

Foundations 11: I Believe in ...the Forgiveness of Sins

March 27, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Matthew 26:26-28

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

²⁷ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸ This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Acts 10:34-43

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him."

³⁹ "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

When was the first time you sensed your sins were forgiven? Some people say it felt like a huge burden being lifted from their shoulders, something like Christian in the classic story, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan. When we get to that part of the Apostles' Creed where we say we believe that all sins are forgiven, we should lift up a cheer. So far, we have learning about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. With this statement the Apostles' Creed is talking about you and about me, and the precious gift we have been given for the forgiveness of sins.

Of course, you have to first admit that you are a sinner. "Sin" in the Greek, literally means, "missing the mark" (hamartia). Sins can be sins of commission or sins of omission. Sins of commission are when we do the things we know we should not be doing. We are purposefully, or sometimes accidentally, disobedient to the will of God. Sins of omission are those things that we should have done but make excuses for not doing them. Regardless, all sin is disobedience to the will of God.

Ever since Adam and Eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden humankind has had a tendency to do the wrong thing. We purposefully do the very things we are told not to do. Most of the time we even get a bit of a momentary thrill for doing the very thing we are told not to do. Perhaps it is because we think we are being clever, that we are getting away with something that no one else knows about or that we are accomplishing something that those less clever than we are had not been able to get away with. And some people do get away with doing something they know is wrong to do because they don't get caught by another human being. But we should not kid ourselves. God knows when we have done something wrong. And there is a penalty to pay for doing something wrong. The Scriptures tell us that the wages for sin is death (Romans 6:23).

And that is not all, as if that penalty were not enough. If a person has any conscience at all, then that person realizes that what they are doing wrong hurts other people and ultimately hurts themselves. And they have to live with that when they are not forgiven. Sin leads to guilt, which leads to shame, which leads to fear, which, if left unchecked long enough, leads to depression, anxiety, and eventually death. Yet we are all guilty of doing what we are not supposed to do and we are guilty of not doing the things we know we ought to be doing. All of us fall short of God's glory and God's expectation of us (Rom. 3:23).

Paul the Apostle laments this struggle within in his letter to the Romans. He writes: ¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. (Rom. 7:15-20)

So, then what can we do about this internal struggle that seems to spin out of our control? Since ancient of days, humankind thought they could appease God's anger over our sins by offering him sacrifices. This is also how many pagans tried to appease their gods, but many times their sacrifices were human sacrifices. Human sacrifice was

not the way of the Israelites, which was what made the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham on Mt. Moriah such an unusual thing.

Perhaps you have heard of the “scapegoat”? That has a biblical origin. Lev. 16 speaks of the process where “Aaron lay both his hands on the head of a live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgression, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for that task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness” (Lev. 16:21-22). And, of course, since the goat would be set loose in a barren land where there was no sustenance, it would die and take all the people’s sins along with it.

The blood of the sacrifice represented the life of the animal that was being sacrificed. It was in essence, a life for a life. The life of the animal instead of taking the life of the human who had sinned.

As you can only imagine, this sacrifice business was messy, bloody, and some may say, inhumane. The blood of these sacrifices was meant to be an atonement for sins. What does atonement mean? It literally means “to cover with.” All these sacrifices were to cover over the sins, so that the sinner could be made right or “at one” with God. These sacrifices could cover up the sins but they did not have the power to remove the sins. They were like the equivalent of sweeping the dust under the rug. The sin remained and just kept building up. What the Israelite people really needed was something or someone who could remove the sin.

Along came Jesus, the Son of God, who came to this world to save people from their sins. Jesus became the ultimate sacrifice for us. His blood was shed upon that cross. He died our death that we deserved because we are the sinners, not Jesus. Our sin was what put Jesus on that cross. We all had a part in Jesus’ being nailed to the cross and dying there. Yes, we are still sinners, but the power of sin no longer remains. As John Wesley put it, “Sin remains but does not reign.”¹

In that same sermon, Wesley asks a good question: “Is there any sin in them that are born of God, or are they wholly delivered from it?” I had a similar question asked of me by a person who called me recently to conduct a survey over the phone. I usually don’t do surveys over the phone and this woman was not a particularly good survey taker. Every time she read a statement she did not personally believe, she made a scoffing noise over the phone. She asked, “Do you believe that anybody can be fully forgiven of their sins?” and then she had a scoffing snort after she asked the question. “I said that I do believe people can be fully forgiven of their sins.” She went on to rebuke me by quoting that Paul the apostle wrote that we are all sinners and nobody is perfect. Well, I

¹ <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/sermons.v.xiii.html> -- John Wesley, Sermon 13, “On Sin in Believers”

agreed with that too. But I do believe that we have forgiveness of sins – and I mean full forgiveness of sins – because that is what we are affirming we believe when we say the Apostles' Creed, when we say "I believe...in the forgiveness of sins."

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross has the power to fully forgive us of our sins. At the moment we ask for forgiveness, we are without sin. If we cannot admit to that, then we are saying we do not believe in the efficacy of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins. Of course, we still have the tendency to sin. It's similar to stepping into the shower, getting fully cleansed, and then the moment we step out of the shower we start getting dirty again. While it is true that we continue to sin, we can have an assurance of forgiveness because our cleansing from sin depends on Jesus and not on us.

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross fully covers us, otherwise we would have to ask for forgiveness the very moment before we died. Jesus Christ died for our sin upon the cross. It is finished. Our burdens of sin, and the accompanying guilt, fear, shame and death, all drop away, like the pack off of Christian's back in the Pilgrim's Progress. We are truly free! Believing that are sins are truly forgiven is something to cheer about! Thanks be to God for his graciousness!