

We need the practical righteousness of spirit that goes to the very heart and motives. But we cry out, "Lord, what will produce this righteousness?" Only embracing the great gospel message of the forgiveness of sins will produce such a righteousness. No one who leans his soul on the forgiveness of sins will ever be lost. And the man who does this will be doing good works. There will be fruit in his life. His works may seem lowly. No one may notice them. He may not even notice them himself. But God sees them because this man lives by the forgiveness of sins. His works in the judgment are therefore only the evidence of the great Christian faith—"I believe in the forgiveness of sins.



In the invitation of the gospel of Christ, all are being called to trust in God's unmerited grace through faith in the blood of Jesus to wash away all their sin and guilt. The free gift of forgiveness and eternal life is promised to all who accept the invitation to come to Christ to partake of the cleansing water of life. Let "whosoever will" call upon His name and He will not only freely forgive, but He will give the gift of the Holy Spirit to begin to write God's law upon the heart of the forgiven believer. Will you cast yourself upon the mercy of God in Christ? Pray this simple prayer to Jesus now and He will in no way cast you away.

Lord, I know that my life is full of sin and selfishness.

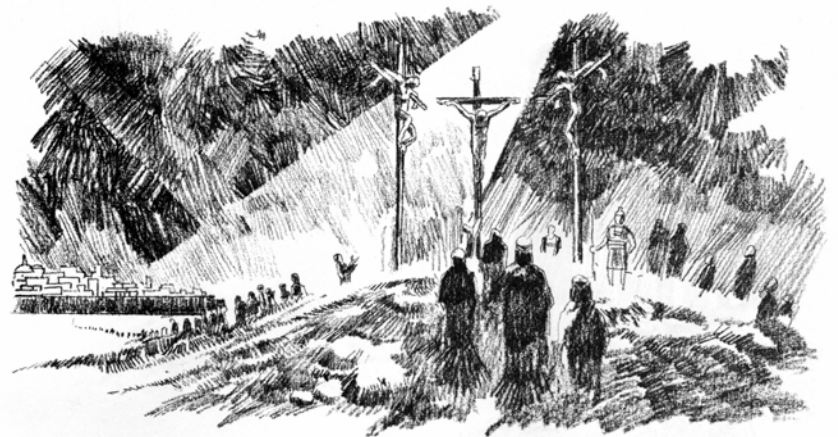
Please forgive me of my sins and reckon me as being righteous through faith in your sinless life and atoning death on Calvary. Please write your commandments upon my heart and daily teach me to call upon You for your forgiveness and unmerited grace.

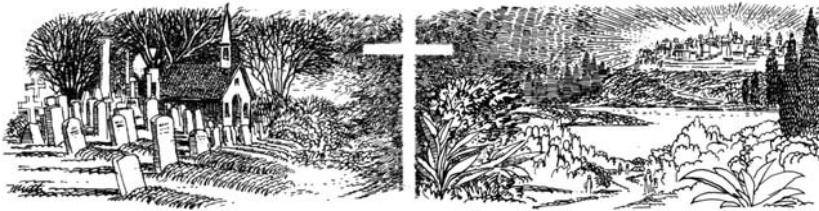
Be the Lord and Shepherd of my life and let me learn to love and forgive and serve others as you have loved and forgiven me and given Yourself for me on the cross. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Good News !!





The Forgiveness of Sin

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He gave this commission to His disciples:

"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation." —Mark 16:15

Luke records the same commission in these words:

"Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." —Luke 24:47

From a comparison of these two scriptures it is clear that the central message of the gospel is *the forgiveness of sins*. This is the message Jesus commanded His church to give. On the day of Pentecost Peter proclaimed,

"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." —Acts 2:38

And again, when the gospel was first given to the Gentiles, Peter referred to the commission of Christ:

"And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that He is the One ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name." —Acts 10:42-43

Paul gave the same message. After showing from Scripture that Jesus is the Christ, the apostle concluded,

Since guilt is the primary cause of sin, the only way to break the power of sin is to remove the guilt. Thus, when we clearly understand that Christ's righteousness is freely put to our account, Satan's power over us is broken. Why does the imputed righteousness of Christ break the devil's power? As Paul would say, it puts God's people "under grace." They are no longer guilty. Christ's obedience stands in place of their disobedience. God looks at them as if they had never sinned. Because they have a clear conscience, they can now serve the living God.

The great truth of the forgiveness of sins restores our relationship to God. It gives us a good conscience toward Him. Those who live by the forgiveness of sins will realize they cannot stand before God a moment without forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not only needed for the occasional slip. Luther understood that even our best deeds need forgiveness. He asked God to forgive him for his prayers because they were not what they ought to be. A man who lives by the forgiveness of sins is bowed down by a sense of God's mercy. He lives as a beggar. Moment by moment his only plea before God is, "Be merciful to me a sinner." And if he realizes that he stands before God on this basis, he will live in a new relationship to his fellow men. A forgiven Christian is a forgiving Christian.

In the judgment God will be more interested in the spirit of a man's heart than in his outward performance. Tragically, many who attend church every week and "tithe mint and dill and cumin" (Matt. 23:23) will lose eternal life and be condemned in the judgment. It is possible to be meticulous in religious duties and yet be intolerant, harsh, unforgiving and unmerciful, and unclean in spirit.

"Speak evil of no one" is the command of the Lord (Titus 3:2). But unless the gospel motivates us, we will never have the hands, the feet or the heart to carry out the commandment of God.

Speak evil of no one. . . for we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient hating one another; but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of His own mercy. —Titus 3:2-4.

Remembering that God saves us according to His mercy, we put our hands over our mouths. Our relationship to our fellow man is modified and sweetened by the element of divine mercy that pervades the entire life. We begin to act toward others as God has acted toward us.

Paul declares, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (1 Cor. 5:10). We are judgment-bound. But we will need something more with which to face that final judgment than a Pharisaical righteousness. For "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20).

The writer to the Hebrews declares that the conscience must be purified from dead works to serve the living God. It is the blood of Christ, shed for the forgiveness of sins, that alone can purify the conscience (Heb. 9:14, 22). Only the forgiveness of sins by the blood of Christ will enable us to live before God with a good conscience. We will therefore never be able

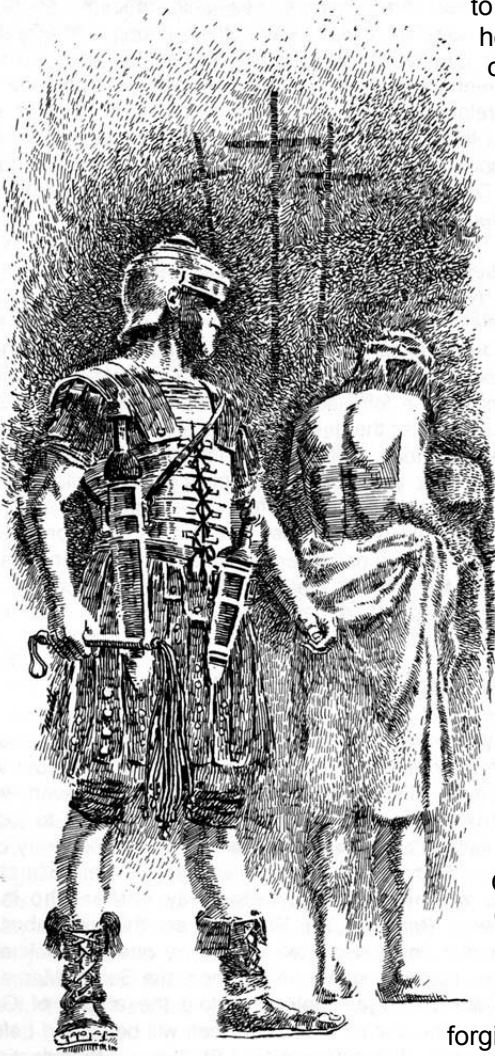
to truly serve God unless we heartily embrace the forgiveness of sins.

The forgiveness of sins is the greatest incentive to stop sinning. Guilt is a factory which produces all kinds of sins. Paul says, "For sin will have no dominion over you" (Rom. 6:14). Does he say that this is because we have been filled with the Holy Spirit and have the indwelling life that gives us strength to obtain the victory over sin? Paul might have given this reason. He does touch on that in Romans 8. But in Romans 6 he says, "Sin shall not have dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14). Grace is simply the forgiveness of sins.

Sin does not have dominion over us because we are not under the law but under grace. On the other hand, sin will have dominion over us if we are not under grace but under the law. We are under the law if we do not want to live by the

forgiveness of sins. We are under the law when we assume that if the past is

paid, we can live thereafter by sanctification. The religion of the Pharisee proposes to satisfy the unbending claims of the law by our sanctification. If that is our religion, we are not living by the forgiveness of sins, and sin will have dominion over us.



"Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this Man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you." —Acts 13:38

Whenever the Lord's Supper is celebrated, the forgiveness of sins is celebrated. Christ took the cup and said,

"Drink of it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." —Matt. 26:27-28

The forgiveness of sins is the central teaching of the Gospels. To the man let down through the roof, Christ said, "My son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). And of Mary, who had crept into the feast at Simon's house and broken a bottle of expensive ointment on His feet, Christ said:

"Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." And He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with Him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." — Luke 7:47-50

Here the words *saved* and *forgiven* are used synonymously. But not only is *salvation* linked with forgiveness. In Ephesians Paul equates *redemption* with forgiveness:

"In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace" —Eph. 1:17

The Apostles' Creed, the oldest and most famous creed of the Christian church, is correct when it indicates that the forgiveness of sins is the essential feature of the Christian religion. In the entire Apostles' Creed the forgiveness of sins is the only thing said about salvation:

I believe in God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried;

He descended into hell; the third day he rose from the dead;

He ascended into heaven; and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Christian Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.

"I believe in... the forgiveness of sins." Sins are forgiven through faith alone, in the name of Jesus, for His sake, because of what He has done and suffered. And all who believe are saved and have life eternal. Thus, he who is forgiven is saved and has eternal life. No one can candidly read the words of Jesus or the apostles and deny that this great truth is the central point of all gospel preaching. This is what revived the church with mighty power in the sixteenth century.

The Spirit of the Gospel

Psalm 32 is one of the great psalms quoted by Paul in the book of Romans (Rom. 4:6-8). This psalm beautifully expresses the essence of Christianity.

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

I acknowledged my sin to Thee,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my
transgressions to the Lord";

Then Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.
Therefore let every one who is godly offer prayer to Thee.

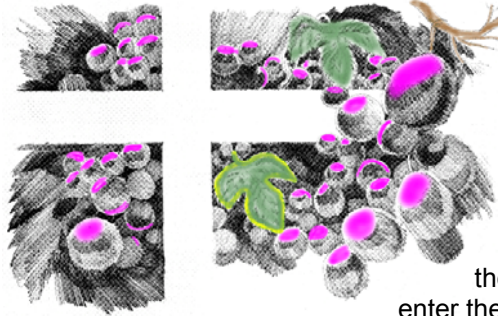
—Psalm 32:1-6



We can also translate the last sentence, "This is how the godly pray." In other words, this is the spirit of the godly man. The happy man (for that is the blessed man) is the man whose transgression is forgiven and in whose spirit there is no deceit (vss. 1-2). The King James Version translates "deceit" as "guile." The expression "without guile" is used to describe those who meet Christ at His coming (Rev. 14:5). They are those who live without pretense, without hypocrisy, who frankly acknowledge their need of divine mercy. They live by the forgiveness of sins.

John warns:

The Fruit of the Gospel



We must not, of course, despise good works. The Scriptures plainly teach that in the final judgment our works will be the evidence of our faith. But sometimes we forget the kind of works the judgment will approve. Works will not be valued by their appearance. Many will enter the judgment with apparently wonderful works. But the Lord will say to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you evildoers" (Matt. 7:23). "For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). How then does God judge works? What works will He approve in the final judgment?

And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that He (Jesus) was at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed His feet, and anointed them with the ointment. —Luke 7:37-38.

This woman's act did not appear impressive. In fact, it was an embarrassment to all the company. But Jesus was the judge, and there He gave an example of the final judgment. He said, "Let her alone; why trouble ye her? She hath wrought a good work on Me" (Mark 14:6, KJV). That was the verdict of the Judge. He said it was a good work. Why? Because it was prompted by gratitude for divine mercy. She had been forgiven much, so she loved much (Luke 7:47).

No deed of God's children—even giving a cup of cold water to a little one in the name of Jesus Christ (Mark 9:41)—will be forgotten if prompted by gratitude for the forgiveness of sins. What a contrast are such works to those of self-righteous Laodiceans, who do not even feel the need of forgiveness!

Nothing reaches so fully to the deepest motives of conduct as a sense of the pardoning love of Christ. The love motive will never be greater than when we realize the greatness of our pardon. That which produces a genuine victorious life in the sight of God is the embracing of the central point of the gospel message: "Through this Man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed" (Acts 13:38).

The Parable of the Two Sons. In the parable of the two sons, the younger wandered into a far country and ended in a pig pen. The older son—the good one—stayed home and always did what he was told. At the end of the story the father welcomed the younger son home with a celebration. But the older son would not forgive his wandering brother. Like the Pharisee, he recounted his years of faithful service. He could only talk about his own sanctification.



In these three parables there is a tragic picture of the human situation and a message of Christ to the end-time church. All have sinned. All continue to come short of the glory of God. And all are condemned unless God intervenes by His marvelous, matchless grace. We all stand before the judgment seat in need of mercy. But the great tragedy is that the Pharisee, the debtor who took his brother by the throat, and the elder son had no forgiveness. They extended no mercy toward their brother. And they received no mercy for themselves.

We must press this point further. Man's sinful heart is not by nature a forgiving heart. It is not a merciful heart. But man is not condemned because he cannot squeeze forgiveness for his brother from his own heart. Why then were the Pharisee, the unforgiving debtor and the elder son condemned? They rejected the spirit of forgiveness. They did not see their own need and deficiency. Their own souls were not saturated in forgiveness, so they had none for their brother. They craved no mercy, so they gave no mercy. And he that judges without mercy, says James, will be judged without mercy (James 2:13).

The Laodicean is the Pharisee who has forgotten that the God of the Bible is not the God who justifies the pious. He is the One who does the unexpected, unheard-of thing. He justifies the impious and receives sinners (Rom. 4:5; Luke 15:2; Matt. 9:13). The needy, the poor, the outcasts—those who cry to God for divine mercy and are willing to embrace divine mercy—always find themselves in the kingdom of God, while the good and respectable and pious are thrust out.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. —1 John 1:8-9

We have made two points. First, *the forgiveness of sins* is the very essence of the gospel message. Second, the basic characteristic of the Christian community is that they *constantly confess* their belief in and need of the forgiveness of sins. They have eternal life and are saved.

The justice of God demands perfect righteousness. A perfect God does not lower His standard simply because we are now sinners. God requires of us today just what He required of Adam before the fall—perfect obedience to His holy law. In order to stay out of debt, we would have to meet the demands of that law every moment of our existence. But is there anyone filled with the Holy Spirit who meets that demand in this life? Of course not. James says, "We all make many mistakes" (James 3:2). Jesus tells us that when we have done all we should have done, we must still say, "We are unworthy servants" (Luke 17:10). All continue to fall short of the glory of God. If anyone says he meets that demand, if anyone in the Christian community fails to confess he is an unworthy servant, if anyone refuses to say he has sinned in word and thought and deed when judged by the great standard of the law of God, that man is a liar and the truth is not in him. David's prayer includes us all: "Enter not into judgment with Thy servant; for no man living is righteous before Thee" (Ps. 143:2).

After washing the disciples' feet at the last supper, our Lord's injunction emphasized their continual need of cleansing and forgiveness (John 13:3-15). And did not Christ also teach us to pray—not just once, not just now and then, but as often as we ask for our daily bread — "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12)?

"The whole law," says the Epistle to the Galatians, "is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal. 5:14). Christ declared:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." — Matt. 22:37-40.

The law demands love—love to God and man. We should make God first and last and best in everything. We should be devoted to Him with all the ardor and fervor of our being. Praise and gratitude should flow to Him continually. And we should be just as concerned for our neighbor's welfare as for our own. We should love him as we love ourselves. Paul

says, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another" (Rom. 13:8). But when we stand under the scrutiny of the law, do we really think we have paid our debt? Of course not! We must hide our lack of perfection in Christ.

But many do not want to rest wholly on the forgiveness of sins. It is often thought that if people rest too much upon it, they will become secure and lazy and will not pursue the life of victory over sin.

There remains the mistrust that this teaching about the forgiveness of sin is no good to live by. We want a dignified religion—a religion that gets us out of debt or at least helps us stay out of debt.

But the gift of the Holy Spirit comes with the forgiveness of sins. While Peter was preaching the forgiveness of sins to Cornelius, "the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word" (Acts 10:44; cf. Acts 2:38). Where the Holy Spirit is present, the fruits of the Spirit will also be present. Certainly there needs to be a concern for godliness and victory over sin in the lives of Christians. But the point to emphasize is this: God's children will not experience victory over sin by damning the message of forgiveness with soft praise.

The Spirit of the Pharisees

The church of Laodicea says, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing" (Rev. 3:17). The religion of Laodicea is the same as that of the Pharisees. We sometimes caricature and distort the Pharisees and make them such a laughingstock that we do not see them as ourselves.

The parables of Jesus were given to expose the religion of the Pharisees, not because He *hated* them, but because He *loved* them!!

These parables reflect the essential message of Christ to the Laodiceans:

The Parable of the Two Worshipers. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a publican. No doubt the Pharisee was very pious. He was a Laodicean. When he prayed, he thanked God for many things and gave God



the credit for his pious life (Luke 18:11). But what was lacking in the prayer of the Pharisee? He did not ask forgiveness. He felt no real need of it. And because he felt no need of forgiveness, he felt no need to extend forgiveness to the poor publican but looked disdainfully upon him. The Pharisee did not ask forgiveness, and he did not give it. Although he was very pious—like a garnished sepulcher, all nice and white and clean—there was within him a foul and unclean spirit. He was outwardly very righteous. He did not seem to lack anything. But religion goes far beyond outward conformity. It looks chiefly at the spirit. Scripture says, "Thou desirest truth in the inward being" (Ps. 5 1:6). The Pharisee begged no mercy from God, so he felt none toward his brother. And therefore he stood before God's judgment bar without mercy (Luke 18:14).

The Parable of the Two Debtors. In the parable of the two debtors we again see Laodicea—and Laodicea is ourselves. A man owed the king a great debt. When the king demanded that he and all he had be sold for his debt, the debtor pleaded, "Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything" (Matt. 18:26). The king had pity on him and forgave him. But he went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a few dollars. He seized the fellow servant by the throat, demanding, "Pay what you owe" (vs. 28). This fellow servant prayed the same prayer the debtor himself had prayed: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you" (vs. 29). But the first debtor would not listen. He had his fellow servant thrown in prison. When the other servants saw what was happening, they told the king. The king was angry. "You wicked servant!" he said. "I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (vss. 32-33).



What was the first debtor's problem? "Have patience with me," he implored. "I will pay you everything." He wanted forgiveness only temporarily. He wanted to pay his own way. He wanted to relate to his lord in a "solvent" basis. Because he felt he could relate to the king by paying all, it was natural that he thought his fellow servant should pay him all. He did not accept the spirit of forgiveness. Therefore he did not extend it. Only the forgiven man can be a forgiving man.