



For the last eight weeks, we have been studying the Apostles' Creed and we're going to do so again today as we look at *the forgiveness of sins*. During these eight weeks, we've been examining each phrase of the Apostles' Creed and the scriptures that justify and explain why each phrase is foundational to our Christian faith. During these weeks, we've learned new information and been reminded of foundational Biblical truths.

Our topic for today, *the forgiveness of sins*, stands as close to the center of Christian beliefs as any other topic. And yet, it is a topic that is not apart of most world religions. So in that way, it is a topic that distinguishes Christianity and is profoundly misunderstood by many people.

Let me give you some examples of how people mistakenly deal with sin:

» Do not believe in sin. A Buddhist or Hindu does not believe in sin. If you were to ask them, "What do you think a person ought to do about their sin?", they would probably respond, "What sin?" Therefore there is nothing to be forgiven.

» Similar in thought is a Secular Humanist or New Ager. They do not believe in sin either. Their thinking would go along these lines: Humanity, by nature, is good; we have either forgotten our true "good" nature or been negatively influenced by the evil in the world. These opinions are quite popular in America today. You most likely know people who think this way. And there is a logical sense to this thinking because if you have no solution for the sin and rebellion in the hearts of humanity, think of the appeal of blaming it on the evil around you. Singer Shaun Mullins represents this idea with the lyrics, "Born to shimmer. Born to shine. Born to radiate. Born to live. Born to love. But we'll teach him how to hate."

» Sin is real but sin isn't too bad. This is seen in the general non-spiritual person. This person might not have thought a lot about the nature of spirituality. They would buy into the general concepts of sin but haven't given it significant thought. The phrase, "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas" epitomizes this philosophy. This phrase acknowledges that something wrong is being done (sin), but it's not serious. Instead, it's fun, if done within the right environment.

» Sin is real and dealt with through faith and a lot of individual effort. Muslims, Mormons and Jews fit in this category. They would say, "A person's sins can be forgiven or removed with a

combination of faith and serving, rituals, helping, giving money, baptizing, moving toward moral purity, attending worship services, and on and on."

The Bible describes sin and forgiveness from sin in the most radical of ways. God goes where no other world religion or philosophy dares to go. The Bible describes sin in the starkest, vilest of terms. "*There is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves, their tongues practice deceit*" (Romans 3:12–13). It describes forgiveness in the most extravagant, beautiful of terms. "*And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of his blood – to be received by faith*" (Romans 3:24–25).

God deals with sin like a tell-it-like-it-is doctor. Upon investigation, the doctor pronounces, "I'm very sorry to inform you that you are deathly ill. Without treatment you will die, I guarantee it. I know what you're probably thinking, 'I want a second opinion. Certainly the situation can't be that bad.'" So the doctor would say, "Save your time, I'm the best, most experienced doctor in this field. That's the bad news. However, there's good news too. I can cure you." It's a combination of the worst possible news and the best possible news.

Jesus describes and explains these extremes in a parable known as the prodigal son.

**Jesus continued:** "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his

son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate (Luke 15:11–24).

Jesus describes the forgiveness of God in four ways.

### **God's Forgiveness is Assertive.**

The father takes the first move to embrace his son. Verse 20 tells us that the father breaks into a sprint as soon as he sees his son on the horizon. This is assertive, active forgiveness. Understand, since they are an honor culture, the son has deeply shamed his father when he asked for his inheritance and then squandered it. It would be logical to think, here comes the son for more of my money and stuff.

In verse 20, when it says the father threw his arms around him, this literally means the father "fell on his neck." The father does not wait for an explanation. The father does not casually wait for the long walk across the front yard.

Instead, at the first opportunity, the father is pumping his arms and lifting his knees as he sprints across the land in order to shower his son with extravagant love. In order for him to run, he would have lifted his robes, exposed his lower legs and dishonored himself. The father doesn't care about appearances or his reputation—there's his son! The greater goes to the lesser. *"But here is how God has shown his love for us. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:8).

To show his assertiveness, God the Father moved toward humanity before they asked. In Jesus Christ coming to earth, God humbled Himself. As Jesus was stripped naked and crucified on a cross, God the Father was humbled. All because God was assertively coming after us, to give us His love.

The Christian Church should operate likewise. We should forgive others with this kind of grace and assertiveness.

### **God's Forgiveness Involves Sacrifice.**

The son has taken a third (or half?) of the father's wealth, then squandered it. The son has disgraced his father. The father's social standing was dealt a fatal blow when his son left. He would never regain his status.

The father and son know this. No attempt is made in this story to minimize the rebellion of the son. No attempt is made to sugarcoat the sin of the son. It stares at us starkly in the face. In his desperation, the son intends to grovel when he returns, begging kindness from his dad; acknowledging his wrong.

**"Father, I have sinned against heaven and you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants" (verses 18–19).**

The son probably intends to earn back the money he took and wasted. Yet the father is ready to absorb the cost of restoring his relationship with his son. He instructs his servants to get...

The best robe—no questions asked. This would have been his robe; what he would have worn when he went out into his culture of honor.

Ring—the family seal; what he would wear when he went out to do trading on behalf of the family.

Both of these acts are stunning and shocking acts of sacrifice. The father's acts show that there will be absolutely no confusion about the attempt to re-earn trust. The son will **not** bear the cost of rebuilding their severed relationship. Instead, the father will sacrificially bear the entire cost of reconciliation. The father will give everything. The son will give nothing.

The son would have hoped, under the best scenario, as he undertook the long journey home, that restoration might happen. Maybe dad will let me work as a servant. Never, in his wildest dreams, would he have envisioned such a sacrificial response from his father. The father immediately gave him full privilege and power in the family.

God the Father sacrificially absorbs the cost when He forgives us too. There is no possible way we could do enough work to satisfy the debt we owe. God knew that a restored relationship would never happen unless He bore the full cost. So God, moved by compassion, lovingly absorbed the full price of our rebellion. It cost him dearly. It cost the life of His only Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is asking us to forgive like this.

Remember, The Apostles' Creed is an individual and corporate confession. We not only receive forgiveness from God, we give forgiveness to one another, just like the Father gave to us. This is of particular importance because the early church was wrestling with granting forgiveness to people. How should they treat a Christian who recanted their faith under persecution? Some churches accepted them back into fellowship while some would not.

The Apostles' Creed addresses this topic in this simple phrase, *the forgiveness of sins*. The church is and will always be a place where forgiven sinners gather. The church is not a place for the holiest of people. It is not a place for the morally upright. And if you call yourself a church of Jesus Christ, you must accept sinners.

### **God's Forgiveness Comes From the Heart.**

**So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him (v. 20).**

Forgiving from the heart is the only way we can learn to forgive like God, filled with compassion. Compassion is the emotion Jesus felt in the Gospels, more than any other emotion. It ranks #1 on Jesus' emotional word list. Compassion = moved from the depths of our being, to act in love toward someone. Jesus is using His signature emotion in this story.

What do you suppose the father has been doing all these months? If he's like us, it was replaying the hurt done to him. Like a digital player, playing the hurtful conversation, over and over. And in my head, I know exactly what I'd say. I'd hurt them, cut them with my words, and injure them at least as much as I've been hurt. The bitterness feeds upon itself.

What about the father in this story? What was he doing during these months? I think he was envisioning himself running toward his son and kissing him and forgiving him. He had been replaying the hurtful words of his son, playing the conversation over and over. And his response was always kindness fueled with compassion. So when he saw his son approaching, he was ready to act in love.

This is how God the Father responds to us. He's thinking about granting us forgiveness. He's considered the cost and has already absorbed it. He is poised, ready, filled with excited anticipation, watching the horizon for our silhouette. He can't wait to see us! He can't wait to race to us, leaving dignity behind, wrap His arms around us and tell us, "You are forgiven."

But we have to turn toward Him. And after we do, when we hear "You are forgiven," we experience resurrection. *"The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing"* (Zephaniah 3:17).

If you are running away from God this morning, I want you to understand that when you are ready to turn back to Him, this is how He is going to respond to you: "You are forgiven."

### **God's Forgiveness Leads to Resurrection/Restoration.**

The father throws a party. The son has been restored. He has been resurrected, as if he were dead.

**"For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate (v. 24).**

Forgiveness from the father resurrects the son. Forgiveness from God brings us back to life. *"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins . . . But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved"* (Ephesians 2:1, 5). We have that fatal disease—sin. The doctor tells us the unfiltered truth about it, that we are dead. And forgiveness is the cure. Forgiveness brings us back to life.

Today we have the same power to give resurrection to one another. By sharing the forgiveness and love that God offers, we give people the chance at resurrection. When relationships are broken and severed, we can give restoration by forgiving them.

What does *I believe in the forgiveness of sins* mean for us as a church, now?

» We would perpetually live in the spirit of reconciliation. We don't allow for build-ups and grudges. We forgive gladly and quickly. Here's a simple test to see if you have a grudge—if someone's failure and hardship would bring you some sense of satisfaction, then you know you still have a grudge. In a Gospel community, we forgive. This is one of the ways we are set apart from the non-Christians around us.

» In the world we treat people with generosity and compassion instead of villainizing, belittling and berating them. When we have an opponent, we ask God to fill us with His compassion and love. We refuse to replay negative and hurtful conversations back in our minds. Christians should interact with people who profoundly disagree with us with generosity and compassion. We see them as a person who is just like we used to be, except for the grace and forgiveness that God the Father gave us.

» We are called to set people free from their past. Because of Jesus Christ, our past is gone. We are new creations. We are fundamentally changed. We should speak encouraging and edifying words to one another so that we are reminded of our forgiveness.

» We should deal honestly with our sin by admitting the full extent of our rebellion and turn toward God; admit our need for His saving grace; humble ourselves before Him and experience His forgiveness wash over us; fill us and restore us.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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