

Lesson 21: Forgiveness: The Supreme Blessing (Romans 4:6-8)

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Carl Hoefler (*Will Daylight Come?* [C. C. S. Publishing, 1979]) tells the story of a little boy who was visiting his grandparents. He was given his first slingshot and was having fun playing with it in the woods, but he never hit anything he was aiming at. But on his way home, as he cut through the back yard, he saw Grandmother's pet duck. He took aim and let the stone fly. To his horror, it went straight to the mark and the duck fell dead.

The boy panicked. He quickly hid the dead duck in the woodpile. Then he saw his smirking sister Sally standing by the corner of the house. She had seen the whole affair.

They went in for lunch. Sally said nothing. After lunch, Grandmother said, "Sally, let's clear the table and wash the dishes." Sally said, "Oh, Grandmother, Johnny said he wanted to help you in the kitchen today. Didn't you, Johnny?" Then she whispered to him, "Remember the duck!" So Johnny did the dishes.

Later in the day Grandfather called the children to go fishing. Grandmother said, "I'm sorry, but Sally has to stay here to help me clean house and get dinner." Sally smiled and said, "That's all been taken care of. Johnny said he wanted to help today, didn't you, Johnny?" Then she whispered, "Remember the duck!"

This went on for several days. Johnny did all the chores, both his and those assigned to Sally. Finally, he could stand it no longer, so he went to his grandmother and confessed all. His grandmother took him in her arms and said, "I know, Johnny. I was standing at the kitchen window and saw the whole thing. And because I love you, I forgave you. And knowing that I loved you and would always forgive you, I wondered just how long you would let Sally make a slave of you."

Guilt makes slaves of us all. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, they tried in vain to hide from God. Guilt makes us want to hide from His holy presence. It also alienates us from one another. We're afraid that if others find out what we have done, they will either reject us or use the information to hold us hostage. "Remember the duck!" Because we all have sinned and because God knows all of our sins, even our secret sins, what we all desperately need is the supreme blessing of God's forgiveness.

In our last study, we saw how Abraham, the father of the Jewish faith, was justified by faith alone, not by his works. To be justified is to be declared righteous by God. It is to be acquitted of all our sins by God's judicial decree. In explaining this wonderful truth, Paul states (Rom. 4:4-5), "Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness." We saw that God does not justify the pretty good guy who tries to do his best. He does not justify the one

whose good works outweigh his bad works. Rather, He justifies the ungodly sinner who has faith in Jesus.

But maybe Paul was stretching things a bit. After all, the Jews knew that Abraham was a good man. Maybe God justified Abraham because of his good works. So Paul brings in another witness, King David. The Jews also recognized David as a great man. He was the best of Israel's kings. But as everyone knew, he also sinned greatly. He committed adultery with Bathsheba and then tried to cover it up when she got pregnant by having her husband murdered. So Paul brings David in as a second witness to prove that God justifies sinners by faith apart from any good works.

Paul (4:7-8) cites David's Psalm 32:1-2 (from the LXX): "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account." The common thread between Psalm 32:2 (Rom. 4:8) and Genesis 15:6 (Rom. 4:3) is the word "credited" or "take into account" (Greek = *logidzomai*). It is an accounting term, meaning to enter something into a ledger. In Abraham's case, God entered into the asset column, "Righteousness." In David's case, God did *not* enter into the liabilities column, "Sin." He didn't credit David's sins against him.

But Paul says that it amounts to the same thing (4:6), "just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works." And so in Psalm 32 David extols the supreme blessing of God's gracious forgiveness of all our sins. Paul uses these verses to teach us that...

The supreme blessing of God forgiving all your sins comes through faith apart from any works.

As we saw in our last study, this doctrine of God justifying the *ungodly* by grace alone apart from any good works grates against our fallen human nature. We instinctively want good people to go to heaven because of their goodness. We want terrible sinners to pay for their sins. They shouldn't get off scot-free. But if that were true, then we would have grounds to boast in our own goodness as the reason for our salvation. And, there would be no hope for really bad sinners. There would be no good news. So if Mother Teresa is in heaven, it is because she saw herself as an undeserving sinner and she fled to the cross for mercy. And if a mass murderer is in heaven, it is because he saw himself as an undeserving sinner and fled to the cross for mercy. God only justifies the *ungodly*.

Do you remember the parable that Jesus told in Matthew 20? A landowner went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for their day's wages, so they went to work. Mid-morning, he went out again and hired others and agreed to give them whatever was right. He did the same thing at noon and at mid-afternoon. Then, an hour before sundown, he found others and sent them into his vineyard.

When it was time to pay the laborers, those who came an hour before dark received a denarius. When those who had been working all day came, they expected to

get more, since they had put in a long day's work. But they also got a denarius. They grumbled about how unfair it was, but the landowner said, "I gave you what we agreed on, so take what is yours and go. But am I not free to be generous to these last men with what is my own?" That's how God's grace works. It is not dispensed according to merit. He gives it freely to whom He chooses. As Paul says (Rom. 9:16), "It does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."

The point that Paul drives home from 1:18-3:20 is that we all are under sin. The pagans who do not know God are obviously under sin. But so are the religious folks (the Jews), who think that they are better than the pagans. All deserve God's judgment and so all desperately need His grace (unmerited favor). The good news of the gospel is that God freely justifies and pardons every sinner who does not work, but believes in Jesus as the propitiation for his sins.

So in our text, Paul is reinforcing that point from David's Psalm 32. The emphasis is on the blessing of God's gracious forgiveness. (He uses "blessing" or "blessed" in 4:6, 7, 8, and 9.)

1. The greatest blessing of all is to have God forgive all your sins.

To appreciate the blessing of forgiveness ...

A. We must feel the heavy burden of our guilt.

A cartoon pictured a psychologist saying to a patient, "Mr. Figby, I think I can explain your feelings of guilt. You're guilty!"

Ever since the fall, sinners have instinctively responded to their guilt by blaming others. When God confronted Adam, he blamed his wife and he even implicated God for giving him his wife (Gen. 3:12): "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate." In effect, he was saying, "It's her fault or Your fault, but don't blame me!"

But blaming others doesn't alleviate the guilt. True, if a person keeps denying his sin and blaming others for it, eventually he may develop a seared conscience (1 Tim. 4:2), where he feels no guilt, even for horrific sins. I read that the Cambodian dictator, Pol Pot, felt no twinge of guilt for murdering over a million of his countrymen! But even if the sinner's conscience is seared, it doesn't remove the reality that he will answer to God for his many sins.

So a guilty conscience is a good thing. It's like the pain sensors in our body, which alert us to a problem. A person with leprosy can't feel pain, and so he can burn his finger off without knowing it. If we suppress our guilt, it often leads to other emotional, physical, and relational problems. But guilt should get our attention by shouting, "You're not right with God!" David suppressed his guilt over his sin with Bathsheba for about a year until the prophet Nathan cornered him with a story and then directly said, "You are the man!" You're guilty!

Puritan Robert Bolton, who at first resisted the gospel, but later came to Christ after deep conviction of his sins, wrote (*Instructions for a Right Comforting Afflicted Consciences*, cited by Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], p. 128):

A man must feel himself in misery, before he will go about to find a remedy; be sick before he will seek a physician; be in prison before he will seek for a pardon. A sinner ... must be cast down, confounded, condemned, a cast away, and lost in himself, before he will look about for a Saviour.

J. C. Ryle (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], on John 4:7-26, pp. 204-205) put it,

Never does a soul value the Gospel medicine until it feels its disease.
Never does a man see any beauty in Christ as a Saviour, until he discovers that he is himself a lost and ruined sinner.

Or, as C. H. Spurgeon put it when describing his own painful five years of conviction of sin before his conversion (*C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography* [Banner of Truth], 1:54):

Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Saviour. He who has stood before his God, convicted and condemned, with the rope about his neck, is the man to weep for joy when he is pardoned, to hate the evil which has been forgiven him, and to live to the honour of the Redeemer by whose blood he has been cleansed.

So for God's blessing of forgiving all your sins to be the *supreme blessing*, you must feel to some extent the heavy burden of your guilt before Him. Then,

B. Forgiveness is the greatest of all blessings.

The Greek word "blessed" means "happy," especially in the sense of being the recipient of God's favor (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, by Walter Bauer, translated by William Arndt and Wilbur Gingrich [University of Chicago Press], 2nd ed., p. 486). John Piper ("When the Lord Does not Take Account of Sin," on DesiringGod.org) defines it as "a condition in which you are deeply secure and content and happy in God."

We might think that those who are rich in this world's goods are blessed, but as you know, many rich people are miserable because they lack close relationships with others. They often have to keep others at a distance because they're afraid that they will take their money. Besides, this world's riches can disappear in a moment with a stock market collapse or war or some other disaster. And everything that we accrue in this life is instantly taken the moment we die. So the only true and lasting blessing is to be right with God by knowing that He has forgiven all our sins. What a great feeling to know that the burden of guilt is gone forever!

We need to understand that when God forgives all our sins, it does not mean that He removes all temporal consequences for our sins. God forgave David, but He ordained

some rather severe consequences on David and his family for the rest of his life (2 Sam. 12:10-15). Sometimes God graciously softens the consequences, but at other times He uses them to teach us to hate our sin. The fact that we experience difficult trials does *not* mean that God has not forgiven us. In fact, it is one evidence that He *has* forgiven us (Heb. 12:8-10).

Also, although many Christian authors talk about the need to forgive yourself, you won't find that concept anywhere in Scripture. If we have sinned, we must seek God's forgiveness and we must ask forgiveness of those we have sinned against. And if others have wronged us, we must forgive them. But the Bible never talks about forgiving yourself. Your need is to receive *God's* forgiveness.

Before we leave this point, let me ask: Have you experienced this greatest of all blessings? Do you know that God has forgiven all of your sins? Are you sure that He will not take them into account on that day when you stand before Him?

In the context Paul is still talking about the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But we might wonder, how does forgiveness fit in with justification?

2. Justification means that God credits Christ's righteousness to the guilty sinner and forgives all his sins apart from any good works.

John Calvin (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John McNeill [Westminster Press], 3:11:3, p. 727) summed up his understanding of justification, "that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness."

A. Justification means that God credits Christ's righteousness to the guilty sinner.

As we saw in verse 3 (citing Gen. 15:6), "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." To justify is not to make righteous or to infuse righteousness into the sinner, but rather, *to declare the sinner righteous*. It is a judicial act of God, based on the satisfaction of God's righteous penalty by the shed blood of Jesus Christ (3:25). Because Christ paid the penalty that our sin deserved, God can be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (3:26).

B. Justification means that God's forgives all of the guilty sinner's sins.

Positively, God declares the sinner righteous by crediting to his account the very righteousness of Jesus Christ. Negatively, God does not credit the sinner's sins to his account. Paul uses three somewhat synonymous phrases to describe this blessing of forgiveness:

First (4:7a), "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven." The Greek word for *forgive* means "to send away." It is sometimes used of divorce, which means a permanent sending away of one's spouse. It was used of forgiving a debt. The books were wiped clean as the debt was removed from the debtor. In the Old Testament ritual for the Day of Atonement, two male goats were selected. The high priest laid his hands on the head of one goat (the scapegoat), confessing the sins of the people. That

goat was then sent away into the wilderness, taking away the sins of the people. Forgiveness means that God has sent away all of our sins. They are removed from us.

Second (4:7b), blessed are those “whose sins have been covered.” The word *covered* is used only here in the New Testament, quoted from Psalm 32:1. It also referred to the Day of Atonement when the priest took the blood of the other goat and sprinkled it on the mercy seat (or covering) of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark contained the Ten Commandments, which God’s people all have broken. The blood of an innocent victim covered the sins of the people. Those repeated animal sacrifices postponed judgment until Christ offered Himself as the perfect and final sacrifice to cover all our sins (Heb. 9:11-15; 10:1-14).

Third (4:8), “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.” This is the accounting term, used 11 times in this chapter (translated as “credited” in 4:3, 4, 5; “credits” in 6). God takes our debt of sin off the books. He wipes the slate clean. It means (Rom. 8:1), “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Also, since David was already a justified man when he sinned with Bathsheba and murdered her husband, Psalm 32 shows that God’s crediting of righteousness and forgiving of sins is not revoked by a believer’s sins (Everett Harrison, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelein [Zondervan], 10:49). Although as I said, God disciplines us for our sins and does not remove all of the consequences of our sins, He does forgive them so that we do not incur His eternal wrath and judgment. We must submit to His discipline, but we do not need to fear His condemnation.

C. Justification means that God credits Christ’s righteousness to the guilty sinner and forgives all his sins *apart from any good works*.

Paul says (4:6) that “David speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works.” If it’s apart from works, then how is it done? In verse 5 Paul says that the ungodly person’s faith (in Christ) is credited as righteousness. We must be clear that he does *not* mean that God views our faith as a work that merits righteousness. That would make verse 5 say the exact opposite of what Paul is saying! If faith somehow merited God’s favor, then grace would not be undeserved. Rather, faith lays hold of what Christ did for us on the cross (3:24-26). God justifies us as a gift (3:24), not as a reward or payment that our faith earns. Faith by definition looks away from oneself and to Christ. Faith is the hand that receives the gift of forgiveness through Jesus paying for our sins on the cross. Thus,

3. To obtain this blessing, we must cease from our own works and believe in God’s provision in Christ.

As we saw in verse 5, the only one God justifies is “the one who does not work.” In case we missed it, Paul repeats (4:6), “apart from works.” If you are trusting in any sense in your good works, you exclude yourself from God crediting Christ’s

righteousness to your account. Paul plainly states (4:6), “God credits righteousness apart from works.” While you must repent of your sins, if you are trusting in your repentance, you exclude yourself from this blessing of forgiveness. And while you must believe in Christ, if you are trusting in your faith, you exclude yourself from God’s forgiveness. Your faith must not be in faith. Rather, your faith must be in Christ alone.

Conclusion

Some years ago, a 6-year-old Michigan boy could not be found. That night, 80 people frantically searched the woods near his home. By morning, more than 300 were looking for him. Then at about 10:30, he suddenly emerged from his bedroom. He had been hiding in a large drawer underneath his captain style bed.

It turned out that he hid himself in there because he was afraid. The evening before he disappeared, a policeman had asked him if he knew anything about a broken window across the street. He lied to the officer. A little later the officer turned on his flasher to stop a nearby motorist. The boy saw it and his imagination ran wild. He thought he would be locked up in jail. Fear and guilt drove him into hiding (from “Our Daily Bread,” Winter, 1980-81).

Guilt over your sins can cause you to keep your distance from others and to try to hide from God. If you are not in Christ, you have legitimate cause to fear His judgment. But God offers every sinner the supreme blessing: He will forgive all of your sins and credit the very righteousness of Christ to your account if you will cease from your own works and trust in what Christ did for you on the cross. Trust in Christ and you don’t have to “remember the duck.” The guilt will be gone and you will know the supreme blessing of having all of your lawless deeds forgiven.

Application Questions

1. Should Christians feel guilty when they sin? What is the proper function of guilt? How can we recognize false guilt?
2. How can we know whether our guilt is due to the Holy Spirit convicting us or Satan accusing us? What action should we take in either case?
3. Some might argue that forgiveness by grace alone without penance on our part would lead to licentiousness. Your response?
4. Genuine faith includes repentance, which includes “a broken and contrite heart” (Ps. 51:17). Some might argue that this then becomes a work that nullifies grace. Agree/disagree? Why?

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