

(God-Centered Praying) 7. Forgiveness of Sins

by Zac Poonen

True forgiveness requires confession, honesty, and a willingness to forgive others in the same way that we want God to forgive us.

Scripture: 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Forgiveness Of Sins", "Spiritual Repentance"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches on the importance of forgiveness, emphasizing that sin is a debt to God and highlighting the value of conscience in recognizing our wrongdoings. He stresses the need for honest confession of sin, urging believers to maintain a sensitive conscience and to acknowledge their sins with absolute honesty. Poonen also discusses the significance of walking in the light, being merciful, and setting relationships right, emphasizing that forgiveness is essential for experiencing God's mercy and for maintaining right relationships with both God and fellow believers.

Transcript

"Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors"

Sin is a debt to God - whether that sin be a coming short of God's standards or a trespassing and going beyond what God has permitted.

The Value of Conscience

Only man, of all created beings on this earth, feels the guilt of having done something wrong. This is one feature that distinguishes him from animals.

A dog doesn't feel guilty if it has done something wrong, unless it has been trained by its master to feel guilt. But with man, you can go to the jungles, among those who have never heard anything about religion, those who have never been taught by anyone, those who have never come across a Bible, and you will find people there feeling guilty. Their conscience tells them that they have grieved their Creator and so they try to appease Him in some way. But you'll never find a religious monkey or a religious dog anywhere!

Our conscience is one of God's greatest gifts to us. It warns us when something is wrong in our relationship with God - just like pain warns us that something is wrong in our body. We must be careful therefore to maintain a sensitive conscience at all times.

Honest Confession of Sin

There are many people who say, "Father forgive us our sins," who don't realise that we can't ask God to forgive us unless we have confessed our sins to Him first. We have to acknowledge our sins with absolute honesty.

God's Word says, "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper," (Prov. 28:13). One who conceals his sins may pray, "Forgive me, forgive me." But he won't be forgiven. The verse goes on to say, "..... but he who confesses and forsakes them will find mercy." The Bible also says, "If we confess our sins (that is our part) He (God) is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (that is God's part) (1 Jn. 1:9). If we do our part, we can be certain that God will be faithful to do His!

Ever since Adam fell into sin, man has had a tendency to cover up his sin rather than to confess it. When Adam and Eve sinned, what was their first reaction? Was it to run to God at once and to say, "Oh God, we have sinned, we have done what You told us not to do"? No. They didn't do that. They ran away from God and tried to hide from Him. What foolishness! Could Adam and Eve hide from Almighty God behind a tree? Sin certainly makes a man foolish.

A second characteristic of man is to put the blame for his sins on others. When God uncovered Adam's sin, He asked him, "Did you eat of this tree?" What was Adam's reply? Adam blamed his wife. And his wife blamed the serpent!

That nature has come down to all of us from Adam and Eve. We're always trying to justify ourselves, claiming that we're not responsible for the mistakes we've made. And when we are caught red-handed, we say that we did it in a moment of weakness and pressure. We seek to cover up our sins instead of confessing them. And that's why we cannot get God's forgiveness.

Walking in the Light

When Jesus talked about coming into the light, He said, "Men loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does EVIL hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the TRUTH comes to the light" (Jn. 3:19-21).

Notice the difference there! On one side, Jesus said that everyone who does EVIL hates the light. The opposite of `evil' being `good', one would think that Jesus would go on to say that everyone who does GOOD comes to the light. But that's not what He said. He said that everyone who practises the TRUTH comes to the light.

Did you notice the difference? What Jesus asks us for is not goodness first, but truth - reality and honesty. In other words, Jesus said, "The man who is evil is dishonest. But the man who comes into the light although not perfect, is an honest man." If we could come into the light only when we are perfectly good, then none of us would ever be able to come into it. But God invites people to come to Him who are honest. These honest people will then become good progressively.

We can pray this prayer, "Forgive us our sins" only if we are willing to be honest. You may be imperfect but you can still come into God's light if you're honest about your imperfections. Everyone who does the truth, who is honest, can come into the light and acknowledge his sin and then that sin will be blotted out.

"If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1:7).

There are many who go around claiming the last part of that verse, "The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin." But it's not correct to quote it like that. The blood of Jesus cleanses only those who fulfil the condition mentioned in the first part of that verse - those who walk in the light.

Let me use an illustration. Supposing it was dark all around me. To come into the light would mean that I expose myself. If my shirt is dirty, it will be seen. The light does not cleanse my shirt. The light only exposes the fact that my shirt is dirty. That's being honest about what I see within myself, instead of trying to hide it. That is the fundamental meaning of coming into the light.

We need to understand this clearly, because this applies not only to our relationship with God but also to our relationship with our fellow men.

In Christianity there is a vertical relationship with God and there is a horizontal relationship with our fellow-believers. You can't have one without the other. You can't have fellowship with God if you're not in fellowship with your fellow- believers.

"If someone says 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar" (1 Jn. 4:20). If you really love God, you'll love your brother too.

A Right Horizontal Relationship

Just as we have to confess to God the things that we have done that have wronged Him, we have also got to confess to our fellow-men the things that we have done that have wronged them. There is no forgiveness without such confession.

If we have cheated someone of money, we must return it. Otherwise, God cannot forgive us. The only way by which we show that we have truly repented is by confessing to the person whom we have wronged and by giving back that which we have taken wrongfully.

If you have traveled in the trains without a ticket, it's easy just to go to God and say, "I'm sorry, I've cheated the railways." But the costly way - the way you prove that you have really repented - is by going to the railway counter, buying a ticket for that journey and tearing up that ticket. Otherwise your repentance is just empty words.

Here lies the reason why many people don't enter into a deep fellowship with God. They repent only with their lips and not with their heart. They confess their sins to Him. But they don't confess to their fellowmen when they have sinned against them.

To say to someone, "I'm sorry, that was my mistake. Please forgive me," is one of the most difficult things to say. Why? Because it slays our ego. We are all basically proud people and we don't like to humble ourselves and admit that we've made a mistake!

Why is it that we feel so free to confess our sins to a holy God but find it difficult to confess our sin to an unholy brother? The reason could be that when we go into our room and claim to be confessing to God, we may be actually confessing only to ourselves! We are not confessing to God at all. We are fooling ourselves. The test of whether you have really humbled yourself before God is whether you are willing to

apologise to any human being whom you've hurt.

In Indian culture, there is the idea that only wives have to ask forgiveness from their husbands - never vice-versa. It's as though the man belonged to some superior species!!

There is just no such thing as being superior or inferior, when it comes to asking forgiveness. Even if you are the director of an office, and you have wronged the junior-most person in that office, you must humble yourself and go to him and say, "I'm sorry. That was my mistake. Please forgive me." Nothing less than that is true Christianity.

There are people with broken relationships in many churches who don't go to one another to settle the matter. They have grudges against each other and won't visit one another. And yet they call themselves Christians! They're not Christians at all. If such people think that they are in the kingdom of God, they are only deceiving themselves.

If you're not willing to talk with or visit a brother and yet take part in the breaking of bread, that's blasphemy. We cannot have fellowship with God on those terms. You can't have a vertical relationship with God when your horizontal relationship with your fellow-believers is not right.

But when we have truly confessed to God and men, then God will cleanse us so thoroughly that the memory of our past will no longer be before Him. And if HE does not remember our past sins any more, why should we think about them (Heb. 8:12)?

Perfect Forgiveness

The Bible says that we are justified by the blood of Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:9). When God cleanses us He justifies us too. That word "justified" means, "Just as if I'd never sinned in my life and just as if I am perfectly righteous now." How wonderful!

We can picture our sins like many words written on a blackboard. Now that board has been wiped clean with a wet cloth. When you look at the blackboard now what do you see? Nothing. It is just as if nothing had ever been written on it at any time. That is how the blood of Jesus cleanses us - thoroughly and completely.

If we have truly confessed our sins to God, then having confessed them once is enough. God blots them out immediately. And His promise is, "I WILL REMEMBER THEIR SINS NO MORE." (Heb. 8:12). What rest comes into our heart when we realize that we've been truly forgiven and that we don't have to confess our sins again and again to the Lord.

Let me add that it is best when we pray "Forgive us our sins," to be specific. Many people pray in a general way, "Lord, I may have committed so many sins." That means they're not sure. It's no use confessing like that; because you're implying that perhaps you haven't sinned at all!

It is best to be specific, and to say, "Lord, this is the sin. I've had a grudge against that person. I haven't forgiven that person. I've been jealous of that person. My motive in doing that was utterly selfish. I did it for my own glory, etc." You have to be honest.

And after we have confessed all the sins that we know, we'll still have to pray like David, "Acquit me of hidden sins" - for we have all sinned in ways that we are not conscious of (Psa.19:12).

Forgiving Others

This petition for forgiveness is one of the most important petitions in this prayer because it is the only petition that Jesus repeated at the end of His prayer.

Have you noticed that?

Out of the six petitions in this prayer, Jesus emphasised one especially at the end. He said, "If you forgive men their trespasses your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses your Heavenly Father will also not forgive you" (Matt. 6:14,15).

Many Christians do not enjoy full and free fellowship with God because they have not taken this petition seriously.

Jesus taught a parable of a king who checked up the accounts of his servants one day and discovered that there was one who owed him 40 million rupees. And when that servant said, "I've got no money sir, please forgive me," the king forgave him completely. That man went out, and found another servant who owed him just 40 rupees; and he caught him by the throat and sued him and put him in jail. When the king heard that, he called the unmerciful servant and said, "I forgave you 40 million rupees so freely. Couldn't you forgive that man 40 rupees?" And he handed him over to the torturers. Then Jesus said, "So will My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Mt. 18:35). The torturers are evil spirits who are permitted to harass us until we learn to be merciful to others.

Jesus used this parable to illustrate how great the debt is that God has forgiven us, and how unmerciful and evil it is for us not to forgive someone who has hurt us.

Has someone done you some harm? Maybe someone has spread false stories about you. Maybe your neighbour, or your wife, or your father or your mother-in-law has done you some harm. Maybe they have ruined your life in some way. Maybe the doctor who operated on you made a mistake that has caused you untold suffering. But the Lord says that all those sins put together are so tiny compared to the debt you had to God and which God forgave you. So there is absolutely no reason why you should not be able to forgive all those people freely from your heart.

The important part of Matthew 18:35 is "from your heart." If you are not willing to forgive your fellow-man from your heart, don't waste your time coming to God and saying, "Forgive us our trespasses," for God won't listen to your prayer. If there is one single soul in the whole world whom you haven't forgiven, you cannot be forgiven yourself; and you'll be lost eternally - for no unforgiven soul can ever enter God's presence. This is far more serious than we realise.

The prayer is, "Forgive us AS WE HAVE forgiven others." God sees exactly how we have forgiven others. Jesus taught that God gives us in the SAME measure as we give to others. He said, "Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down and shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For BY YOUR STANDARD OF MEASURE IT WILL BE MEASURED TO YOU IN RETURN." (Lk. 6:38)

That means that if you use a small spoon to give to others, God will use that very same spoon when answering your prayers. So when we pray for something great and mighty from God and God takes a small spoon and gives us only a little bit, the reason usually is that we have used that same spoon to give to others. The larger the spoon we use to give to others, the larger the spoon God will use to give to us. This is an unchanging principle in God's dealings with us.

"Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy" (Matt.5:7). The more merciful you are to others, the more merciful God will be to you in the day of judgment. But "judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy." (James 2:13).

And so, if you forgive others in a mean, stingy way, God will forgive you in the same way too. But if you give those who have harmed you a warm, forgiving look, God will give you a warm, forgiving look too. God will treat you exactly as you treat others.

Setting Relationships Right

Jesus said that when you bring your gifts to the altar, when you come to pray to God, or to put money into the offering box, and there remember that you've hurt your brother, you should, "FIRST be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your offering" (Mt. 5:22-24). Otherwise God won't accept your money or your prayer.

The Old Covenant standard was just: "YOU shall not bear any grudge against your neighbour" (Lev. 19:18). That was easy to keep.

But the New Covenant standard is higher. Jesus said, "If YOUR BROTHER has a grudge against you, go and set it right." Of course, there will always be brothers who have something against us for no fault of ours. Jesus and the apostles had many enemies because they stood for the truth. But here, in the context, Jesus is referring to a brother who has a grudge against us because WE spoke to him rudely (Matt. 5:22). It's a grudge caused by something sinful that WE did. In such cases, we must go to him first, confessing our sin and asking him for forgiveness. Only then can we bring our offering to God.

If we go to God and say, "Lord, I want the fullness of new-covenant power in my life", the Lord will say, "When I give you new-covenant power, it will bring with it new-covenant responsibilities."

Many Christians do not enjoy new-covenant power, because they are living by old covenant standards. They remain powerless because they are unwilling to go and ask for forgiveness from someone.

Being Merciful

We all have a flesh and we are living among others who have a flesh. And so we are constantly liable to injure one another knowingly and unknowingly. The only place where we'll never get hurt by anyone is in heaven. And so we need to forgive one another as long as we live on this earth. To err is human, to forgive is divine.

One of the features of hell is that there is no mercy there. And in the measure in which you lack mercy in your heart towards others, in that measure you have got a little bit of hell right inside your heart. If you are unwilling to forgive someone, you've got a little bit of hell inside you. You may be considered very pious by others, because of all your religious activity. But you've got this little bit of hell right inside you all the time. And you can't go to heaven in that condition - because you can't take hell into heaven. You've got to get rid of it before you leave this earth.

That's why the Lord taught us to pray, "Forgive us in exactly the same way that we have forgiven others."

When we don't forgive others, it can affect our bodies too. Disobedience to God's laws often brings physical suffering.

If you bear a grudge against someone in your heart or if you're jealous of someone, and thus violate God's law of love, it can finally begin to affect your body. There are Christians today suffering from arthritis, migraine, rheumatism and asthma etc., who can't be healed - just because they have a grudge against someone. They may take any number of pills but they're not going to be healed until they learn to forgive. The cause of such diseases is not organic. It's not in their body. It is in their soul.

If you have not forgiven your brother or sister, God will not listen to your prayer. The Bible says in Psalm 66:18: "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear." It's not only that He doesn't answer, he doesn't even HEAR.

Let's not fool ourselves. True forgiveness follows brokenness and confession, and that involves a recognition of the rottenness of our flesh, a willingness to make any restitution and to ask anyone's forgiveness if necessary, if only our relationship with God can be straightened out.

Finally, remember that the petition is "Forgive US." We want our brothers to be forgiven too. Sometimes, it's possible to have a secret hope that a brother will be judged by God for the way he has treated us. Such an attitude is Satanic - for it's only the devil who wants people to be punished by God.

Jesus said, "I have washed your feet and you must wash one another's feet" (Jn. 13:14). That means that when you see dirt on your brother's feet (spiritually speaking), you must long for him to be cleansed too.

"Forgive US" means, "Father, I won't be satisfied if you just forgive me my sins. There are other brothers and sisters around me. I want you to forgive them their sins too. Amen."

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