

# AM 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 Understanding the Cross: Forgiveness

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Date: 04 December 2022

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[ 0 : 00 ] In the New Testament, in the second letter to the Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and we're reading in chapter 5, verses 11 to 21.

That's 2 Corinthians, chapter 5, and we read from verse 12 through to the end of the chapter. We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you cause to boast about us so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.

For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God. If we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us because we have concluded this, that one has died for all, therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh.

[ 1 : 17 ] Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away.

Behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ. God, making his appeal through us, we implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Amen.

May God bless the reading of his word. I will be referring to 2 Corinthians chapter 5, certainly, but also a number of other passages, so it's good to keep your Bible in front of you and you can refer to them as we go along this morning.

[ 2 : 36 ] Over 260 years ago, Scotland's most famous and celebrated poet was born. And I know he has a strong connection to the town of Dumfries as well.

But Robert Burns, of course, isn't as equally celebrated by all since in life, so also in death, he does stir some controversy.

Burns had strong views, you see, and that can always make a person unpopular with some, at least. Some of his views, if you read them through his poetry, some of his views seem to contradict each other, and that doesn't help either.

And, as you're probably all aware, notoriously he had a string of adulterous affairs, which at that time brought him into a head-on collision with the church, and that certainly results in him being unloved by many today.

But you might be surprised to hear Burns did have a certain sensitivity to what we might say the things of God. When he was only 25 years old, and of course he would die a fairly young man anyway, but when he was only 25 years old and suffering from an illness that at the time he thought might take his life, he wrote these lines, where, with intention I have erred, no other plea I have, but thou art good, and goodness still delighteth to forgive.

[ 4 : 17 ] Another thing you might be surprised to hear this morning is that forgiveness has become popular. You might even say forgiveness has become trendy.

Now, why would I say that? Well, it could be a result of the ever-increasing focus that there is on self.

That's, of course, very prominent in what we broadly call our Western culture. And in the search, with this focus on self, in the search to ensure that you are always at your psychological healthiest

forgiveness, has been seen as a way of dealing with the past and with past issues that might still be having an unhealthy impact on your life.

But maybe even more recently, there's been a little bit of kickback against this forgiveness culture, if we could call it that. One article appeared a few years ago, and it was entitled, and excuse me, but it was entitled, To Hell with Forgiveness, or To Hell with Forgiveness Culture.

And the main thrust of the article is that victims, because when you talk about forgiveness, you know, it's always, in some sense, at some level, some degree, an issue between a perpetrator and a victim, the thrust of the article suggested that victims are almost being bullied into forgiving perpetrators by this climate created by what the author called the leftover of Western Christian culture.

[ 6 : 08 ] A leftover which we call forgiveness. And, you know, you probably need to read the article, but that there may be some truth in it.

I'll leave you to ponder where the some truth in it might lie. But this morning, we'll want to look at the cross, and in fact, we'll do that again this evening. But we want to look this morning at the cross and trying to understand the cross.

I'm pretty sure everyone here has some understanding of the cross. But we're wanting to try and understand the cross even better, and maybe more deeply for some of you. And so this morning, I want to consider this matter of forgiveness.

This evening, we'll look at the cross again and we'll consider it in the light of love. But this morning, forgiveness. And what then is true forgiveness?

If I've suggested that forgiveness might have been in danger of becoming popular, even trendy, we might say, well, what really is forgiveness then? Well, it's a challenging thing, I think, for all of us.

[ 7 : 15 ] I mean, it's all too easy, for example, to smooth over a situation, a difficult situation, by acting and speaking, maybe in a sort of conciliatory way when we're still carrying a deep-seated resentment, a resentment in the heart.

But outwardly, we act and we speak in a conciliatory way with another person where, you know, there is or has been a difficult situation.

For some people, words, words come rather easily. Others of us may, at times, struggle to find words and what we think are the right words. But others find words easy.

And they say they forgive, but inside, they are holding on to the old saying, I can forgive, but I'll never forget.

Now, that's an old saying with which you're all familiar, but it's never made any sense, has it? When you think about it, you see, a crucial aspect of true forgiveness is that we really do at least start to work at forgetting.

[ 8 : 27 ] Perhaps one of the reasons we find it so hard to forgive is because of our own awareness of how humiliating it can be or to feel to be forgiven.

So we may struggle to forgive others because we've at times experienced someone's forgiveness of us and we've actually felt that to be in some way humiliating.

It becomes something we just want to avoid altogether. The whole subject, the whole idea of forgiveness. Having, as I say, perhaps experienced in the past someone offering us forgiveness.

I mean, if that happens, think back, what was your response? Did you just say, oh, well, thank you for that. Or maybe you struggled with the very idea that you needed to be forgiven at all.

what are they talking about when they offered to forgive me? What was I meant to have done? You see, when we are offered forgiveness, we really have to come to terms with the fact that we need to be forgiven.

[ 9 : 41 ] And that doesn't come easily to our human nature. another get-out clause in relation to forgiveness is the belief that some sins are simply unforgivable.

You know, if I do something to hurt a friend, and I do mean a friend, but, you know, we can hurt our friends, and we're aware that we have hurt them, but they are a friend, then we might have a hope that I can be forgiven and our relationship will get back on track.

Our relationship can be restored. We are friends, after all. But, when someone steals, when someone defrauds another, when someone murders another, then, you know, forgiveness, really? Forgiveness is out of the question, then, is it not? This person has hurt so many others, or the seriousness of their offense is just too great. It is unforgivable.

But perhaps, instead of raising this as a reason to avoid the need to be forgiven as well as to forgive, we should understand what you might call a distinction between personal and communal forgiveness.

[ 11 : 02 ] In the matter of personal forgiveness, it's between you and another. So, if it's going to happen, it is between you and that other person that it's going to have to be sorted out.

The offense was personal. The difficult situation now existing is personal. But, of course, as a couple of things I just mentioned there, well, actually, probably all of them, stealing, fraud, murder, you know, they can have personal consequences, but they are the kind of things that have much bigger consequences than just one person to one person.

So, we can make a distinction between what we would call personal forgiveness and communal forgiveness. Now, I want to go back to Robert Burns for a moment. Now, as I say, Burns became notorious for his affairs and in 1786, he appeared before the Kirk Session of Moughlin Parish Church in Ayrshire and he was to answer charges that the child to be born to Gene Armour was his. As it turned out, it was going to be twins but they didn't have our technology so we wouldn't know that until the twins appeared. But, he was to answer charges that Gene Armour's yet-to-be-born child was his.

They, of course, were not married at the time. Now, there was no job centre, there was no universal credit in these days and, of course, the church frequently then took responsibility for the relief of the poor.

[ 12 : 38 ] So, you see, children without fathers, women without husbands were especially vulnerable and frequently were supported by church funds.

So, Robert Burns in an instant like this was a wanted man both for his immoral behaviour and, put simply, child maintenance.

Now, in fairness, Burns actually admitted that he was the father, he was publicly rebuked, he offered public repentance and both he and Gene were publicly absolved and their marriage was regularised in 1788.

So, here you have an example of personal and communal forgiveness. Robert and Gene, you see, they would have had issues, there's no doubt about it, they would have had issues to sort out between themselves, issues of personal forgiveness as well as probably with their immediate families too.

But, the community, the wider community couldn't ignore what had happened. but, the community response was not merely one of punishment.

[ 13 : 54 ] Indeed, the final aim of the community response was forgiveness. Now, of course, we're looking at the cross of Christ and you might be saying, when are we going to get to it?

We'll want to look at the cross of Christ this morning and try to understand it better. Now, the focus here is, of course, on how then it relates to our forgiveness.

The cross can be seen from a number of different aspects or from different angles you might say. Forgiveness is clearly one of these. Tonight, we will look at it from the aspect of love.

You can look at the cross as victory and many other things as well that we see at the cross. But, that Jesus Christ's death in some way brings about forgiveness of sin by God, that can't be in any doubt for anyone who honestly reads the New Testament.

You can't miss the centrality of the cross. Each of the gospels builds up, leads up to the cross and then disproportionately spends chapters and ink and words on the cross itself.

[ 15 : 09 ] and Paul and the other letter writers will follow suit. So, no honest reader can deny that through the cross, somehow forgiveness of sin by God is delivered, is won, is achieved.

And, of course, there's been various ways of trying to explain that over the centuries in the history of the New Testament church and any of the best of the explanations are the ones that stick closest to what the Bible itself tells us.

But some of these, even those that you would fairly say do stick close to what the Bible is telling us itself, some have been regarded as competing ideas.

So, if you accept one explanation, then you can't possibly be accepting the other explanation. but the truth is more like this, that so wide and so deep and so rich is the cross that there is no single theory of what is achieved there and how it is achieved that can possibly do justice to the cross of Christ.

In terms of forgiveness, at least, there, of course, have been three main ways of understanding the cross. And please accept my apologies for the big words. These three words may be very familiar to some of you here and you may, in fact, be able to explain them better than I can.

[16:47] But if anyone comes across them for the first time, I apologize, but I'm going to give a brief explanation of each. So the three main ways of understanding the cross have been as a satisfaction, as an expiation, and thirdly, as propitiation.

So I warned you in advance and gave you the apology, so I won't apologize again. Okay. So basically, briefly, satisfaction is about paying what is owed.

And it views our sin, the reality of our sin before God, in terms of a debt. It's something then that is a debt that we owe to God, that we need to pay back to God, but of course, the thing is we can't.

The debt that we owe God, that we call our sin, and all the consequences of our sin, is something that we can't possibly pay back, we can't possibly pay off.

And therefore, Christ's death on the cross is the means by which this debt is paid and cancelled. Through the cross, the debt is paid in full.

[18:04] Those who trust in him are then excused their debt because another, another has paid it. Expiation, well, it's connected to that idea of satisfaction, but it's more about the removal or the covering over of an offence.

And in terms of the cross, Christ's death is the means by which our guilt can be removed. Or you could say our guilt covered over.

Our guilt is real before God and if it's not dealt with, then that leads to the most serious of consequences.

We know ourselves when there are things that need to be dealt with, but for whatever reason we just won't deal with them. That thing can become worse.

And worse and worse. Well, believe you me, our guilt before God is real. And if it's not dealt with, the consequences are most serious. And this is again what Christ's death on the cross deals with.

[19:15] An expiation, a covering over, a removal of our guilt before God. And then there's that third one, propitiation. Another big word, but theologians, they have really argued over this one.

And that's where that comes back to what I just said about competing ideas. You know, it's as though, well, if you believe the cross is a propitiation, then you can't believe it's a satisfaction. But it's not like that.

The cross embraces all of these. But, yeah, fair enough. Propitiation. Theologians have argued over it. Many do not like the idea.

But what is the idea when we speak of propitiation? Well, if someone's raging mad, and in order to calm them down, you think, well, maybe if we give them something, you know, they'll calm down.

Or we'll do something for them. And that'll bring them back to an even keel. If it works, that is, the calm down, then you can say it's a propitiation.

[20:24] I mean, I know we never do, but that's trying to get at the idea of propitiation. Think of Hitler and giving him parts of Czechoslovakia before World War II in the hope that he would stop there.

Think of Vladimir Putin and giving him parts of Ukraine in the hope that he'll stop there. And you can see then why, you know, theologians, at least some theologians, maybe don't like the idea in connection with the cross and God.

But of course, you see, that is to misunderstand God, to misunderstand why he matters. It is to misunderstand the true nature and the seriousness of sin.

It is to misunderstand the true and real wrath of God against sin. It is to misunderstand what the Bible teaches about these things.

And to misunderstand the coming and certain judgment of God. God is not an unruly, unjust, raging, human, tyrant.

[21:39] God is just and his anger is righteous. The guilty cannot ultimately go free. God is just, God's anger is righteous.

We may not like that idea, especially as we're thinking about ourselves. But let's be honest, does it upset you quite as much when you think about at least some others?

Judge. There is a price to pay. We would hope, you see, that a human judge would have a sense of this when serious cases come in front of them.

The harm and the hurt and the devastation that has been caused because, you know, obviously they come to court, they're accused, but, you know, if the case is to be proved that they are guilty, you hope that the judge has a sense of the seriousness when it's their responsibility to then pass sentence.

They don't just stand up and say, well, it didn't matter that much, it's all over now, isn't it? Off you go. And people are sitting there. Is that justice?

[ 22 : 55 ] Did we just see justice done there? I don't think so. So if we hope that a human judge have a sense of these things, how much more than the perfectly just God forgive?

Now if all that I've been saying is true, there's a huge question, and that is, how can such a just God forgive? You know, if the guilty cannot just simply walk free, if God is just and his anger is righteous, how can that just God forgive?

And it kind of takes us back to where we began this morning. the whole challenge of forgiving others, and yes, of even being forgiven, and that kickback against what's been called a forgiveness culture, which almost seems, as I said, to bully real victims into some kind of forgiveness of their abusers, which leads to us asking, well, where's the justice in that?

You know, everything will be alright, if the victim will just forgive the abuser, and everything will be fine then. It will be good for you, it will be good for them, everyone will just be happy, won't they? So how can God be just and forgive? And this is how we can begin, I think, to understand the cross of Christ better, and this in the particular matter of forgiveness.

[ 24 : 29 ] forgiveness. At the cross, you see, the just wrath of God against human sin is turned away. Our debt of sin is paid, and our guilt is removed.

We are then forgiven at the cross. It is in no way a cheap, trendy, or form of psychological only forgiveness.

forgiveness. It is real and true forgiveness. And I think that's helpful, I think it's important for us to remember when the matter of forgiveness between individuals and between groups of human beings is raised.

Well then, to make things, I suppose, just a bit more personal, what about forgiveness for me? You know, every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are remembering Jesus' death, Jesus' death on the cross.

And there are really three things that I think are good for us to keep at the forefront of our minds when we remember Jesus' death. They're all about him, and they are all crucial for our forgiveness.

[ 25 : 54 ] forgiveness. The first is that Jesus represents us. And I suppose the classic, maybe one-off, but I think probably the classic passage on this is in Romans chapter 5.

Jesus represents us. In verse 19 we read, For just as through the disobedience of the one man, and that's Adam, Paul refers to, that many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man, and that's Jesus, the many will be made righteous.

So you either have the one man, Adam, as your representative, or you have the one man, Jesus.

And, you know, when we take part in the sacraments, the one that is regular and ongoing in the life of the Christian, which is the Lord's Supper, or the one that marks our entry into his community, into his people, into the body of Christ, which is baptism, in either case, by taking part in that sacrament, you testify that you trust in Jesus as your representative.

And you join together with others who are saying, he is our representative. So, at the cross, Jesus represents us.

The second thing is that we are joined to Jesus. And, hopefully, in the next chapter in Romans, in chapter 6, in verse 5, we read this. For if we have been united to him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.

[ 27 : 38 ] Now, all will be resurrected at the last day. There is not a human being who has ever lived who will not be resurrected at that last day.

But only those united, only those joined to Jesus, will, however, be resurrected like him. And so, again, if you're at the Lord's Supper, we say we remember Jesus' death until he comes.

So, we remember his death where he has represented us, but we also know that we have been united to him in that death. And we remember that death then until he comes.

Because when he comes, we will be resurrected, but we will be resurrected like him. And then, thirdly, Jesus takes our place.

And that brings us back to 2 Corinthians chapter 5, and particularly verse 21, where we read, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[ 28 : 52 ] You see, there can be nothing more dramatic than the idea of someone stepping in and taking our place. The story is told, and I'm sure some of you know it, but the story is told of British prisoners of war who were constructing the notorious Kwai Valley railway line between Burma and Thailand during the Second World War.

Now again, as you're undoubtedly aware, the Japanese regime for prisoners of war earned a reputation for the utmost brutality.

Nearly a hundred civilian and military prisoners died every day during the three years that it took to build that railway line. On one occasion the guards claimed that a spade had gone missing from one of the work squad's tool sheds.

And all the men of that work squad were gathered together and they were told that they would all be executed one by one unless the culprit, the one who had hidden, buried, taken, whatever they'd done with that spade, unless the culprit owned up.

And one prisoner of war immediately stepped forward and the guards beat him to death on the spot. Later on that day it was discovered that the guards actually made a mistake in counting there was no missing spade.

[ 30 : 26 ] and one prisoner of war testified how that incident transformed the attitude of the members of that work squad towards each other.

I mean, you don't want to imagine the conditions they were living under and, you know, we all like to think that we would be the noblest human being who always looked out for the other when we were in such horror...

Well, it's not. We resort to what we are by nature put under that pressure and everyone scrambled for whatever they could get to try and survive.

But after that incident, this prisoner of war said the relationships between the rest of us were totally changed, totally transformed. And Jesus stepped forward for us so we might be forgiven.

so we might be transformed in our relationships with one another and to everyone else. Amen.