

THE DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS

By Rev. William A. Henderson, Sr.

What is forgiveness to you?

What does it mean to be forgiven?

What does it mean to forgive someone?

Do you think “we as the people we are today,” have a problem with forgiving one another?

What about within the church body?

DEFINITION:

The Christian doctrine of forgiveness is that God has lifted the sentence of condemnation upon Christians for their sins through the death of Christ on their behalf and no longer counts them as guilty.

- David VanDrunen

Forgiveness is necessary for two reasons:

1. Because God is just.
2. Because all humans are guilty of sin. (Romans 3:23)

God will never ignore the guilt of sin. He cannot because He is holy.

What does “holy” mean to you?

Rather than ignoring the guilt of sin, God who alone is fit to judge, became the one who was judged for the guilt of everyone. **This guilt was punished justly**, however the guilty received forgiveness instead of punishment. The punishment which the guilty **deserved** was laid upon the one who took their place and **“became sin”** for every one that we might be saved.

For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

2 Corinthians 5:21 KJV

Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree:

Galatians 3:13 KJV

God did not unfairly nor abusively punish his Son. Christ submitted to his Father’s will joyfully and willingly. This forgiveness provides the center of

the Christian proclamation in the world and should lead all those who have received it to rejoice and to praise God for His mercy and His grace.

Do you see us rejoicing in the church services today? Why or Why not?

Look with me at these words of the psalmist...

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.

Psalm 32:1-2 NIV

These two verses of scripture help us to understand how blessed we truly are. Yet we still come to church and so often sit in fear. What are we afraid of?

1. I wonder if the preacher is going to preach about me and my sins today?
2. I hope God doesn't expose me and the things I've done!
3. I hope the sermon doesn't draw any attention to me.

In all three statements above, who is the focus? And what is the focus on?

Everyone is afraid of having their sins exposed or put on public display. But you need to settle it in your heart and mind that all have sinned just like the Bible says! One of our problems is that **we have become judges of sins and have tried to reclassify them as minor sins and major sins.** Sin is sin, and **ALL** sin is hated by God! But there is no sin for which Jesus did not shed His blood, save blaspheming the Holy Spirit. (Mark 3:29 KJV)

I believe this is one of the main reasons people today refuse to come to worship. Nobody wants to have their sins exposed because exposure is embarrassing AND it hurts! And there are a lot of people who use just that: to justify not going to church. But by not coming many will never know that God's Word exposes **EVERYONE** to their own sins. From the greatest to the least, the Word of God exposes each of us to our own sins! Nobody else knows what the Holy Spirit is saying to you in service as the Word of God is preached!

And by not coming people also miss out on knowing about God's forgiveness. Look again at the opening words of Psalm 32, but this time read them as past tense; as a person who has been redeemed.

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.

Psalm 32:1-2 NIV

But there is one more thing I would like for you to wrestle with. The last part of verse 2. It says, "*and in whose spirit is no deceit.*"

Deceit – (Merriam-Webster)

The act of causing someone to accept as true or valid what is false or invalid. (*In short – we call it lying.*)

Deceit (Cultural Ontology) - Definition

The deception of others by individuals, usually for the sake of their own interest, safety or pride. Scripture condemns such pretense and demands honesty from believers at every point.

Scripture has a lot to say about deceit!

Psalm 10:7 says of the wicked...

His mouth is full of cursing and deceit and fraud: Under his tongue is mischief and vanity.

Psalm 101:7 says of the deceitful...

He that worketh deceit shall not dwell within my house: He that telleth lies shall not tarry in my sight.

Proverbs 14:25 says of the deceitful...

A true witness delivereth souls: But a deceitful witness speaketh lies.

Romans 3:13 says of the deceitful...

Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips:

So, let's make this easy...

1. Who **HAS NOT** told at least one lie in their lifetime?
2. Who has not said at least one curse word?

None of us are worse than anybody else, and **CERTAINLY** none of us are better than anybody else. And yet Christ died for us all. *(Let that sink in!)*

Let us look one last time at Psalm 32:1-2

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.

Psalm 32:1-2 NIV

The word “blessed” in this context could literally be rendered as happiness, or the relief experienced when one knows that their sins are forgiven. Paul quotes this passage (just verse 1) in Romans 4:7, as he describes the blessing of God which is extended to all, and is appropriated on the basis of faith. In the Old Testament the idea of forgiveness is conveyed principally by words from three different Hebrew roots. In the New Testament there are two main Greek verbs along with one noun form, that are used to

relate to us the doctrine of forgiveness. In the Old Testament the word “pardon” is used, although this is never used in the New Testament. In the New Testament the word “remission” is used, indicating release from the sentence of sin. The word forgiveness is used in both testaments.

The forgiveness of sin is a supreme blessing for every believer. It’s available to everyone, but only applied to those who have confessed with their mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord, and who have believed in their heart that God has raise Him from the dead. We will dive in deeper next week, but for now imagine with me you are standing there before the Lord, and you hear these words, “Has no one condemned you? Then neither do I condemn you.”

1. What kind of joy would you have upon hearing those words?

2. Would simply saying the words “thank you” be enough to express your gratitude or how you will really feel in your heart?

3. Why do you think people DON’T react the way question #2 implies in church today, upon hearing of God’s forgiveness?

Why do you think people today struggle with God’s forgiveness?

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

At least two topics are crucial background for understanding forgiveness.

1. Because *God* is the one who forgives, we need to appreciate who God is.
2. Because *sin* is what God forgives, we need to reflect on humanity's guilt before the Lord.

These two themes are intimately related.

Who is God? (Question #1)

This may seem like a simple question, but you need to understand how we make this answer so complex. Each of us knows God in our own unique way, even though we have common experiences. Think of it as entering the church building. One walks in through the front door and experiences things at the front of the church. Another comes in through the side door and experiences different things at the side door. All I'm saying is that each of us have encountered God in a way unique to us. But the way we encounter Him is ordained by Him to bring about our acceptance of Him. Always remember, God is not willing that any should perish.

*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, **not willing that any should perish**, but that all should come to repentance.*

2 Peter 3:9 (KJV 1900)

What does it mean to you when Peter said, "not willing" in the verse above?

We are here right now because we have encountered God in such a way that we realized we cannot live without him. But to truly answer this question for ourselves we must get to know Him. That's where His Word comes in, and

why we **should** come to Bible Study. We all want to know Him even as He knows each of us. One thing scripture emphasizes about God is His justice. God “is not partial and takes no bribes,” but He “executes justice for the fatherless and the widow.” That says God cannot be bought, and that He is always on the side of the disadvantaged. You cannot dress down and disfigure your face to appear a certain way. God sees through it all and knows all. He will always be on the side of justice.

Also unto thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy: for thou renderest to every man according to his work.

Psalm 62:12 (KJV)

And His mercifulness is personified by scripture.

*And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; **and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy.***

Exodus 33:19 (KJV)

That takes it all out of our hands. We can ask in prayer, but just because we ask doesn't mean God is bound to give us what we ask for. Remember when Jesus was on the cross between two thieves. Both asked to be saved, but one admitted his guilt and asked for mercy while the other only asked for a favor. Examine yourself to see if when you pray, are you asking God for mercy admitting your guilt, or are your prayer requests just for acts of favor.

Who is guilty? (Question 2)

We all call certain deed's “wrong” or “immoral,” but when we speak of “sin,” we're implying God as the one who has been ultimately offended. Consider King David. He grievously offended Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam 11), but when he confessed his sin, look at what he said...

*Against **thee, thee only**, have I sinned, and done this evil in **thy** sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.*

Psalm 51:4 (KJV)

To sin against God renders a person guilty. To be guilty is to stand condemned under God's just judgment. All sinners are accountable to God. Therefore, sin brings us under God's judgement.

Forgiveness then means God lifts His sentence of condemnation for our sins and no longer holds us guilty for them. We all stand in need of forgiveness because God is just, and we have hope of forgiveness because God (*halleluiah*) is merciful.

TAKING GOD'S FORGIVENESS FOR GRANTED

There is a serious problem today with many "Christians." The problem stems from a misunderstanding of God's mercy. Being a Christian does not mean you are FREE TO COMMIT sin, and then all you have to do is ask God for forgiveness and He [God] MUST forgive you because that's what He said.

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 (KJV)

Christianity is NOT a license to commit sin! Yes, we sin every day, but we should never live IN sin nor call it an acceptable lifestyle.

How would you explain to someone that we sin everyday and are yet Christians?

Let me give you an example. One popular sin today is to live together like a married couple without being united in holy matrimony. (*We called it “Shack’n Up”*). How many people in this world today do you think are living this way? It’s not our “job” as Christians to say it’s alright, but instead to help them realize God is not pleased AND THEN help them to get out of sin. One of the biggest turn offs for Christianity today is that we come across as judgmental. There is an old saying, “The right thing done wrong is just as bad as the wrong thing done right.”

Even within the church, there are those who commit willful sin, and have made it a part of their Christian walk. They know it’s wrong, but they have given up fighting against the temptation. They don’t see any difference between denying themselves and giving in to the temptation. The voice of the guilty conscience has been silenced, and they are no longer bothered spiritually by conviction.

Do you think God is pleased with this type of Christian? What can be done to correct the Christian living in this kind of situation?

What happens when you marry who God is to this kind of situation?

BOUNCING BACK FROM GIVING UP

Is it God’s intention that we be tempted to sin?

Do you believe it's God's will for your life that **He** deny you certain pleasures?

These two questions have a purpose behind them. That purpose is to help us put in perspective why we are tempted to commit sin against God. We cry out to God with the same question so many other Christians ask, "Why me Lord?"

We feel if "God" would just keep the temptation away, we would be so much better off, and we would be a better Christian. But that is not correct!

1. If God kept the temptation away, we would become conceited and think we were better than everyone else. Do you know any "Christians" who are conceited concerning their own Christianity?
2. If God kept the temptation away, we would never truly learn to choose God's way, that His way is far better than our way, nor put God first in all things.

While the struggle is real, you need to know there is a method to this seeming madness! Our failures increase our dependence upon Him. Our failures prove to us our own way is not better than God's way. Our failures help us to realize the truth of God's Word, and to see His light shining clearly.

So many people feel powerless to do anything about their sinful situation. Yet there is power available. We want God to give us this power so we can resist, but God wants you to resist so you know that in Christ you already have the power to resist.

We dare not come out of the closet about our sins because of how other "Christians" would react. The Bible says...

Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

James 5:16 KJV 1900

Are you willing to confess **ALL** your faults to someone else? I dare say for everyone that the answer is “No.”

But did you hear what God would do if you did?

But do you know what people would think of me if they knew!

But did you hear what God would do if you did?

But do you know how hard it is to find a church where nobody knows me, and nobody knows anybody from the church I used to be a member of?

But did you hear what God would do if you did?

God said, “...*that ye may be healed.*” Isn’t healing something we’re all longing for? God’s forgiveness is a healing forgiveness. Our problem is not with God, it’s with “Christians” whose main problem is their love for gossip and their unwillingness to let stuff go. These “Christians” will call you and talk to you, then hangup and call someone else to tell them everything you just said. And what does all this end up teaching us?

1. To keep our mouth shut and keep my business to myself.
2. To not associate with certain brothers or sisters in Christ.
3. To not get in conversations around church folk.
4. To **NOT** confess my faults one to another, and to stay **unhealed!**

It’s the opposite of James 5:16! Now who wants you to do the opposite of what the Bible says? So, who are you listening to, God or the devil?

The problem with so many Christians today is that we don’t understand forgiveness from God’s point of view. When God forgives, look at what the Bible says He does with our sins...

And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: For they shall all know me, From the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: For I will forgive their iniquity, And I will remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah 31:34 KJV

And again...

For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

Hebrews 8:12 KJV 1900

And again...

And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more.

Hebrews 10:17 KJV 1900

When God forgives there is **no remembrance of sin!** Our forgiveness should be the same as His. And until it is, we have work to do concerning our own heart and forgiveness. This is one main reason why we struggle with our own ability to forgive. If we “say” we forgive, but we always remember what “they did to us”, we have failed to completely forgive (as God does) and we only prolong our hurt. This is why we say, “forgiveness is for you.”

DEEPENING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF FORGIVENESS

There are many today whose idea of forgiveness is summarized as, “I don’t want to hear from you! I don’t ever want to see you again! And should you see me somewhere you need to look the other way and leave!” Even Stevie Wonder can see that’s not forgiveness. That is actually storing up hurt and pain in your heart. Because what happens to you if you are somewhere new, and you see that person again? All the hurt and pain can come right back because you never actually forgave them from your heart. You can get mad at that person all over again, you can let them spoil your mood for the rest of the day, you can blame them all you want! But the REAL issue is not with them, it’s **IN** your heart.

God loves us all unconditionally. He wants us to love like He loves. Yes, to even love sinners like He does. He loves sinners, but not their sins. He loves sinners so much until He gave His only begotten Son. What have you given besides some lip service? “Hey, how you doing? Ooh I can’t stand

him/her!” And what happens if the one who offends you gets saved? Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you.” What happens if their place is next door to yours? Jesus is not going to assign housing based on who YOU want next to you. That old, “I can’t stand him/her” attitude will not exist in Heaven. So, you might as well get rid of it here and now.

But for those who are still struggling, let’s look a little further. There are still Christians who struggle to understand if God can be just and merciful at the same time. If God forgives sin rather than punishes it, is he acting unjustly? I mean God said in Exodus 23:7 “...for I will not justify the wicked.” (KJV) But scripture makes it very clear that God is both just and merciful, so the question is, “How can He be both?”

We will look briefly at some different arguments from theological history.

THE ARMENIAN POSITION

Many Armenians believe God can forgive sins at his discretion. He is the moral governor of the universe, and if he wishes to forgive, that is his prerogative. Of course, they say, God is grieved by evil and He does not want his mercy to make people take sin lightly. Thus, in the crucifixion of Christ, God displayed how seriously he regards sin. But they believe Christ did not actually take others’ guilt upon himself on the cross or endure their punishment. They believe that was not necessary. This is called the “governmental” view of the atonement. The famous Dutch Armenian jurist Hugo Grotius promoted it in the 17th century, and the influential American Wesleyan theologian John Miley defended it in the 19th century. Recently, the well-known Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff has advocated a similar view of God’s justice and forgiveness.

THE REFORMED THEOLOGIANS' POSITION

Reformed theologians and many other Protestant thinkers have rejected the Armenian position. God's declaration that he will not acquit the wicked (Remember Exodus 23:7) cannot be dismissed so easily. We would ordinarily be horrified to learn that a human judge, with a notorious criminal standing before her court, announced that this person was forgiven and would not be punished. We wonder why it would be different for God, especially when he declares that the one who "justifies [declares righteous] the wicked" is an "abomination."

He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, Even they both are abomination to the Lord.

Proverbs 17:15 KJV 1900

God is just, and this signals that he will not treat guilty people in the way he treats innocent people. **Yet, God does forgive! He "justifies the ungodly"!**

But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.

Romans 4:5 KJV 1900

THIS is what other biblical texts say God will *not* do! There must be an explanation deeper than appealing to God's discretion.

Scripture provides us an explanation: Christ's atonement. Throughout his perfectly obedient life on earth Christ bore "our griefs and carried our sorrows," and climactically on the cross "he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities," for the Lord "laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:4–6). Jesus "bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24). Just prior to his striking claim that God justifies the ungodly in Romans 4:5 (above), Paul wrote about "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood" ([Rom. 3:24–25](#)).

Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;

Romans 3:24-25 KJV 1900

In short, God remains just when he mercifully forgives our sin because Christ has stood in our place. Though he was not personally sinful, Christ took our guilt upon himself and suffered the punishment we deserved. In forgiving his people, God does not wink at sin. He administers the just penalty for sin, but a substitute bears it in our place. Justice is served. Divine forgiveness is thus rooted in the “substitutionary” or “vicarious” atonement, as this view is often called.

Vicarious (definition) - performed or suffered by one person as a substitute for another or to the benefit or advantage of another.

HOW FORGIVENESS IS RECEIVED

How is this wonderful forgiveness received? Scripture teaches us that we receive forgiveness by faith. And remember what the Bible defines faith as...

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Hebrews 11:1 KJV

God forgives us not because of any good work or virtue we've achieved, but only by trusting in Him and resting in the perfect work of Christ.

According to Paul in Romans, whatsoever the law says, it says to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped (Romans 3:20). In other words, there is no excuse that can be given by any of us to redeem us apart from Christ. The Law kills because the Law proves us all guilty of sin.

Why do you think there are people today who believe that there are degrees of sin? (Ex. A liar is nowhere near as bad as a murderer.)

Forgiveness comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. The Bible says...

²¹ But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; ²² Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:

Romans 3:21-22 (KJV)

This is the faith of Abraham, who grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised. Confessing that we're forgiven only by faith is another way of confessing that we're justified by faith alone. It is the church's work (not just the preacher's work but the entire church), to proclaim God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Do you feel this is getting left behind in all the political rhetoric being proclaimed in many churches?
