

In Forgiveness of Sins

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Date: 28 March 2020

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning again. If you have just tuned into St. Paul's, for the first time we have been working our way through the ancient statement of Christian belief called the Apostles' Creed.

And this short statement captures the way that Christians view the world, view God, view life, view the future. And today I'm picking up the very next statement that we're up to in the Creed called, We Believe, that's Christians, We Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins.

This next phrase in the Apostles' Creed, if you've looked at it at all, introduces for the very first time something to confess about humanity, about all of us people. Everything up to this point has declared the glorious work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And now, for the first time, we have the character of humanity on full display. And what it says is not something positive.

It says that we are sinners. When the Christian confesses that they believe in the forgiveness of sins, they are affirming an entire theology from creation to the fall of humanity into sin through to God's redemption to Christ in eternal kingdom. The entire Christian faith rests on these words, the forgiveness of sin. Without the forgiveness of sin, there is no good news. And therefore, there is no hope for humanity. And so, if you've got the St. Paul's app in front of you right now, I'd encourage you to open it up. And you've got three things I want to cover in this morning in looking at this. I want to see, first of all, the reality of sin. Secondly, the compassion of Jesus Christ towards sinners. And thirdly, the authority of Jesus Christ to forgive sin, to deal with our issue. So, firstly, the reality of sin. Ephesians chapter 2, verses 1 to 3 was just read out to us.

And they are a comprehensive panoramic picture of the human condition outside of God. And it says, quite bluntly, that we are dead in transgressions and sins. Now, the word dead there is not a figure of speech.

[2 : 45] These people, all of us, humanity outside of God, are absolutely dead. This state of spiritual death is universal. So, the Bible, in this point, is not describing some decadent, depraved segment of society, but all of humanity from top to bottom.

On Friday, I went out for a run in the national park. I figured, probably, I wouldn't see many people out there. And I still came across a few people. But quite noticeable is that everyone gave themselves space. For the first time ever, as I moved across to the other side of the road, or gave people a bunch of distance, people nodded, or they waved, or they said, thank you, for the first time ever.

Normally, you know, everyone's head down, don't acknowledge at all. But the first time ever, as we're practicing social distancing, we're acknowledging one another. And that's because, for the first time ever, we realize we have a common enemy. If I crossed to the other side of the road five weeks ago, the person coming at me would have assumed that I was rude.

We are now dominated by the thought of a common threat to humanity. And everyone that I saw on Friday was aware of it. But while some of us may be infected by COVID-19, and others won't be, that's not the case with sin. This is a soul disease that has infected all of us.

But it's not a soul disease that we are aware of in the same way that we're aware of COVID-19. When you look around at society, it doesn't seem like we're all infected, or that in fact, that it's a threat to everyone. Some appear to show more symptoms than others.

[4 : 59] We naturally do that as human beings. We look down, down the line when it comes to morality and ethics, and we judge our own righteousness by those whom we deem to be less than us.

We look at the criminal sitting in prison and assume that we are okay, that we must be therefore good, moral, righteous, because we're not like them.

To be dead in transgressions and sins means here in Ephesians chapter 2 to be enslaved. Have a look at it with me. Ephesians chapter 2.

See the word followed? It's there in verse 2 and again in verse 3. That word followed there means to be mastered, to be controlled by something.

The reason we are dead in transgressions and sins is that we are as helpless as a dead body.

[6:16] Completely controlled. Totally mastered. Unable to move, to act, even breathe. Verse 3 says the key idea for us.

That is, it's literally referring there to self-centered human nature.

This is the thing that drives us. This is the thing that masters us and controls us. According to the Bible, the reason we are dead in transgressions and sins, the reason we are slaves to sin is because the human heart is profoundly self-centered.

The 16th century church reformer and theologian Martin Luther put the condition of the human heart quite succinctly. He described it as curved in to itself.

Curved in on itself. Absorbed in itself. Looking inside, it is self-centered. That's what it means to be a human being apart from God.

[7:29] Luther said that our nature is so deeply curved in on itself that it, his words, wickedly, curvedly and viciously seeks to use all things, even God, for its own sake.

It's like all of us have this little computer in the center of our heart that never, ever, ever stops.

It is constantly analyzing everything, every person, every interaction, every object, every event, every setting. It's analyzing the basic question.

What's in it for me? Everything is being analyzed by how it benefits my happiness and my glory and my reputation and my comfort and my control of things. How does this help me?

How does it fit into my interests? How does it make me happy? Everything gets put through that grid. Self-centeredness obviously can make you pretty cruel.

[8:46] It's not hard to identify the tyrants through history who were egotistical and proud and self-centered and murderous because it was about them and their control and their power.

But self-centeredness, sinfulness, often will make us really good and moral people.

That is, it will force us to be a good person as well. If everything is about my need to feel good about myself, then there is no better way for that to happen than for me to be a good person, a moral person.

So self-centeredness, while it might drive some to be cruel, it drives the majority of us into being good. Trying really hard by serving the needy and being good, you know, child to parent and good parents to children.

A good friend who assists wherever you possibly can. A dutiful person who does what's expected of them. What lies beneath is a self-centeredness where we ultimately do it for ourselves.

[10:04] Because it's about making me feel good. We do good things to be noticed by people, to receive the applause of others. It's so that we can feel like we've got a meaningful life.

To feel like we're a good person. Deep down inside of us. If we ever allow ourselves to go right, right down into the silence of our hearts.

We feel like bums. We're all trying to do something to convince the world and to convince ourselves that we're not. That we are good.

And so we evaluate everything in terms of whether it makes us look good or not. But, so sin can make you cruel.

It can make you a good person. It can also make you a religious person. We can devote ourselves to obeying God. Turning up to church. Reading the Bible. Praying.

[11:10] Giving. Doing the sort of things that we do Sunday by Sunday. All good things. All right things to do. How do I know whether I'm doing it all for me?

See, what happens is when things aren't going well in your life, what you tend to do is you default into the condition of your heart. It's because we're doing these things to use God and to make ourselves for good.

So when things aren't going well, we pull back. We do things and expect God to come through for us in the way that we want him to. That means it's about us using God for our end.

It's awful to think, but it's possible to get into even Christianity to have God serve us rather than us serve him.

Sin. Sin clings to everything in our lives. Verse 3 uses the word craving to describe our self-centeredness.

[12:20] It's a word that means inordinate desire. It means that our egos are addictive. The little computer within us is in overdrive running evaluations.

But no amount of glory, acclaim, recognition, comfort, control will ever be enough.

The computer will never be satisfied. Our hearts curved in on themselves will never be satisfied.

C.S. Lewis, the Oxford professor and author, wrote that there is nothing more enslaving and miserable than self-centeredness.

He wrote that it is hell begun in us that will eventually take us to hell. It takes us towards the person that we are becoming like.

Satan himself. And the Bible's view of sin is that every part of the human person is tainted by sin.

Now that doesn't mean that all humans are not capable of any good or that there is no dignity in humanity.

[13:28] In fact, I'd argue that the Bible places supreme dignity on human beings like no one else. But it means that no part of the human being, mind, emotions, soul, heart, will, is left untouched by sin and self-centeredness.

And so the consequence of the end of verse 3 is shocking to us in a modern context. It says that we can't believe that we are not only dead in sin.

It says here that humans are not only dead in sin, but they are also condemned in sin. It says like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

God's anger, however, is not like your anger or my anger. It's not a bad temper. His anger is not spite. It's not malice.

It's not animosity. It's not revenge. And it's certainly not arbitrary. It is predictable. It's not governed by mood or by whim. It is God's personal, righteous, constant hostility to evil, injustice, and sin.

[14:42] It's his settled refusal to compromise with sin and his resolve to condemn it. And so that's Ephesians 2.

And the trajectory of every human being. Now, if I was to go to my doctor right now, I don't need from him, if I've got symptoms and I'm feeling sick, I don't need advice from him.

I need a remedy. I need a solution to my sickness. And the great news is that the Bible gives us the solution.

So come with me into Mark chapter 1 and see the compassion of Jesus Christ towards sinners. You see, what the Bible declares is that Jesus Christ is the compassionate rescuer who has the authority to deal with the deepest issue, the deepest problem of humanity, and that's our sin.

We see his compassion in the encounter with the leper in Mark chapter 1. So if you've got your Bibles, go there, please. Mark chapter 1, verse 40 and 45, through to 45.

[15:54] You see, in first century Israel, the lot of the poor leper was summed up in the Old Testament book of Leviticus in chapter 13. You can hardly imagine the humiliation and the isolation of a leper's life.

He was ostracized, isolated from society. He had to cry whenever he came into any form of contact with a human being, had to cry out, unclean, unclean.

Imagine the pervasive sense of worthlessness and despair. By Jesus' time, if a leper stuck his head inside a house, the house was declared unclean.

It was illegal to even greet a leper. The leper had to remain at least 50 meters away if they were upwind and two meters away if they were downwind.

Josephus, a Jewish historian, summarized it by saying that lepers were treated as if they were, in effect, dead people.

[17:05] See, leprosy was not just a disease. It was a total condition that was physical, social, economic and spiritual. Physically, because your body was literally falling apart.

But socially, you're an outcast. You were all alone, isolated from healthy people, isolated from society. The social codes punished lepers if they came anywhere near inhabited places.

And others were punished if they went anywhere near a leper. Economically, they were ruined.

They couldn't walk. Sorry, they couldn't work and had to beg or hope that someone would have compassion to leave some food out for them in some way.

And spiritually, they were ruined because society in that time assumed it was clearly the judgment of God on their life. And so a leper's need is multidimensional rescue.

And so this leper says to Jesus in verse 40, If you are willing, you can make me clean. And what he means there, you can make me clean before God, clean before the community.

[18:12] You can make me physically clean. He knew he needed a total cleansing. And Jesus is the one who can give it to him. And verse 41 literally translates that Jesus is filled with compassion.

And that is a deep down desire churning inside of him to act for the leper's good. And Jesus did what others wouldn't.

He reached out and he touched the man. He broke all social conventions. He reached out and he touched the man.

Out of compassion. He is loving a man who's starving for love. He touches him. Risk being infected with the disease himself. This leper knew fully who he was.

What his condition was. He knew that he had a disease that needed to be fixed. He lived with his need for rescue every single moment of his day.

[19:16] And the spiritual reality for all of us is that we are spiritual lepers. That is what this image here is meant to teach us.

This is our deepest need. Unlike the leper, we are often unconscious of our sin and the pervasiveness of our sinful condition.

The less we grasp that there is something deeply wrong with us, the more spiritual leprosy has in fact a hold on us. It is a spiritual necessity to know our sin.

And Jesus says it perfectly and with eternal economy in Matthew chapter 5. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are the poor in spirit for their sins. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Now the next encounter in Mark chapter 2 that Jesus has, we see he doesn't just have compassion on the leper and compassion on our helpless state because that would be nice but it's not enough.

[20:33] What we see is that he doesn't just have compassion to do something, he has the authority to do something about our deepest need. The scene is a paralytic who has some friends who carry him to a house where Jesus is and when they arrive, they discover that it's a sellout.

There's no room, it's standing room only and social isolation is not an issue here. But these guys are so determined to get their buddy to see Jesus that they go up on a roof and they start dismantling the roof to let him down.

They drop him right down in front of Jesus. All eyes are on Jesus. What's his next move? And it comes in verse 5 of chapter 2 of Mark.

When Jesus saw their face, he said to the paralytic, son, your sins are forgiven. He doesn't do that with the leper.

This is not what everyone was expecting. It's not what the paralytics expect. It's not what his friends are expecting. Couldn't Jesus see that this man's biggest issue was that he needed to walk again?

[21:49] He healed the leper. Why does he not heal this guy? Because Jesus says there's a deeper need. And he's going deeper.

And in going deeper, he sets up a showdown with the religious heavies. Have a look in verse 6. Now some teachers of the law were sitting there thinking to themselves, why does this fellow talk like that?

He's blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone? The religious leaders knew that Jesus' claim to be able to forgive this man's sin was tantamount to Jesus saying, I'm God.

That's blasphemy. You were stoned to death in the first century for that. And you can kind of understand their point. For most of us, the terrorist attack in the United States in September 11, 2001 is still a vivid memory.

And yet, I wasn't personally impacted by that atrocity. I wasn't there. I didn't know any of the approximately 3,000 people who died.

[23:07] I don't even know anyone who was injured. So you can imagine me going to the perpetrators of such an atrocity and saying to them, on behalf of everyone who was personally injured by your sin, I forgive you.

I forgive you. How do you think those who suffered loss of loved ones on September 11 would feel about that?

They'd be right to feel upset, cheated, even angry with someone like, what right do you have, Steve Jeffrey, to hand out my forgiveness to someone else? So how could Jesus presume to forgive

another human being for the sins that they've committed against God?

Jesus is either a deluded blasphemer with an unhealthy view of his significance, or Jesus is saying something very significant and very life-changing in this encounter.

Jesus claimed to have authority to hand out God's forgiveness is one of the most significant aspects of his authority. No other religious leader has ever made a statement like this.

[24 : 24] Not Buddha, not Muhammad, not Krishna. No one has made a statement like this. And it's a bold statement. But instead of backtracking in that moment, Jesus takes the opportunity to emphasize publicly that God has authorized him, has given him authority to offer forgiveness to everyone who seeks it.

Have a look. Mark 2, verse 8. Immediately, Jesus knew in his spirit that this is what they were thinking in their hearts.

And he said to them, Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier to say to this paralytic, Your sins are forgiven, or to say, Get up, take your mat, and walk.

But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. He said to the paralytic, I tell you, Get up, take your mat, and go home.

He got up, took his mat, and walked out in full view of them all. And this amazed everyone. And they praised God, saying, We've never seen anything like this.

[25 : 36] How do we know Jesus' promise to forgive sin wasn't just empty words of a deluded man? Because he followed through with his words.

Followed through with the display of the power that God had given him to heal a man that no one else could. Immediate, immediate, total restoration.

He was raised. There was no painstaking process of rehabilitation to learn. No physios or exercise physiologists. No doctors needed. This total healing.

He came in on a stretcher, and he carried it out. And yet the most important thing in this encounter is the massive public claim of Jesus that he can hand out forgiveness of sin to people who have lived as if God doesn't exist.

The healing of the paralytic was a visible sign that Jesus could do the invisible miracle of handing out God's forgiveness. Jesus met his obvious need to walk, but went after the thing that he didn't know he needed.

[26 : 57] His biggest issue, his deepest need, his sins forgiven. Now the good news is that this life-changing event for this one paralytic isn't an isolated event.

Jesus says this about himself just a few chapters later in Mark's gospel. The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus ultimately makes good on his promise to hand out God's forgiveness by giving his life for us, for all of us.

He died for our sin against God so that we, as it says, the many can be forgiven for our sin against God. That is, Jesus has traded places with us.

Did you notice that at the end of chapter one in the Bible reading with the leper? The leper was healed and he went into the towns praising God.

[28 : 04] But Jesus stayed in the place of isolation. He swapped places with the leper. Ephesians 2 verses 1 to 3 tells us that the essence of sin is putting ourselves where only God should be, the center of our lives, on the throne of our lives, in control of our lives.

That is what sin is, putting ourselves where only God deserves to be. Salvation, according to the Christian faith, is the exact opposite. Salvation is God putting himself where we deserve to be, under his punishment.

Jesus, on the cross, took the full weight of human sin upon himself. Jesus isn't on the sideline, cheering us on, hoping we'll pull through with our deepest need.

He isn't even an intensive care doctor doing everything he can to save our life. He does so much more. He's the doctor who takes our disease upon himself so that we walk out of the hospital full of life and health.

Jesus Christ took the just and the righteous punishment of God that we deserve for putting ourselves in the place where only God belongs, on the throne and the rule of our lives.

[29 : 33] And the punishment he took on the cross was so much more than the cruel and the excruciating physical punishment of crucifixion. He took the wrath of God that verse 3 says that we deserve.

He was cut off from his father, forever united with him, and he was cut off from him, sent to the place of isolation. He experienced the agony that we would experience if we were cut off from God for eternity.

I cannot even imagine to begin what it was like for him. He sat in our seat so that now we can sit in his seat in the presence of God.

One person has put this really succinctly. He says, the essence of sin is us substituting ourselves for God while the essence of salvation in the Christian faith is God substituting himself for us.

Christianity doesn't say the good are in and the bad are out. Doesn't say the open-minded are in and the judgmental are out. The good news of Jesus Christ says that the humble are in and the proud are out.

[30 : 55] Christianity says the people who know that they are not better, they're not more moral than anyone else, they're in. And the people who think that God is okay with them, they are in very grave danger.

Jesus came to call sinners. He still calls sinners. He is calling today to those who know that they are not morally and spiritually unable to save themselves.

He announces that despite the unforgiving nature of much of our world, God is in the business of offering us, every single member of humanity, a clean slate.

This is our deepest need. Jesus is the savior of the world. Jesus has been authorized to announce God's forgiveness and to make good on it, no matter how great the sin it is possible to find complete forgiveness in Jesus.

And so if you are watching this right now, wherever you are, in your lounge, no matter where you are, if you all of a sudden for the first time are feeling pangs of guilt in the way that you've treated God or you may be paralyzed by sin and guilt and shame, you need to know that Jesus is in the business and has dealt with it.

[32 : 20] The business of dealing with your deepest need. Jesus is the only savior who can fulfill all of your needs and forgive you when you fail him.

And so my call is to turn to Jesus, the creator, the king, the savior of the world for complete forgiveness. Turn to Jesus and the guarantee of life that you have with him forever.

But there'll be more of that next week. Won't get, jump the gun here. More of that next week. What this means for you. But you can be a new person forever starting today.

So what I'm going to do is I'm going to lead us in a prayer for you. I'm just going to go through it slowly. If this is a prayer for you, just in the moment of your heart right now, pray it out. Pray it out loud. If you're sitting by yourself, pray it out loud.

Or even if you're without someone else, pray it out loud if you want to. But just take a moment and pray this prayer before I hand over to Debbie. God, thank you for sending Jesus into the world to rescue us from sin.

[33 : 36] I admit that I have lived life at a distance from you and not treated you with the honour and the obedience you deserve as the creator and ruler of all things.

I realise I have offended you. I am truly sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you that Jesus, thank you Jesus for dying on the cross for me.

Thank you for guaranteeing my forgiveness and new life by rising again. Help me now for the first time in my life to live close to you with reverence and trust and teach me to love others as I have been loved by you.

Amen. Early in this service Debbie pointed us to the communication card on our website communication form.

Can I encourage you that if you prayed that prayer for the very first time let me say rejoice. I rejoice that you have forgiveness of sins in Jesus and he welcomes you and he now abides with you by his spirit.

[35 : 04] What great news you are never isolated and alone. If you know what I'm not sure what I'm talking about there go to last week's message. But if that communication card I would be delighted we here at St Paul would be delighted if you could fill out that form for us and just let us know that you prayed that prayer for the first time and we would love to send you some resources to be praying for you in this season.

God bless you. God bless you to the next week's show. God bless you. Thank you for the night.