

The Forgiveness of Sins

Luke 5:1-11; Matthew 26:69-75; Galatians 2:11-21

One of the things I have loved about preparing for our sermons through the Apostles' Creed is the opportunity to draw upon thousands of years of Christian thought and reflection on the creed. Every man and his dog has written an exposition of the creed, charting the significance of the central truths of the Christian faith.

And a particularly striking theme that I have noticed through many of these older reflections on the creed is the concern for Christian assurance. Throughout Christian history, the creed has been understood not just as a series propositions to be believed in our heads, but as precious truths that comfort and console the heart.

You could say the creed is less like the blueprint of a house, and more like the house itself, a safe place of refuge from the troubles of the world. The creed is not like stacking up firewood into a neat and tidy pile, but the controlled blaze of the fire giving warmth and light to the whole household. The truths in the creed comfort us with the knowledge of God, the three-in-one, and all that he has done for us.

And with this frame of assurance in mind, the four words we will consider in the creed today are a soothing balm for weary and hurting souls. For is there anything else in the Christian life that will undermine our assurance more than our own sin?

And yet, the Bible teaches and the Church confesses this precious truth: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." Let's pray.

Father, Son, and Spirit. Today, grant us true knowledge of ourselves. And comfort us with the goodness of your grace. Amen.

Drama

As we have explored the Apostles' Creed, we have begun each week by considering the *drama* of Scripture.

And it would be fair to say, that most weeks we have taken a big picture view of the biblical drama. We have followed the Grand Story of Scripture from Creation to New Creation. We have traced the purposes and promises of God as they are worked out in the history of Israel, fulfilled in the person and work of Christ, and then lived in the life of the church. This is story of cosmic proportions.

But it would be possible I think to be asking yourself, "but, what about little old me?" If God is concerned with the rise and fall of nations, is he really concerned with the ups and downs of my little life here and now? Good question, I'm glad you asked it!

For we mustn't lose sight of the fact that much of the biblical drama unfolds through the lives and experiences of individual people. Yes, the whole drama centres around Jesus, and yet again and again the story zooms in on particular people, in particular situations. The transcendent God of heaven and earth is intimately concerned for every creature he has made. The Bible is not primarily *about us* in the way that it is *about Jesus*. But the Bible is undeniably *for us*—for *me* and *for you*.

And so today we will consider the story of one of those individuals: Peter. Oh Peter! What a gift he is to us. For in him we see ourselves. And God's concern for *him*, will help us to understand God's concern for *us* too.

- *A sinful man*

We read the beginning of Peter's story in Luke chapter 5, as Jesus interrupts Peter in the course of his everyday life. From the start, Peter is not a spiritual guru ascending upward to Jesus; Jesus meets Peter where he is.

But of course, while Peter himself is engaged in the ordinary, Jesus is entirely *extraordinary*. His teaching gathers multitudes, and by some power or wisdom he gathers an almighty catch of fish for Peter, the weary and skeptical fisherman.

Now it's hard to say at this point how much Peter grasps of who Jesus really is. But in his encounter with Jesus, Peter sees himself with absolute clarity.

He falls to his feet and declares: "*Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man*"

Confronted with the power, and the kindness, of Jesus, Peter instantly recognises his own utter unworthiness. He knows he doesn't deserve to even be in the presence of Jesus, and yet comforted by Jesus' words he leaves everything and follows him.

Peter's relationship with Jesus begins with *his* confession, and Jesus' *kindness*.

- *(Still) a sinful man*

And you might think that from this point, Peter's life would continue on an unbroken upward trajectory to greater holiness and purity. But it's not quite so simple.

Yes, Peter is genuinely transformed by his relationship with Jesus. He has these wonderful high-points as a follower of Jesus. He recognises that Jesus is God's Messiah and confesses him to be the Christ. He fearlessly proclaims the gospel at Pentecost, despite fierce opposition. He courageously takes the gospel to a Gentile family, crossing a great cultural divide with the good news of Jesus. Jesus does indeed make him to be a fisher of people, as he receives for himself and holds out to others the forgiveness of sins.

But at the same time, Peter continues to be a sinful man. The gospels are littered with examples of Peter missing the point and messing up. For every great step forward there seems to be a stumble back. And we see this in the two other accounts that Simon read for us before.

There's so much that we could say about each of these passages, but it strikes me that they could both be called *Peter's Denial*. Did you notice that similarity?

On the night before Jesus' death, Peter rejects Jesus; three times he claims not to know him. He retreats into self-protection and denies his Lord.

And a very similar thing is happening in Galatians 2. By eating exclusively with the prominent Jews, Peter is making his decisions according to superficial outward appearance. He makes cultural background and religious observance the most important thing. But it's not!

The most important thing is that Christ has died for all people, Jew and Gentile, Slave or Free, Man or Woman, Adult or Child. Paul's diagnosis is that Peter and those with him *were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel*. Here Peter retreats into self-promotion and undermines the truth of the gospel he proclaims.

In one case, Peter denies Jesus with his words. In the second case Peter denies the gospel of Jesus by his actions. In these accounts Peter, the follower of Jesus, the apostle of Christ, falls short and fails to live a life worthy of the gospel he has received. Peter is *still* a sinful man. A forgiven sinner, a follower of Jesus, even an apostle of Christ, but a sinner nonetheless.

Doctrine

- *Human sin*

And isn't this all of us? His story, and the story of every man and woman in the scriptures gives rise to our *Doctrine* of human sin.

In Peter's case, his sin is seen in *denial*, his failure to speak and act in line with the way things really are in light of who Jesus is and what he has done.

But the Bible uses many different images to help us understand the reality and gravity of sin.

The Bible shows us that we sin both by doing what is wrong, *and* in failing to do what is right. Sin is straying like lost sheep, and a stiff-necked refusal to heed God's instruction. I read this week in Ezekiel the prophet describing people as a faulty bow that always shoots the arrow off target. The book of Proverbs describes the wicked as a polluted stream, contaminated at the source.

Sin is like the disobedience of a child, the adultery of a spouse, the rebellion of an outlaw against the King. Sin is not only the breaking of God's law, but the breaking of his heart as we reject his love and turn away from his life.

It's not so much a resigned admission that "nobody is perfect" as it is "No one is righteous, no, not even one." (Romans 3:10)

It's not like saying, "oh well, everyone makes mistakes" but more like "All of have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

And, what we see in Peter's life, and all through the Bible, and if we're honest, in our own lives as well, is that the problem runs deep.

Jesus himself says to his disciples:

But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Have you ever had that experience where something gets under your skin and you burst out in anger, or bitterness, or malice, and afterwards you think "I don't know what came over me?" Well of course, nothing came over us, did it? Something came *out of us*.

Like a cup filled to the brim, sometimes only the slightest knock causes the contents of our hearts to spill over.

When I look into the mirror of Scripture, I see myself clearly. Like Peter I must fall at Jesus' feet and declare, "I am a sinful man."

- *Divine Mercy*

But Peter's story, and the story of the Bible is not only a mirror to help us see the reality of human sin. It is also a window that opens up onto the wondrous doctrine of divine mercy. Peter's sin is never the end of his story!

As Peter confesses his sin on the beach, Jesus does not turn him away. Jesus comforts him, "Do not be afraid." And he calls Peter to follow him.

Having denied Jesus before his death, Peter meets Jesus after his resurrection. And Jesus restores Peter to his fellowship and sends him out to serve the church.

And even in Paul's rebuke of Peter, Paul does not berate him with a command but reminds him of God's glorious grace in the gospel. Paul calls Peter back the one who loved him, and gave himself for him, and the righteousness that comes not from works or cultural background but through faith in Jesus Christ!

At every point, Peter's sin is outpaced by the grace of Jesus.

This was the good news that Peter treasured above all else. Not just for himself, but for all people. To the crowd gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost, Peter's sermon climaxes in this appeal:

*Repent and be baptised, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ **for the forgiveness of your sins.***

And at this point I think we can make three really important clarifications:

Firstly, Christianity is not fundamentally about being a “good person”. To be a Christian, first and foremost, is to be a forgiven sinner. We must never think that the church consists of the good people in here versus the bad people out there in the world. That will only lead us into hypocrisy or despair and neither of those are particularly pleasant. The church is simply that gathering of believers who are washed clean by the atoning blood of Jesus. And so our message is not “clean yourself up and then you can come in”, but instead “come as you are and take refuge in him!”

Which leads us to the second point: Jesus is *the only safe place, the only way of forgiveness*. From beginning to end salvation is a work of the triune God. Forgiveness is from God the Father, through the death and resurrection of the Son, and then applied to our lives by the Holy Spirit who unites us with Jesus and all his benefits. Again Peter declares in Acts chapter 4: *Salvation is found in no one else! For there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*

And then, point three, because Salvation does not come from *inside of us* but from *outside of us*, the wonderful good news of the gospel is that this salvation is open to all! No matter your past, no matter your sin, forgiveness is offered to everyone through Jesus.

I know that there are many people in our church who feel keenly the gravity of sin. Or perhaps you have lived your whole life giving very little thought to God...You could be watching today, looking at yourself and wondering “how on earth could God forgive *me*?”

And it is true that as we delve into the rocky soil of our hearts, we find that our sin runs deep. In ourselves, there is no solid ground of hope.

But, as one writer says, there is another rock, another foundation, upon which we may stand:

That is why the rocky hill of Golgotha is the most holy place in the world. [Giving up on ourselves] leads to the foot of that cross. There one stands, a poor wretch, like Peter on that first Good Friday, full of shame and despair, looking upon his crucified Saviour, whom he had been unable to follow. There it becomes apparent that the Lord's best disciples are unworthy of him. They are all betrayers and deniers, sharing in the guilt of his death. But there, at the cross, it also becomes clear that the Lord himself makes atonement for their sins.¹

What comfort and assurance to believe in the forgiveness of sins! Not because of our own worthiness – but because of his! We are saved *because the love of God is invincible, and Christ overcomes all difficulties.²*

As Peter himself writes:

*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring **you** to God.*

¹ From *The Hammer of God*, a novel by the Swedish Pastor Bo Giertz. Written in 1960.

² This is a paraphrase of the puritan Thomas Goodwin.

Discipleship

- *Confession*

And so, the only logical response to the reality of our sin, and God's rich mercy is to confess our sins and receive the forgiveness offered to us in Jesus! And as we move from Doctrine to Discipleship, we see that *confession* is both the beginning and the pattern of life as follower of Jesus.

Like Peter, the Christian life begins when we encounter Jesus and come to terms with our sin. We confess "I am a sinful man" "I am a sinful woman", then we leave everything behind (including our guilt and our shame) to follow Jesus. This is the decisive confession that accompanies our conversion.

And from that beginning, confession becomes the rhythm of the Christian life. Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "give us today our daily bread". Then he continued, "forgive us our sins!..."

Just as we are nourished each day by the food we eat, the Christian knows they are sustained by the generous mercy of God. And so, brothers and sisters, how can you build in patterns of confession into your prayer life? Perhaps you could even use the Lord's prayer this week to draw you into asking God for forgiveness, and seeking his mercy. The great temptation when we sin is to run *from* God, but the Doctrine of forgiveness will drive us *towards* God in humility and faith.

And can I say, too, that if you are joining us today and you have never humbled yourself before Jesus, confessed your sin, and received forgiveness. Then do not wait another day. Follow Peter's example, and hear his call: confess your sin and be forgiven!

There is an abundant storehouse of mercy in the gospel and if you would but come to him, God will throw open the doors and lavish his grace upon you.

As we read in the letter of 1 John:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

- *Forgiveness*

The Christian life is one of humble confession. And it is also one of generous forgiveness. Jesus teaches us to pray “Forgive us *our* sins, as we *forgive those who sin against us.*” This is a most striking feature of the Lord’s prayer.

And it makes a point that runs throughout all the New Testament. That is, *the chief evidence of God’s forgiveness for us is our willingness to forgive others.* When we grasp the great debt Jesus has cancelled for us, it follows that we will be quick to cancel the far smaller debts that are owed to us.

It struck me this week how counter-cultural this really is. For the great irony of our modern society is that for the most part people do not believe in the reality of sin. “We are all basically good.” Is the secular doctrine. And yet when someone crosses us, or transgresses some social norm, we cast them adrift. The sins of the past are dredged up and displayed for all to see. We live in a world that deals largely in outrage, not grace. People are cancelled, not debts.

But the Christian doctrine of human sin and divine mercy shapes radically different people. The more we grasp the wonder and *cost* of God’s forgiveness, the more we will overflow in grace and forgiveness towards others in our own lives – even sometimes at great cost to ourselves.

This is Christian discipleship: humble confession and generous forgiveness.

Doxology

- *Confession and Forgiveness in Corporate Worship*

And it is also Christian doxology. Throughout this series we have largely dealt with doxology in the more narrow sense of *praise*. But we can also think of discipleship more broadly in terms of *worship*. And as we were reminded last week, our worship is not just about us as individuals, but also as a body of believers in the church.

And it's in our gathered corporate worship that we foster and encourage confession and forgiveness.

I haven't done the maths on this, but it's my hunch that one of the most common commands given to churches in the NT is the instruction to *forgive one another*. And I wonder if this is part of the reason why the writers of the creed placed *the forgiveness of sins* right after *the church and the communion of saints*.

For as we have seen, the church is made up of a whole bunch of forgiven sinners. And as we rub shoulders with one another, there is going to be friction, and sometimes we will rub each other up the wrong way! At times you will be frustrated by someone else at church, and sorry to say this, but you will be a frustration to somebody as well!

But in the back and forth and ups and downs of church life, we have the opportunity to grow in grace towards one another. Our meeting together as a church family is like going to the gym. We exercise our muscles of confession and forgiveness, so that we might display the humility and grace of the gospel in our homes, and our workplaces, and at school, and with our friends.

That's why we pray prayers like we did at the beginning of our service; confessing our sin to God, and to each other. And we continually point one another to the abundant grace of God; and we comfort one another with the assurance of forgiveness through the body and blood of Christ. And then we humbly receive and generously offer forgiveness to each other. These are the great gifts of corporate worship.

And, to finish, I think this is a timely, but perhaps surprising word to us. Over the last 6 months our church has lived at a certain distance from one another, and there are so many things we have missed. We've missed singing, and seeing each other's faces, and turning around to talk with the people sitting around you, sharing fellowship over morning tea/supper, and giving each other a hug, or a holy kiss.

But one thing we have also missed, is this opportunity to bear with one another. To forgive one another as we face the friction that inevitably comes with close Christian community. This is not good for us!

So as we pray for God to open up the way for us to meet together in person again, let us not forget to pray this prayer: that God would grant us the opportunity to exercise ourselves ourselves in the pattern of confession and forgiveness in our worship together as a church.

May God help us, in the words of Ephesians 4, to

Be kind and compassionate to one another, [and when we fail at that, which we will! To] forgive one another, just as in Christ God has forgiven [us].

Follow God's example therefore, as dearly loved children, and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 4:32-5:2)