

I Believe

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
(Genesis 1:1 ESV)*

*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.
(Hebrews 11:6 ESV)*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

The Forgiveness Of Sins

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Luke 24:44-53

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Luke 24:44-53. We are talking this morning about the forgiveness of sins. This line in the Apostles' Creed was actually a fairly late addition. It was put into both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed in the 4th century in reaction to a controversy that had raged throughout the church for the better part of 70 years.

In the year 303 AD on February 23rd the Roman Emperor Diocletian launched what became known as The Great Persecution. He issued a series of edicts calling on church buildings to be destroyed, Bibles to be burned, Christians to lose all civil rights, clergy to be imprisoned and all believers everywhere to sacrifice to the Roman gods on pain of death. Many Christians were martyred – refusing to abide by these edicts – refusing to hand over their Bibles and refusing to offer forced worship to the false gods of Rome.

But numerous Christians – including many clergy – came out to make the sacrifices. They effectively denied their baptism under pressure. After the persecution, which was intense but relatively short lived, these defections created a pastoral crisis in the church. Many of those who had gone forward to make the sacrifices returned to the church in sackcloth and ashes. They

repented of their weakness and they begged for forgiveness and it created a GENERATION LONG controversy within Christianity.

Can people be forgiven for such weakness?

How many strikes do you get before you are called OUT?

And what about a pastor who sins in this way – can he be forgiven? And if people can be forgiven – what is the process for that? Do they have to be re-baptized? If they are a pastor – do they have to be re-ordained? If that pastor conducted your baptism – do you have to be re-baptized? Did his sin invalidate your profession of faith?

It took 70 years for the church to wrestle their way through these issues.

And thanks be to God – they landed on the side of forgiveness – and to cement their conclusion they added this phrase to both the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. In 381 AD the Nicene Creed was updated with the phrase: “We confess one baptism for the remission of sins”¹ and around the same time the Apostles’ Creed was expanded to include the phrase, I believe “in the forgiveness of sins”.

Ben Myers summarizes the decision that the church came to as a result of this controversy. He writes:

“When backslidden believers return to the faith, they don’t need to be rebaptized. They simply need to show, through a changed way of life, that they are trying to take their baptism seriously. There is no need to be baptized more than once, since that would imply that we need to be forgiven more than once. **The forgiveness of sins has taken place once for all in the death and resurrection of Jesus.**”²

The forgiveness of sins has taken place once for all in the death and resurrection of Jesus – that is what we are saying when we say that we believe in the forgiveness of sins. And according to the passage that we will be starting with this morning – that is the sum and substance of our Gospel

¹ The Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 as cited in *Creeds Of The Churches*, edited by John H. Leith (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 33.

² Ben Myers, *The Apostles’ Creed: A Guide To The Ancient Catechism*, (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2018), 115.

proclamation. So hopefully you have your Bibles open by now to Luke 24:44-53. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,⁴⁶ and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,⁴⁷ and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”⁵⁰ And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them.⁵¹ While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy,⁵³ and were continually in the temple blessing God. (Luke 24:44–53 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

According to verse 47, “the forgiveness of sins” is the sum and substance of the Christian message. Al Mohler says here:

“The entire Christian faith rests in those words – *the forgiveness of sin.*”³

So obviously this is a first level issue – this THE first level issue. This is the GOOD NEWS we’ve been commissioned to share with the nations. So let’s take a few minutes and make sure that we understand it. We’ll talk first about what it is, we’ll talk next about why it matters and then lastly, we’ll talk about how it may be obtained.

First of all then, what is it?

What Is It?

What are we talking about when we refer to the forgiveness of sins?

³ R. Albert Mohler, *The Apostles’ Creed: Discovering Authentic Christianity In An Age Of Counterfeits*, (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2019), 169.

One of the most important passages on this topic in the New Testament is found in Paul's Letter to the Colossians. Flip forward in your Bible to Colossians 2:11-14. Here the Apostle says:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,¹⁴ by **canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands**. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. (Colossians 2:11–14 ESV)

Hallelujah!

So the first thing we would want to say by way of definition is that the “forgiveness of sins” has to do with an expunged record, or as we more commonly say, a clean slate.

1. A clean slate

According to the Apostle Paul, God has forgiven us by CANCELING the RECORD of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.

You can hear both versions of the confession clause in the Lord's Prayer in verses 13-14 here. As you probably know, in the American version of the Lord's Prayer they say: “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” whereas here in Canada and elsewhere throughout the Commonwealth we say, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” – both are good; both are fine – and both concepts no doubt lie behind this foundational passage.

There are several passages in the Bible that talk about BOOKS that contain a record of all our rights and wrongs. And according to Revelation 20 those BOOKS will be opened and read on the Day of Final Judgment. Revelation 20:12-13 says:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. (Revelation 20:12–13 ESV)

So it sounds like every sin that you commit is written down. There is a record of it somewhere and if that record is not EXPUNGED then you will be excluded from the eternal kingdom of God. That's why the Psalmist says:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. (Psalm 32:1 ESV)

That's what you want! That's what you need! You need something or someone to BLOT OUT the record of your transgressions. They're in the BOOK. You need them out of the book. You need something to erase it from your legal record forever. And according to the Bible the only thing that can do that is the BLOOD OF JESUS CHRIST.

This is what we sing about when we sing in church – isn't it?

What can wash away my sin
Nothing but the blood of Jesus
What can make me whole again
Nothing but the blood of Jesus
Oh precious is the flow, that makes me white as snow
No other fount I know
Nothing but the blood of Jesus⁴

Or as an older generation had it:

There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains⁵

⁴ [Robert Lowry](#) (1826-1899)

⁵ William Cowper (1731-1800)

That is the Gospel!

That is the only hope for sinners!!

When you stand before God on Judgment Day and he opens the book of your life you want him to turn to the sin page and to see ABSOLUTELY NOTHING but the blood of Jesus. If he sees that – then he will close the book and toss it into the heart of the sea. There will be NOTHING TO SEE THERE and NOTHING standing in the way of your entrance into eternity – no stain, no blemish, no offense, no debt, no trespass whatsoever. You will enter heaven as a free man or a free woman – more than that – you will enter heaven as a friend and family member of God.

J.I. Packer says here:

“Forgiveness is taking back into friendship those who went against you, hurt you, and put themselves in the wrong with you. God’s forgiveness is the supreme instance of this, for it is God in love restoring fellowship at the cost of the cross.”⁶

So that’s the second thing we need to add to our definition. Forgiveness is a clean slate and it is also:

2. A restored relationship

It isn’t just that we no longer OFFEND GOD it is that we are welcomed home as FAMILY. The Apostle John said:

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. (1 John 3:1 ESV)

Because of Christ – in Christ, we have become THE CHILDREN OF GOD! Once we were enemies and strangers, but through the cleansing blood of the cross, we are RESTORED to our original status. We were not CREATED REBELS – we became rebels through sin. But with our

⁶ J.I. Packer, *Affirming The Apostles’ Creed*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 131.

hearts cleansed and our stains removed – and our spirit restored – we are in Christ what we were created and intended to be in the beginning.

We are sons.

We are daughters.

We are children.

We are family.

And of course, that's the main point in perhaps the most famous story that Jesus ever told. In the story of the Prodigal Son a young man who had sinned terribly, who had squandered his blessings and repudiated his identity finally came to his senses and began to make his way back home. He dared to hope for the status of a slave. He thought perhaps his father might HIRE HIM BACK – but he DARED NOT hope for full forgiveness. He dared not hope to be treated as a beloved son. But of course you remember what happened, right?

while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.'²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.'²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:20–24 ESV)

That's the welcome you can expect to receive when you return to your heavenly Father through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. The welcome of a son – the welcome of a beloved child turned from rebellion, turned from ruin, turned from despair – and home toward God and grace. You can expect OVERWHELMING compassion, overwhelming affection, overwhelming mercy – you can expect the best robe, a signet ring and a fatted calf. You can expect music, dancing and singing – because YOU WERE DEAD and have come back to life; you were LOST but have now been found and so all of heaven must celebrate!

That's what the bible says – that's what Jesus says – about the sort of FORGIVENESS that can be yours through the cross.

A clean slate and a restored relationship – thanks be to God!

That's what forgiveness is – and knowing what it is helps us to understand why it matters.

Why Does It Matter?

And it does matter. It matters first of all for the sake of our own conscience.

1. For the sake of conscience

Guilt and shame are powerful and destructive forces within the human psyche. We notice that very early on when we read the Bible. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden they immediately hid from God. Do you remember that? Right after they sinned the Bible says:

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. ⁸ And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:7–8 ESV)

Human beings don't need to be told that their sin affects their relationship with God. They know that. David knew that. He said:

“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear *me*” (Psalm 66:18 KJV)

We know that sin creates a barrier. Every time we sin we FEEL that barrier getting thicker. We have felt the holiness of God in our souls. We have FELT HIS SETTLED ANTAGONISM toward sin – and so like the PRODIGAL SON we have a hard time anticipating anything other than judgment. We FEEL the holiness of God from a million miles away. We encounter that and immediately it begins to stir up in us all manner of objections, all manner of compelling reasons

why we should just keep on running. So God had to come up with a way to shut our mouths. He had to deal with our sin in a way that we could believe in.

He had to do something extreme.

The prophets of Israel understood that. They knew about sin. They knew about rebellion. They knew about shame and so they knew that God would have to do something astonishing – and Isaiah the prophet saw it coming. He said:

Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. As many were astonished at you— his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind— so shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand. (Isaiah 52:13–15 ESV)

Are you seeing that? The cross of Jesus was meant to be ASTONISHING. The bloodiness, the brutality – it was all part of the plan! God was making a spectacle. He was teaching the world about SIN and HOLINESS and WRATH and MERCY. And the body of Jesus Christ was his canvas.

His appearance was SO MARRED – beyond all human semblance – that Kings will shut their mouths because of him. They will learn about the ugliness of rebellion and the preciousness of grace. So shall he sprinkle many nations.

The cross shuts our mouths, do you see that? It answers all our objections. It makes a mockery of all our excuses. It says this is how much God hates sin and this is how much God loves you. Now what are you going to do about it?

I like the answer given in Hebrews chapter 10. The Apostle says:

“let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, **with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience** and our bodies washed with pure water.” (Hebrews 10:19–22 ESV)

This is the way home, right here, the Apostle says. This is a solution that matches our sin. This is the DEEP MAGIC that can overturn the curse, retune our compass and lead us home to God. This is the path, now walk ye in it.

The forgiveness of sins matters for the sake of our conscience – and it matters also for the sake of our relationships.

2. For the sake of our relationships

Sin makes us hide from God, we've talked about that, but it also makes us turn on one another. In Genesis 3 when the man and the woman hide from God, God comes looking for them. He finds the man and he asks him what went wrong.

The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." (Genesis 3:12 ESV)

What went wrong is THE WOMAN!

And from that moment on, the man and the woman have been at war. In fact God says to the woman:

"Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you."
(Genesis 3:16 ESV)

You and your husband are going to be in perpetual conflict. Your desires and his desires are not going to be in alignment – but because of his superior strength, he will almost always get his way.

And so began the battle of the sexes – and every other human battle too. What the Bible is saying here is that unresolved sin separates us from God and from one another. Which means that the cross of Jesus Christ is kind of a two for one deal. It simultaneously reconciles us to God and to one another. When we see what God did to forgive us – then all our hatred and animosity towards

other people is supposed to disappear. So much so that if it DOESN'T disappear, then there is every reason to suspect that you have never truly received it.

Jesus connects these two things all the time. Right after the Lord's Prayer he said:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14–15 ESV)

You either have both or have none – that's what Jesus says. Because if you truly GET THE CROSS – if you truly receive the forgiveness of sins that is offered there – then that completely undermines and destroys all justification for hatred and vengeance toward other people.

The cross of Jesus Christ is the basis for all true and lasting peace – both vertically and horizontally.

In October of 2006 a lone gunman shot 10 children ages 7-13 in a small Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania. 5 of those children died. Within hours members of the Amish community visited both the killer's immediate family and his parents, in order to express sympathy for their loss. The Amish uniformly expressed forgiveness toward the murderer of their children and his family.

The American public was AMAZED.

Four years later a group of secular scholars wrote about the incident. One of their main conclusions was that American culture was unlikely to produce people with a similar capacity for forgiveness because they didn't have the right foundations. The study concluded that the Amish were able to forgive because at the centre of their worldview was a man dying on the cross for his enemies. The authors of the study came to the conclusion that forgiveness is a form of "self-renunciation" - giving up your right to receive your due - and that notion is completely contradictory to how Americans are taught to think and behave.⁷

⁷ <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/the-fading-of-forgiveness/>

It seems to me there is a battle going on right now in the evangelical church over which factor will have the greatest influence over our thoughts, actions and behaviours: the cross of Jesus Christ or American culture.

I vote for the cross.

Because without the cross – without the forgiveness of sins – there is no peace with God and no peace with one another.

The cross right sizes all my grievances. The cross mocks my concern for personal justice. The cross shuts my mouth, bows my head, and breaks my heart and positions me to live at peace with other people.

So the forgiveness of sins really matters. It matters for the sake of conscience, it matters for the sake of our relationships and thirdly it matters for the sake of our future.

3. For the sake of our future

We've talked about this already. On Judgment Day if the record of your sins has not been expunged then you will be excluded from the Kingdom of God forever. The Book of Revelation makes that very clear. In Revelation 22:14-15 it says:

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. ¹⁵ Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. (Revelation 22:14–15 ESV)

So there are only two types of people on Judgment Day. Those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb – and those who have refused to do so and who are therefore excluded from the Kingdom.

Jesus spoke about this in the parable of the banquet. People were supposed to be dressed a certain way:

“But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. ¹² And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ (Matthew 22:11–13 ESV)

If you haven’t washed your robes in the blood of Christ – if you haven’t received the forgiveness that God offers freely to you in Christ – if you show up on judgment day covered in all your sin and rebellion, then you will be outside, in the dark, away from God and under judgment FOREVER.

So the forgiveness of sins MATTERS. It matters MAXIMALLY – it matters for the 3 reasons we have talked about and probably half a dozen more and therefore obviously we need to bring this in for a landing this morning by talking about how it may be obtained.

How Is It Obtained?

Of course, there is only one answer to that. The forgiveness of sins is available to all people, everywhere:

1. By grace, through faith in Christ alone

But what do we mean by that?

I want to read to you two passages that I think together put some meat on those bones. The first one comes from the First Epistle of John. 1 John 1:9 says:

“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 ESV)

That’s what John said.

And then Peter, on behalf of the disciples as a group said something similar to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. They had heard the sermon that Peter had preached and they asked him and the other Apostles:

“Brothers, what shall we do?”³⁸ And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ **for the forgiveness of your sins**, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:37–38 ESV)

Confess. Repent. Be baptized.

I think that’s what the hymn writer meant when he said:

For my cleansing this I see—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!
For my pardon this my plea—
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!⁸

If that’s what you mean when you go under the waters of baptism – if it is as Peter says later, an appeal to God for a good conscience – then you can be assured that you have received it.

That was the issue, you remember, that gave rise to this line in the Creed. They were asking: is the cross BIG ENOUGH to handle the weakness and frailty of men and women?

And the answer that they came to was YES.

Under the water, under the blood, all may be forgiven. There is no sin bigger than the cross of Jesus Christ.

I believe that. I believe in the forgiveness of sins – thanks be to God!

Let’s pray together.

⁸ *What Can Wash Away My Sin?* Robert Lowry. Verse 2.