hope of salvation throughout Scripture, and as it turns out, it is the foundation stone on which the New Covenant is laid. As we enter the NT, we have arrived at a critical nexus in human history. On the one side, the corrupt religion of Judaism had grown in post-exilic Israel under the foreign and pagan influence of Babylon and the mystery religions alongside the accumulating oral traditions of the elders, and all of these defiled elements had converged on Israel, moving them further and further from their revealed roots and the authentic knowledge of God recorded in the canon of the OT Scriptures.

The intertestamental period with its 400 years of divine silence from Malachi, the final prophetic voice of the OT until the arrival of John the Baptist as the NT opens witnessed the growth of a Judaism that



was an increasingly corrupt man-made religious system manufacturing a schema of works righteousness that was foreign to both Moses and David who were the chief architects of the worship of God under the Old Covenant. Both Moses and David saw their work in the purposes of God as anticipations of a coming kingdom that would be inaugurated in the person and work of the Coming Messianic Redeemer who would be greater than Moses and greater than David and would bring all the types and shadows of the Old Covenant to their fulfillment. The revelation of God in the OT is not complete by itself. It only finds its completion in the story of the Christ that opens the NT and is told in the four gospels.

It is only in the coming of this Messianic Redeemer that the promised blessedness of sins forgiven will become a truth that is covenantally enshrined as the foundation of the New Covenant ratified by the shed blood of God's Messiah, Christ Jesus our Lord! This is the blessedness of sins forgiven, but I want to attach to our celebration of sins forgiven a balancing truth also taught in the NT. **Acknowledging God's forgiveness of our sins and walking in the light of that forgiveness are two entirely different matters. In fact, walking in the light of God's forgiveness is arguably the most difficult undertaking of our Christian walk. It is one of the hardest activities to which we are called as the people of God. It takes us a lifetime of hard, uphill climbing to take full possession of and truly walk in all the fullness of God's gift of forgiveness. Now I know what you're thinking? How can walking in the gift of the forgiveness of our sins be one of the most difficult endeavors of our Christian life? Why would we have any difficulty receiving and walking in God's forgiveness?**

The reason I say this is because of what Jesus declares to be the clear and irrefutable evidence that we have truly received and are walking out the gift of heaven's forgiveness. ***Jesus makes plain that the one and only proof that we have received God's forgiveness is that we forgive others their offenses against us.***

Remember how Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer *"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."* (Matt 6:9-13). Why would Jesus instruct us to pray this way? We are told to only ask God to forgive as we forgive others. *Doesn't that mean that we are setting up our forgiveness to be earned? Isn't Jesus making God forgiving us contingent on our forgiving others?* Adding to the problem, this is the only petition in His model prayer that Jesus singles out for further comment. It is the one petition that is worded in such a way that it would stir the kinds of troubling questions we are raising right now! So Jesus adds as He concludes His instruction on prayer: *"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses"* (Matt 6:14-15). What is Jesus saying here? What does He mean?

Now in pursuing an answer to these questions, we must first note something important! ***When Jesus adds His comment about forgiving others, He changes the word that he used in the prayer.*** In the prayer He uses the word *"debt"* to describe sin. But here when He comments on the prayer He uses the word *"trespasses"* to describe sin. What's the difference between the two? How is a debt distinguished from a trespass?

Here's the difference in a nutshell. "Trespasses" describe the particular form that sin has taken in your individual history. It tells you **how** you are a sinner. It reveals the pattern of your own personal deviation from God's will. It reveals the way sin and sin patterns have been passed down to you from your parents and grandparents and great grandparents. It reveals the pattern of besetting sins that mark your life. Trespasses are the unique manifestations of sin that come forth in your life. The pattern and description

of “trespasses” in your life history is different from anyone else’s. It describes your unique history in sin. That’s trespasses!

What then are “debts”? Well, debts are the specific ways that someone’s pattern of “trespasses” impacts, wounds, and victimizes others. It’s trespass making a direct hit into someone’s life. “Debt” looks at the personal impact that someone’s sin makes against you. Debt is what leaves you reeling. It drops you into emotional turmoil—shock, anger fear and confusion all converge into one another You find yourself the victim of someone else’s trespasses.

***What this says is that our patterns of “trespasses” are so full of liability that we are constantly making ourselves debtors to one another by our failures. We all still carry the marks of sin in our lives, such that at some point and in some way, we all will eventually disappoint and fail one another! We create debts with one another, which requires us continually to both seek and extend the mercy of forgiveness to one another.***

So when we stand as the victim of someone else’s sin against us, it reveals to us how to pray for that person, because “debts” uncover the unique pattern of “trespasses” that plague the walk and experience of another person. And so we pray: *“Lord, I see the struggle that my brother or my sister is going through by the way they have sinned against me and others. Lord, I ask that you would rescue them from the bondage and shame of those “trespasses.” I cover the trespasses that have made this debt with me, I cover them in the same forgiveness with which you have covered my massive debts to you; and the trespasses that created those debts, I cover them in the same forgiveness that you extend to my trespasses in the sacrifice of your Son and my Savior.”*

***Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness, in this setting of the Lord’s prayer, strikes at the heart of one of the biggest spiritual battles that we all face in the outworking of our salvation: the unrelenting challenge to forgive the debts and trespasses of others against us.*** Jesus warns us that we must not be deceived—that we cannot be forgiven without being forgiving. He declares this truth: ***forgiven people are forgiving people!*** He reminds us that each time someone sins against us, we are called to remember how boundless has been God’s mercy toward us in the forgiveness of our sins. And that reminder should make us ready to forgive the shortcomings and failures of those who have sinned against us.

***Why does Jesus make this point with such force and urgency?*** Because where there is a persistent unwillingness to forgive the trespasses of others, a question is raised about how much the forgiveness of heaven is really cherished. Those who treat the forgiveness of heaven lightly have not come to grips with the staggering debt that their sins have constituted to a holy God! And the consequence produced in their lives is a great struggle in forgiving the shortcomings and failures of others. ***And by making it a part of a daily prayer that Jesus gives us to pray, He is telling us we must be reminded of this daily!***

***So Jesus is giving us a test! The index by which we measure the value we place on heaven’s forgiveness is how it moves us to forgive others.*** The forgiveness of sins is the first gift of heaven as the blessings of salvation begin to flow into our lives, and the power of God’s forgiveness in the human soul immediately lays siege against the torments of a guilty conscience and rebuilds our conscience around the joyous knowledge we have been received into the favor of heaven through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. ***When heaven’s forgiveness approximates this kind of worth and value in our hearts,***

**it necessarily and certainly stirs in us a readiness to forgive as we have been forgiven. So how fully we have received the blessing of forgiveness is measured by how freely we turn around and distribute forgiveness to others.**

Jesus thus through the vehicle of instructing how we are to pray is pressing us with this challenge: ***Is it a treasure that outweighs any pain or injustice you have suffered at the hands of others in this life that your sins are eternally forgiven? Is God's forgiveness of your sins so valuable to you that you will be willing to follow your heavenly Father's example and forgive all the shortcomings and failures of others against you?*** These questions are important, because you see. .if there is a complete absence of a heart to forgive others who have wronged us, then no high value has been placed on the forgiveness of heaven, and where heaven's forgiveness is not treasured, the genuineness of our embrace of the grace of God in salvation must be questioned. Here's where we end up. ***True, saving faith lays a tight hold on and cradles to the breast the most precious treasure of God's forgiveness. And the outworking of this embrace of heaven's forgiveness is its inevitable expression in relationships with one another.***

***Now the place where this is tested the most is in the context of committed relationships, especially in the home, the family, and the church.*** It is tested in the unrelenting challenge to forgive fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, or the close circle of friends that make up our communities of faith.

Why am I giving so much attention to this matter of forgiveness? Because ***this is the foundation out of everything good in the New Covenant flows, including our emotional, spiritual, and physical healing.*** Here's the truth to lay hold of: Because God is a forgiving God, He is a healing God! These two are inseparable accompaniments of each other. Our healing always touches multiple levels in varying proportions—the emotional, the spiritual, and the physical. These are not separable categories in our lives. We cannot rigidly distinguish between emotional and spiritual illness, which inevitably also carry in them physical implications. God is concerned about the whole person: body, soul, spirit, mind, will, and emotions.

So if we harbor grudges, offenses, anger bitterness, and unforgiveness against someone, we create the conditions in which emotional, spiritual, and physical ill health and disease will grow. And when we let loose of those grudges, offenses, anger and bitterness by forgiving the offenses of others, we establish the foundations for our own healing in all the dimensions of life—emotional, spiritual, and physical.

The same is true at the corporate level of the church body. ***If we create a setting where the unconditional love and forgiveness of heaven find continual expression in our relationships one with another, we are establishing our church as a place where healing can and will follow in all its multiplied dimensions!***