

**The Forgiveness of Sins:
The Gift That Matures Love and Compassion in Christ's Body
July 11, 2021**

Several weeks ago we engaged in a study focusing on the distinguishing foundation stone laid in the New Covenant that formed the basis for the creation of a new Israel whose identity would not be founded on blood kinship, but on faith that would draw together a new people from all the nations of the earth. That foundation stone was the unilateral and unconditional promise that God declared through Jeremiah, "For I will forgive all their iniquity, and their sins I will remember no more." This was the promissory foundation laid in the New Covenant that God would make with a new Israel upon whose hearts the law would be written in its redemptively-matured and fulfilled form, ratified by the perfect obedience and voluntary self-sacrifice of a new sinless Covenant Mediator who would free all its covenant beneficiaries from the bondage and guilt of sin and cancel the condemnation of the Old Covenant entered under Moses at Sinai.

We began this study highlighting the New Covenant promise of sins forgiven that creates a new "community of the forgiven" aka the church of Jesus Christ. We are now broadening our investigation to note how the promises enumerated in the New Covenant laid upon the foundation of sins forgiven in fact leads us into the discovery of five identifying descriptions of the church as the New Covenant people of God.

We noted in our study last week that these five identifying markers of the early church are given their skeletal introduction in the twin volumes authored by Luke the physician—the Gospel bearing his name and the book of Acts. With these two books, interestingly, Luke becomes the single largest contributor to the NT. His two books by themselves make up 26% of the entire NT. The thirteen epistles of Paul are a close second making up 24% of all the NT.¹

Building off of Luke's foundational summary of the identifying descriptions of God's New Covenant people, the rest of the NT fills in and develops these five identifying markers. These five summary descriptions are derived both directly and indirectly (i.e., implicationally) from the language of the New Covenant laid out in Jeremiah (31:31-34) and Ezekiel (36:26-27). God's new called-out community from the nations is all of the following embroidered into one beautifully woven tapestry. They are:

- (1) the community of the forgiven,
- (2) the community of the outpoured Spirit,
- (3) the true spiritual seed of Abraham by faith,
- (4) the blessed citizens of the eschatological Zion, the City of God, living out their high calling in this present evil world,
- (5) the remnant of the last days, called to be ambassadors of the Christ whose kingdom was *inaugurated* in His first Advent and will be fully *consummated* in His second Advent.

¹ Paul becomes the largest contributor to the NT if he also wrote the book of Hebrews, as some have contended at various time through church history. Whoever the author of Hebrews was, however, it seems he may have wanted to keep his identity hidden in the light of his larger purpose to develop a treatise demonstrating the absolute and unrivaled supremacy of Christ above both angels and men. In any case, together, Luke and Paul author half (and perhaps more) of the NT.

We touched on the first of these identifying descriptions three weeks ago in our study of forgiveness and the New Covenant, and last week we looked at the birth of the church unveiled as God's new called-out community by the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The third identifying description is what we are studying together in Paul's Wednesday night study of the book of Galatians. The fourth identifying description of the church as the eschatological Zion, the city of God, is going to take a little longer to develop, because it will take us on a brief excursion into the book of Revelation to give substance and significance to this description.

This morning's message is going to connect most seamlessly with our study three weeks ago of forgiveness and the New Covenant. So I would commend to you a review of that study alongside what we will cover today. God has ordained and appointed the growth of our understanding, appreciation, and joy in His forgiving mercies, precisely as we learn to value that forgiveness by our forgiving others of their debts and shortcomings toward us. The reality that we all live with this side of our final rescue from sin and being clothed in resurrection glory is that we are all still "with spot and wrinkle" as we await our future glory when our failures and our besetting sins will no longer plague us.

We addressed this issue of the difficulty of receiving God's forgiveness in our study three weeks ago, and we also touched briefly on the continuing work that God has to do in our hearts to bring us into the full joy of our forgiveness. What that means is that the path along which we walk in fully receiving God's forgiveness is long and slow, and one that will be marked by many challenging seasons, some of which may be quite painful. One of the sure indicators that we have not yet reached the full joy of sins forgiven is the rut we all too easily fall into where we begin to feel the nagging weight and burden of guilt over our still besetting sins, and it sometimes creates moments of doubt where we begin to question whether our sins are truly forgiven. We become so burdened by sin patterns that remain in our lives that we begin to secretly think that somehow we owe God a better effort to free ourselves from those besetting sins. We start to wonder if God doesn't grow tired of our repeated failures to walk in victory over certain sin patterns that continue to plague us. Guilt begins to accumulate in our souls and we begin to wonder if God's pronouncement of sins forgiven remains true as the battle with our sin becomes a greater labor and is marked by a deeper sense of our sinfulness. Even if we still hang on to the belief that God has forgiven us, it becomes increasingly difficult to forgive ourselves.

And we end up landing in a place where we declare, "I know God has forgiven me, but I just can't forgive myself." Ironically, however this is not just about a deepening sense of our own sinfulness. Sometimes, in fact I suspect most of the time, it is an indicator of a secret, unacknowledged pride. So we, incentivized by a hidden pride, become committed to an enterprise of self-forgiveness, which is what we want to analyze (and maybe more accurately cross-examine) to expose this spiritual snare this morning. We imagine that we are still honoring the fact that God has forgiven us, but we impose on that divine verdict our own requirement of self-forgiveness, which is a deadly spiritual snare and deception. We will summarize in our study today **five observations** that grow out of the deadly snare of self-forgiveness.

Observation 1. A preoccupation with self-forgiveness means that you are making yourself a stricter and a higher judge to which you are accountable above God Himself. It is as if you have elevated yourself to the Supreme Court justice in God's courtroom, and you have the power to challenge God's lower court ruling regarding your sin. But if the supreme and holy God first condemns your sin but then arranges to give you a Redeemer and Advocate who both takes the guilt of your crime and then advocates for you as forgiven under the terms of God's law, and thereby rescues you from the condemnation of your sin, who are you to reserve the right to judge otherwise? Are you a greater judge than God? So a preoccupation with self-

forgiveness produces a mindset that moves you to imagine that you are a greater judge than God. It may sound like the decent and upright thing to do to take responsibility for your sinful actions even if it means spurning God's forgiveness secured in His Son, but it is in fact an expression of an even worse sin, of an incredible hubris and pride that makes you imagine there must be another way that I can obtain forgiveness by my own effort that will quiet my guilty, accusing conscience.

Observation 2: A preoccupation with self-forgiveness exposes a heart that still looks to an idol for justification instead of trusting God. And the idol in this case is oneself. Tim Keller describes this scenario beautifully. He says, "When people say, 'I know God forgives me, but I can't forgive myself, they mean that they have failed to please their idol (self), whose approval is more important than God's.'" Self-worship has replaced God-worship in the vain pursuit of self-forgiveness!

Observation 3: A preoccupation with self-forgiveness engages you in the belief that your sin is somehow a bigger deal to you than it is to God. You think, "Of course, God has forgiven me," as if that were a small thing for Him to do! The fact is that God is always the most offended by our sin, even when we sin against someone else. No one knows better than God just how big a deal our sin truly is. It cost God His infinitely perfect Son to purchase our redemption and the forgiveness of our sins.

David confesses in his penitential psalm when his double sin of adultery and murder was exposed, "Against you, *you only*, have I sinned" (Ps 51:4). Consider how David sinned! He neglected his army during wartime, he got the wife of one of his most loyal soldiers pregnant, and then he had his loyal soldier murdered to hide it (2 Sam 11:1-12:14). He sinned against *everybody*. Yet in his confession, he saw his debt to God towering over his debt to everyone else. It is the height of self-centeredness and self-deception to think your sin somehow offends you, or anyone else, more than it offends God.

Observation 4: Feeling unforgiven may mean that you really have not honestly confessed your sin to God. This is one of the more pernicious sins hidden in pride. In this case, you feel unforgiven because you are unforgiven. What does it mean to feel unforgiven because you are unforgiven? It means that without confession I remain unforgiven, not because God doesn't forgive, but because ***a refusal to confess your sins is a rejection of forgiveness***. Refusing to confess, I refuse to acknowledge my need of forgiveness, so I do not seek it. ***This was the sin of the Pharisees. When they went out to see John in the wilderness, they did not receive his baptism of repentance with its promise of sins forgiven because they had no sins to confess.***

Observation 5: It gives a false sense of control to think you have the last word on your own forgiveness. You want to reserve to yourself what debts you will let God cancel and what debts you will continue to hold yourself accountable for. So you become the determiner of how much you are truly forgiven of. You hang on to some debts imagining you must work hard to gain God's favor by cancelling those debts by your own performance. You may even feel noble for not letting yourself off the hook; it's your respectable show of penance. This is the deadliest snare of all! It is better to be broken and desperate for God's grace and mercy, better to humbly accept God's gift by faith and paint the blood of the Lamb on the doorposts of your heart, and better to find your joy in the sweet release of knowing that every debt is cancelled.

These five expressions of a hidden pride set a legalistic, sin-entangling, joy-robbing snare in our walk with Christ. They also leave us vulnerable to the popular counterfeit forgiveness being touted in secular psychology.

Secular counseling therapy in our day has attempted to borrow from the capital of forgiveness that is the hallmark of authentic Christianity. But in borrowing it, they have twisted it into a counterfeit forgiveness that has debased the true character of genuine biblical forgiveness. Secular psychology fixes attention only on the benefits that accrue to you personally in forgiving someone. It becomes forgiveness for solely selfish reasons. It is not uncommon in secular counseling circles to hear a therapist talk about forgiveness as a choice that is in your best interests because it releases you from anger, hatred, bitterness, and resentment toward those who have offended or hurt you.

This kind of forgiveness has nothing to do with the rescuing benefit your forgiveness might have in the life of the person who has wronged you. The only reference point is its benefits to you and it stops there. This is not the kind of forgiveness that is appointed to characterize the people of God. Authentic biblical forgiveness is built on the hope of seeing the rescue of the one who has wounded and wronged you, and therefore it ends up in fervent prayer for God's gift of saving repentance to be given to the person who has sinned against you or for God's deepening work of repentance will take root in the heart of one who has claimed faith in Christ but who for some reason has remained insensitive to sin in his/her life that is destructive to the bond that should exist in the community of God's people.

The value of Christian forgiveness, therefore, is not measured solely by its healing benefits to you personally. True biblical forgiveness extends its healing mercies to the person who has wronged you as well. The truth is that we all leave deficits in our relationships with one another that require our diligent attentiveness to kindness, humility, meekness, and longsuffering with one another. We all carry our own unique limitations and weaknesses that run the risk of leaving debts in our relationships, which is why Paul describes our interactions in the body of Christ as being directed by forbearing one another and forgiving one another (Eph 4:2). Forgiveness is thus designed to extend a healing impact throughout all the relationships in the community of faith, and not just become a personal psychological maneuver to quell negative emotions toward someone with whom we will never have a deep or trusted bond. Paul counsels us as Ephesians 4 closes,

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

We should forgive as God in Christ has forgiven us. There are several implications that grow out of this command. We consider these in closing this morning. First, we are reminded in the model prayer that Jesus gave to His church that we are to forgive the debts that inevitably accompany our sins against one another. Jesus wants us to think about how our sins create debts with one another. God knows and sees exactly the debt, the deficit, that is the devastation and damage intrinsic to our sin. He knows exactly how each of us are sinners. By calling our sins "debts," He wants us to think about how our sin carries the potential of damaging, defacing, and impairing our relationships with one another. It is this dangerous potential in our sins that is to be the specific object of our mercy in forgiving one another.

Second, we should recognize and expect that a heart of forgiveness will be costly in this life, but it will be full of infinitely greater reward in the next life. In the same manner, God has freely forgiven us in this age, but it cost Him the gift of the one and only sinless Son in whom His soul delights, but in the age to come, it will be the Father's great delight to give His glorious Son a pure and perfect bride clothed in all the glory of the salvation purchased for her in the sacrifice of the Son.

Similarly, it cost the Son Himself an unimaginable price to win His bride. In self-emptying love, He descended from heaven to take on the likeness of sinful humanity, yet without any sin of His own. He

endured the humiliation and pain of mockery, contempt, betrayal, slander rejection, and the ultimate suffering of separation from His Father when on Calvary's cross He was made the sin-bearer described by Isaiah as the One on whom the Lord has laid the iniquity of us all (Isa 53:6). The full text of Isaiah 53:6 reads,

All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Let me give you the picture conveyed in the verb "has laid on Him." The stem of the Hebrew verb used here is causative, and the base meaning of the word involves the violent action of casting upon, throwing down upon with great force. So the integrated sense of the base meaning and the Hebrew stem employed here conveys a picture and a sense that is much stronger and more violent than the way it reads in our English translations. The verse says, "the Lord caused our iniquity to be cast upon, to be thrown down upon His sin-bearing Servant." The picture is a violent one. It is describing the crushing weight of our sin landing in a sudden jolting moment on the Son who was hanging on Calvary's cross. I suspect that this crushing blow was felt by Jesus at the precise moment when He cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?" That may also have been the moment of the great darkness that fell over Golgotha as the shadow of the dark asteroid of our sin accelerated to its targeted landing place on God's Son and as it landed the earth shook in the earthquake that Matthew reports while Jesus was on the cross. This is the moment described in the violent verb Isaiah uses to picture the precise moment in time that God's Servant became our sin-bearer. The Son who was one in the impenetrable bond of Triune glory with the Father and the Spirit was in that one eternal moment all alone, and the eternal and unbreakable bond between the Father and the Son in the perfection of God's tri-unity was stressed as it would never be stressed again. This was the great cost of our redemption! It was as if the weight of all the sins of God's people who would become the heirs of salvation landed like a giant asteroid on God's Son hanging suspended between heaven and earth on that day in a moment that will stand throughout eternity as the moment of our redemption from sin.

This was the cost attached to God's forgiveness and the cleansing of all our sins. And we will grow in our grasp of God's great gift as we are led by God's Spirit to walk on similar paths that our Savior walked in securing our forgiveness of sins.

The potential costliness of forgiveness that we learn comes when we find ourselves in situations that summon us to learn the price Christ paid to win our forgiveness. In Romans 5:8 we learn something of the forgiveness that models the love of Christ, "But God commended (put on display) His love to us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." touches the higher realm of Christ's forgiveness. It is a forgiveness that models the love of Christ, which Romans 5:8 declares is "while we were sinners." Sinners is one of three interchangeable labels the apostle uses in this same context. We are also called "ungodly" (vs. 6) and "enemies" (vs. 10). This final epithet, enemies, also is joined by Jesus to the love command in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus says that the command to love your neighbor must be elevated to include the command to love your enemies. This kind of love is only possible from a heart that has transformed by His redeeming love. Loving a neighbor becomes particularly costly when that neighbor is also an enemy. So Jesus raised the stakes in loving our neighbors when he taught us to love even our enemies—to pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us, to do good to those who hate us, and to bless those who curse us. How we treat our enemies is the ultimate test of our love for God and neighbor. Is it possible to love your enemy and not forgive him? Not according to the cross. Christ's love is expressed through a sacrifice that purchased the forgiveness of sins for enemies! So the love of Christ showcased in

the gospel cannot be separated from forgiveness. Therefore, forgiveness must be understood as an expression of love, which includes what we must also note includes “enemy love.” This kind of forgiveness can only flow from a redeemed heart and is the direct work of God's love in us that compels us to give ourselves for another despite being sinned against, so that the forgiven ones receive a demonstration of God's infinite love.

With these understandings of the love and forgiveness showcased in the gospel, two conclusions stand out: (1) forgiveness can be seen as loving another despite being sinned against, and (2) both love and forgiveness in God's people spring from the fountainhead of God's redeeming love in Christ.

Robert Cheong has written an unpublished doctoral dissertation entitled, “Toward an Explicitly Theocentric Model of Forgiveness,” in which he describes the power of forgiveness to absorb the sins of others against us without stirring in us the impulse of a retaliatory vengeance. He says that absorption is at the heart of forgiveness, since it involves the ability to deal with hurt or pain in a way that will prevent it from being passed on to others and running the risk of requiring others to accept our offense and become defiled by our root of bitterness against someone. It is, as Tolstoy put it, a forgiveness that “swallows” evil and prevent it from going further

On the cross, Jesus overcame evil with good; He didn't return evil for evil; He didn't pass on the evil by seeking revenge; He absorbed it (Romans 12: 21 | Peter 2: 23). The only way we can truly absorb evil—the only way we can forgive—is to “roll it over” on Jesus who deals with it for us in perfect love and justice. To do that is to show love for our enemy because our desire that he should know the love and forgiveness of Jesus is greater than our desire to wreak vengeance upon him. It is in these kinds of crisis situations that we learn to forgive, and in learning to forgive we grow in our love and appreciation for God's infinite forgiveness displayed in our salvation. This is the kind of growth that Christ appoints in His church to raise up communities of faith who will incarnate His life as a people who have learned forgiveness by growing in a love that rejoices in God's forgiveness in Christ.