

Series Apostles' Creed

This Message: I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins #12

Scripture Psalm 32:1-5; 130:1-5

In the Churches of the early centuries, the Apostles' Creed was used as a summary of New Testament theology. The Creed was a helpful way to organize the theological teaching about God and what He had done. The Creed is all about God; it is about God the Father Almighty, the creator; it is about Jesus Christ who came to earth to die; it is about the Holy Spirit who applies God's life to believers. Believers were expected to reflect on the meaning of each statement when reciting the Creed and, then in response, they were expected to declare their appreciation to God in worship for who He is and what He has done.

The subject for today is "the forgiveness of sins." This is an extensive subject, much too vast to cover in one message. Fortunately, the Creed concentrates on one aspect of the subject, the forgiveness made available to us by God.

According to Martin Luther, this phrase, "the forgiveness of sins," was the most important statement in the Apostles' Creed. He explained the reason for his opinion this way: "If the forgiveness of sins is not true, what does it matter whether God is almighty or Jesus Christ was born and died and rose again? These things are important to me because they have a bearing upon my forgiveness." Another person said, "If our sins cannot be forgiven, then nothing else really matters. And if our sins can be forgiven, then everything else is just details." From a practical standpoint, these quotations are true since forgiveness is the most basic spiritual need we have.

Sin is a perversity which affects each one of us. Apart from Jesus Christ, no human being has ever been free of its presence. Sin appears in our thoughts, desires, and deeds. The Bible declares that sin is like a cruel master who enslaves and controls us, and that we are unable to free ourselves from its grip.

The simplest dictionary definition of sin is “transgression of divine law.” It is the “breaking of God’s law.” Behind the breaking of God’s law is the spirit of rebellion — the unwillingness of people to do what God wants them to do. It is the human desire to have freedom from outside control. When Adam and Eve were tempted in the Garden in Eden, the serpent promised that they would be like God. Genesis 3 indicates that their desire for autonomy was the main reason for the fall. Unwillingness to submit to the law of God caused the separation between God and mankind.

Sin is everyone’s problem in the sight of God, because He is holy and pure, and we are contaminated with ungodliness and wickedness. God cannot co-exist with creatures who are contaminated with sin, so this leaves us in a very precarious situation, “for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men” (Romans 1:18).

The good news, however, is that sins can be forgiven. Our readings today are from the Psalms.

Read Psalms 32:1-5.

Read Psalms 130

Notice the question in verse 3 of Psalm 130; “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O LORD, who could stand?” The answer, of course, is no one would be able to stand in His presence; no one could have an acceptable relationship with Him because of the pervasiveness of sin in human lives. Fortunately, for us, there is a solution to the human predicament. Notice that verse 4 begins with the very important three letter word “but.” Grammatically, this little word is called “a conjunction of contrast” and the contrast is, “But with you, O LORD, there is forgiveness.” The solution originates with the forgiveness provided by God Himself.

From our standpoint, the law of God is rigid, unyielding, and the penalty for breaking His holy law is unambiguous. Isaiah wrote to his listeners, “Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you so that he will not hear” (Isaiah 59:2) and the Apostle Paul wrote, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). The Scriptures are very clear about the consequences of sin.

However, from God's standpoint, there is a plan in place to deal with the problem of sin. The prophet Micah wrote about this plan in one of the most exciting verses in Scripture: "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgressions of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy." Our hope for a relationship with God rests in God Himself; He is the one who pardons our sin and forgives our transgressions.

What exactly is forgiveness? When we forgive a person we give up our claim to retaliate or get even. Let me state that in another way: When we forgive a person, we absorb the consequences of that person's actions. Think about how radical that statement is. Forgiveness means that we do not require the thief to reimburse us for the items which were taken from us. Forgiveness means that we do not demand the punishment of the person who injures us.

Let me give an example of radical forgiveness. On October 2, 2006, Charles Carl Roberts entered the one-room schoolhouse of the Old Order Amish community in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. He took hostages and eventually shot and killed five girls and injured several others before committing suicide. What was the response of the Amish community? The grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls described the attitude of the community, "We must not think evil of this man." Amish community members visited and comforted the widow and parents of the murderer. They also set up a charitable fund for the family of the shooter. They accompanied the widow to the Roberts funeral service in order to mourn and grieve with her. Marie Roberts later wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbors thanking them for their forgiveness, grace, and mercy. She wrote, "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you." I think you will agree that the attitude and actions of the Amish people is not normal human behavior.

The words "forgiveness" and "pardon" have almost the same meanings. When we pardon a person we absolve that person of the consequences of his or her actions. A pardon is the release from the penalty of an offense. When we forgive we refrain from exacting a payment. Forgiveness puts the relationship back to its previous condition or position. Forgiveness is accepting those who go against us, hurt us, deprive us of what is ours.

Think about this from the standpoint of God. When He forgives us, He backs away from His resolve to exact a penalty from us. According to Scripture, the designated penalty of sin is death. When God forgives, it means that He no longer considers us guilty of breaking His law, and therefore He is willing to remove the condemnation of death and incorporate us into His family.

Psalm 32 suggests how God is able to forgive and pardon. There are three aspects. In verse 1 “sins are covered.” Verse 2 mentions “sin the LORD does not count.” Verse 5 mentions the acknowledgement of personal sin and confession.

In God’s plan, forgiveness of sin was worked out through Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul explained, “God ... reconciled us to himself through Christ ... not counting men’s sins against them,” and, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (II Corinthians 5:18-21).

The law demanded the death penalty for sin, and since everyone is a sinner, every person throughout history has faced, or will face, the judgment, condemnation, and wrath of God. What is incredibly wonderful for us is that God poured out this judgment, condemnation, and wrath on His Son, Jesus, in order that there would be a basis to offer atonement, redemption, and forgiveness to people. Paul summarized the plan of God in these words, “In Him (Christ) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us” (Ephesians 1:7).

Martin Luther had some unique insights into this matter of substitutionary atonement. He wrote, “Learn to know Christ and him crucified. Learn to sing to him and say, ‘Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. You took on you what was mine; you set on me what was yours. You became what you were not, that I might become what I was not.’” Offering praise to God is good advice for us. When we link ourselves to Jesus by faith, there is a great change in our lives. We no longer are the enemies of God, but we become accepted by God as righteous, and our sins are cancelled. This is too wonderful for us to understand.

I have been describing a deep theology, but we need to go deeper still because forgiveness is just one part of a greater truth we need to know. The New Testament talks more about justification than forgiveness because we need more from God than just forgiveness. Justification is described as “forgiveness plus.”

Justification does more than deal with the past; it also deals with acceptance and assurance for the future. Think of it this way: forgiveness removes the guilt of past actions. This is wonderful, but there is a problem — we never stop sinning. Forgiveness is always playing catch up to what we do. It is true that forgiveness is available to us on an ongoing basis; Scripture declares “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9). However, forgiveness alone does not keep us from having an up-and-down kind of relationship with God — falling out of favor with God because of sin and having to be restored to favor, only to sin again. The problem is: how can we be confident and secure in our relationship with God?

The answer is justification. Justification is concerned with our permanent standing before God. It is a gift whereby God not only reverses the effects of sin but He establishes a relationship between Himself and believing humans which is complete, final, and irrevocable. Justification is a much broader and much richer, more significant concept than forgiveness.

Theologians, beginning with the Apostle Paul, have made note of three consequences of sin. The evidence of these consequences goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. They experienced guilt, condemnation, and separation from God. Justification successfully deals with all three of these things. As a part of justification, God provides forgiveness, thereby lifting the condemnation and penalty that hangs over humanity. Second, He removes our guilt by substituting the righteousness of Jesus Christ; God put our guilt on Him, and then He hid us “in Christ.” Finally, God ends our spiritual separation by implanting His life within us and bringing us into His family. The indwelling presence of God’s eternal life in the believer is proof that our relationship with Him will never again be at risk.

Because we are justified, a one-time-for-all-time action, we can have security and confidence in our relationship. The Apostle Paul wrote an appropriate summary to the matters of guilt, condemnation, and separation in his letter to the Roman church fellowship. In a series of questions and answers he explained: “Who will bring a charge against those whom God has chosen?” The answer, No one; because “It is God who justifies,” thus removing our guilt (and if God is for us, who can be against us?).

“Who is he who condemns?” The answer: No one, rather, “Christ Jesus, who died, ... who was raised to life, who is at the right hand of God, ... is interceding for us” (not condemning us; He is pulling for us).

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” The answer: No one; “neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:33-39).

Forgiveness is a response to a specific act. However, the reality is that forgiveness must apply to an ongoing succession of acts because we keep on sinning. We are expected to forgive repeatedly throughout our lifetimes. Justification, however, is a once-for-all response to faith in Jesus Christ and never needs to be repeated. Justification relates to our spiritual position in the presence of God and covers all of our lives — past, present, and future. Forgiveness is a response to negative circumstances. Justification is positive, bestowing on the believer the purity and holiness necessary to stand before God.

Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, He said to His disciples, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.” This is a command which applies to us today as much as it applied to the men who were with Jesus 2000 years ago. The good news is that our compassionate and gracious God is eager to forgive us our sins.

What must we do in response to the forgiveness provided to us by God? What can we do? We can only bow the knee to God in appreciation for His grace toward us. We can tell Him “thank you” over and over again, praise Him, worship Him, serve Him. Then, secondly, in keeping with the command of Jesus, we must tell non-believers that forgiveness has been provided to them as God’s gift to humanity.

Some miscellaneous thoughts for reflection:

The Bible uses a number of images to describe how God deals with our sins:

God blots out our sins as a thick cloud (Isaiah 44:22).

God forgets our sins and remembers them no more (Jeremiah 31:34).

God puts our sins behind his back (Isaiah 38:17).

God buries our sins in the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19).

God removes our sins as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12).

In the letter to the believers in Rome, Paul explained, "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who ... are justified freely by his grace; ... God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished; he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:22-26).

According to God's plan, the Old Testament law was given to prove that everyone was a sinner. In his letter to the Galatian church, Paul wrote, "The Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised ... might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. The law was put in charge until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the law" (Galatians 3:22-25).