



Sermon

19th November 2023

Finding Forgiveness

Psalm 103:1-12; 1 John 1:1 - 2:2; John 5:19-27

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Last month, I said that I had the idea that I should take the church through the teachings we offer on our trips to Kondoa and in teaching prayer ministry so you can benefit from them as well.

You will remember that I spoke then on forgiving others. Jesus commands us to forgive. I said that the key to forgiving is that it is a decision not a feeling. If you missed that talk, I encourage you to look it up on the Sermons blog on the parish website or pick up a sermon from the welcome table stand. It is an important principle for our emotional and spiritual health.

The other side of forgiveness is knowing we are forgiven by God. I teach on this because so often Christians get stuck not being able to believe that God has forgiven them for some sin. We all need to know this for ourselves and sometimes to help others who are stuck.

Forgiveness of sin comes from God.

Psalm 103

The wonderful thing is that God is merciful and compassionate. He always has been. His nature does not change. We find his forgiveness offered in the Old Testament. Psalm 103 is a great encouragement for us all.

Ps 103:8-13 The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger for ever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.

It is in Jesus that we most clearly see forgiveness provided and made freely available.

John 5

In John 5, Jesus was defending himself against charges of sabbath-breaking and the blasphemy of claiming to be equal with God.

In response, he asserted that he was God's representative, speaking for God, only doing the things he saw the Father doing. In verse 23, he is to be honoured just as the Father is honoured. And he said, "to dishonour the Son, is to dishonour the Father." He continued by saying that God the Father had given him the power to give life to people and had entrusted "all judgement"¹ to him. He has the power of granting life and of judgement.

¹ Verse 22

"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."

As we are thinking about forgiveness, do you register what he is saying there? If you hear the promise of eternal life for those who trust in Jesus and God the Father? They have eternal life and crossed over from death to life - they will not be condemned.

1 John 1

The first chapter of John's first letter is a great foundation for us when it comes to forgiveness.

When Helen and I lived in England, we came to know a man called Bob who was exploring Christianity and struggling to believe. One day, I visited him at his flat and as he went to make a cup of tea, I noticed his sofa. It was upholstered in a fabric which had script in the design - it was fashionable at the time. Usually the words are either trivial or incomprehensible. As I looked, I realised it was Latin. Summoning what little, school-boy Latin I could muster, I struggled to make out the writing and then to make sense of the words. "Quod fuit ab initio, quod audivimus, quod vidimus oculis nostris, et manus nostræ contrectaverunt de verbo vitæ." It took a while for him to make the tea and I worked out *audivimus* is we heard, *vidimus* we saw, *oculis* eyes, *nostris* that's our. And then it dawned on me: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched, this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." It was the first verse of John's first Epistle! I was amazed - indeed a little overwhelmed by it. I felt it was a pointed message for Bob - he was sitting on a text about Jesus being God which was exactly what he needed to believe!

Listen to what John says in this first section. "The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it. ... The eternal life which was with the Father ... has appeared to us. ¹It was from the beginning, we have heard it, we have seen it with our eyes, we have touched it with our hands – this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life."

That is awesome stuff. John is talking of his experience of Jesus and he identifies him as Eternal Life. Eternal Life is a person not a thing. And John speaking as a witness can say he heard him, saw him, gazed upon him (yes physically with his eyes) and touched him with his hands.

All people have sinned. John was countering a teaching that encouraged people to say they had no sin. But the good news is that the Blood of Christ purifies us from all sin.

When Jesus died, his blood was poured out. The Bible says the life is in the blood. So his bleeding was giving his life for us. Where the penalty of sin was death, by dying he paid that penalty for us. He dealt with the offences that block our relationship with God. His death allowed God to forgive us and remember our sins no more.

Yes we have all sinned but there is an answer – confession and asking forgiveness.

John said that when we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.² That is so important. It is a verse worth memorising.

It says that God is faithful and just in what he does. He is faithful when he forgives because he has promised to do it. He is faithful to his own intention to deliver us from the grip and consequence of sin.

He is just because he himself has paid the penalty of sin for us, so it would be unjust of him to impose another penalty.

As we carry over to chapter 2, John assures us that if we sin, there is a lawyer ready to defend us before God. We have an advocate – a paraclete – a barrister to help us. Do you remember that Jesus called the Holy Spirit, the paraclete, the advocate? Well here, Jesus is also called by that title.

² 1 John 1:9

Do you see how God has set this up? There is this problem of the sin of humanity. Injustice and rebellion cannot be ignored. So God’s plan was that he would pay the penalty for sin himself. “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ...”³ Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

He is the also the one who speaks in our defence.

And furthermore, God the Father has delegated judgement to Jesus. So when we confess our sins and ask forgiveness, Jesus has paid the penalty himself; Jesus speaks in our defence; Jesus is the judge! How will we not be forgiven? Yes the court is loaded in our favour, but justice is being done because Jesus has died for our sins already.

Steps to Forgiveness

These are the steps we go through in receiving God’s forgiveness once we have realised there is some wrongdoing.

1. Confess - acknowledge to God we have done wrong
2. Repent of the action - decide before God not to do it again.
3. Ask for forgiveness.
4. Trust that he has forgiven us.
5. If relevant, undo the wrong we have done to others (e.g., return stolen property).

Dealing with difficulties

If you find are repeatedly asking God for forgiveness for the same thing, the problem is not that God has not forgiven – he promised to forgive. The problem is that you are not believing it or you are under condemnation.

A Be reassured by Scripture

Our first help is to say aloud scriptures which assure us of God’s forgiveness.

1 John 1:9: If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

2 Cor 5:21: For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Ps 103:12: As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Say them out loud and thank God for these truths. Decide to believe you are forgiven because you have fulfilled the conditions and thank God for your forgiveness.

B Recognise Condemnation

The second thing to understand is that there is a difference between conviction and condemnation.

Conviction	Condemnation
Specific, clear	Vague, indefinable
Puts the finger on a sin “You sinned, that was wrong”	Puts you down “You’re no good, God will never forgive you”
Specific repentance required	Nothing you can do but wallow in misery
From God	From Satan (the Accuser)
Action: Repent & ask God’s forgiveness	Action: Rebuke it

The

Holy

Spirit brings conviction of our sins – that is he lets us know there is something wrong so we can repent and be

³ 2 Corinthians 5:19

forgiven. He tells us precisely what was wrong but he does not crush us. The response is to trust in God's mercy, repent and ask forgiveness.

On the other hand, the enemy of our souls tells us about our sins and blurs and broadens it so everything is wrong and we are hopeless. We come to believe that God will never forgive us. This is condemnation. It is not the voice of God and it needs to be resisted. The way to deal with it is to use our authority in Christ and order the accusation to stop. "Condemnation, I command you to go, now, in Jesus' name." And it will go!

Romans 8:1-2 is reassuring in this situation:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

C Confess to someone else

Finally, if we are still struggling, it can greatly help to speak out our confession to someone and be assured that we are forgiven. The old adage about confession in the Anglican Church is "Some should; none must; all can." Some people do need it for their spiritual health; we don't have to confess to another person but it is available if needed.

Part of bringing the matter into the open is that it puts it into proportion and we start to see the lies of Satan (such as: it is unforgivable, our wretchedness, the uniqueness of our sinfulness) for what they are. It also allows us to hear a statement of forgiveness.

Testimonies

Let me tell you several stories where these principles helped people find forgiveness and peace of mind.

When I was a new Christian, I was troubled by not feeling forgiven for something that had happened in a relationship at church. I had come to know about the need sometimes to hear forgiveness declared. So I approached a Christian friend and explained the principle to him and asked him to hear my confession and to tell me what the Bible said in 1 John 1:9. I made my confession and he didn't say anything. So I prompted him and he replied that he didn't know what to say. It ended up that I dictated the words for him, which he repeated after me. And as soon as I heard him say them, I was free. I knew I was forgiven! It was ludicrous yet it was effective.

There was a young man on an Alpha course in England. He needed to confess his sins, so I encouraged him to pray silently confessing whatever was on his heart to God, then I would tell him what the Bible says about forgiveness. He told me afterwards that it was when I quoted Psalm 103, "your sins are removed from you as far as east is from the west," that he knew he was forgiven.

I was a bit puzzled by that and prayed afterwards, saying to the Lord that I thought 1 John 1:9 would have been effective. I had the clear thought, "When you quoted Psalm 103, you declared he was forgiven." There is power in the declaration of forgiveness.

Conclusion

We all need to know this stuff for ourselves. I do. You do. We need to keep short accounts with God and be confident that we are forgiven and loved by him.

If what I have said today has raised issues get the copy of the sermon from the welcome table or the website so you can read it through and apply the steps I have outlined. If you still need help, please contact me, Anne or Helen so we can pray with you.