

Confessions of a Forgiven Sinner

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on February 26, 2023.

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah

Therefore let everyone who is godly
offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found;
surely in the rush of great waters,
they shall not reach him.
You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
which must be curbed with bit and bridle,
or it will not stay near you.

Many are the sorrows of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.
Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart! (Psalm 32).¹

Hi, I'm John, and I'm a sinner. For years I ignored it, but if I'm honest with you, I see evidence of it every day. In fact, as far back as I can remember, it was there: A fellow-preschooler had a toy that I coveted, and so powerful was the desire that I stole it, right out of his hand. He cried, pathetically, and the teacher reprimanded me and returned the toy, but she could not curb my desire. I'd sin again, and I did.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

I have learned, through research, that actually it's genetic; I was born this way. It's been in the family for eons, going all the way back to my ever-so-great-yet-not-so-great grandfather. Records reveal that he was the first and then passed it on, from generation to generation, an inheritance no one asked for or wanted and yet continues to plague everyone in my family. And that's why I'm sharing this with you today, because as it turns out, we're related, blood relatives. My grandfather is your grandfather, Adam of Eden, who sinned against God, cursing every son and daughter to follow.

But wait, it gets worse. Not only have we all inherited our common ancestor's sin nature, yielding unspeakable sins of thought, word, and deed, but a death sentence comes with it. Originally created to live forever, now, we all die. Created to glorify God and enjoy him forever, sin renders us enemies deserving punishment forever.

So, since we are all in this together, what are we going to do about it? One option, popular today, is we could redefine sin. God says, "You shall have no other gods but me," but we could just say that we believe in a "higher power" of our choosing. God says, "You shall not make for yourself an idol," but we could call it an "individual interest." God says, "You shall not take the Name of the LORD your God in vain," but we could call it a "semantic expression." God says, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy," but we could call it "me time." God says, "Honor your father and your mother," but let's just call it a "family squabble." God says, "You shall not murder," but I'm thinking "dispute resolution." God says, "You shall not commit adultery," but I've heard it called "unshackled freedom." God says, "You shall not steal," but on Monday morning it's called "commercial enterprise." God says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," but in November it's called "strategic maneuvering." God says, "You shall not covet," but I like to think of it as "ambition" (Ex. 20:3-17).

There! Do you feel better? Me neither. Why? Because "Sin is any failure to measure up to what God requires, or any disobedience to his commands."² Redefining sin does not remove the guilt of it, because sin is against God's standard, not ours. Redefining sin is nothing more than a futile attempt to deceive God, but in the end we're just deceiving ourselves. God is not deceived, and in fact, the apostle John says, "If we say we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar ..." (1 Jn. 1:10). That's not something we want added to our list of transgressions.

Let's face it: There's nothing we can do about sin. Unless ... God acts on our behalf. And so he has.

The Blessing of Forgiveness

Just as David and the other Old Testament saints looked to the promise of God's Covenant of Grace, we look back to its fulfillment in Christ. Through faith in Christ, we too can sing with David,

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered

² The Westminster Shorter Catechism in Modern English, Q. 14, accessed February 23, 2023, <https://matt2819.com/wsc/>.

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Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit (1-2).

“Blessed” indeed is the one who is forgiven not by works but by grace.

David uses three words for sin (“transgression,” “sin,” and “iniquity”), as poetic synonyms for the comprehensiveness of his sin. But as great is his sin, as is ours, God’s grace is greater. We see this clearly in David’s use of three verbs to describe divine forgiveness:

“is forgiven,” literally meaning “carried away”; “is covered,” connoting atonement; and, “counts no” or “does not count” in the sense of justification.³

Together, the verbs convey a complete picture of the forgiveness God has given us, not by our works but by his grace.

It is not surprising then that the apostle Paul cites these verses in his epistle to the Romans, explaining that through faith in Christ our sins are not counted against us but charged to Christ’s account, whose righteousness we receive in return. Or, as Paul explains to the Corinthians, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Co. 5:21). And to the Ephesians: “In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7).

This means the cost of our forgiveness was high, the atoning sacrifice of God’s Son, a reality we must not take for granted and so deceive ourselves. Part of being blessed then is remembering the cross of Christ, or as John Stott puts it, “It was by his death that he wished above all else to be remembered. There is then, it is safe to say, no Christianity without the cross. If the cross is not central to our religion, ours is not the religion of Jesus.”⁴ With gratitude we remember, and in gratitude we live as forgiven sinners.

The Necessity of Confession

For the forgiven sinner, sin breeds sorrow and suffering. It can even make you weak and ill (1 Co. 1:30). Harboring it can make you feel like your whole body is wasting away, leaving you not delighting in sin but groaning in agony. It can feel like darkness, leave you depressed, heavy with sadness, and distant from God. Wallowing in sin, and its accompanying guilt, is no remedy. But confession is.

The apostle John says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9). He who is the Judge of all is always faithful to forgive the sins of his child for Christ’s sake. For, it is not to our righteousness that the Judge of heaven and earth looks to forgive us but to the righteousness of Christ. We who are justified as

³ Willem A. VanGemeren, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 312.

⁴ John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

righteous through faith in Christ are being sanctified by that very same righteousness. And confession of sin is a necessary part of our sanctification, including the cleansing that not only restores us relationally but reinvigorates us joyfully. Sin robs joy, and so rightly does David pray in the fifty-first psalm, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (Ps. 51:12a).

As God promises forgiveness and cleansing, so David confesses,

I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin (5).

With a penitent heart, David uses three verbs of confession coupled with the same three words for sin to express the completeness of his confession: He acknowledges his sin, does not cover his iniquity, but confesses his transgression. The result is as God promises, “you forgave the iniquity of my sin,” or “the guilt of my sin” (NRSV). We need not know his specific sin to know the result of his confession. He is forgiven, cleansed indeed.

And as we continue shackled to our sin nature, confession is an ongoing necessity in our sanctification. This side of glory, we never reach a point where we no longer need to confess and repent of our sins. While we must always strive to obey God, when we sin we must not think that it is one sin too many or that we might store up a basket of sins until it starts to overflow, like a college student’s dirty laundry. No, God knows that we are sinners saved by his grace alone, and he desires that we come to him, early and often. As R.C. Sproul says, “God is pleased to clean us up when he finds us in the dirt.”⁵

The Way of Righteousness

The faithfulness of God to forgive us in Christ is neither an encouragement nor a license to sin. In fact, the truly converted heart desires to please God, to obey him, to glorify him. This does *not* mean that we are perfect, far from it in fact, but it *does* mean that we are being perfected, that is, conformed ever more to the image of Christ. This comes not from ourselves but by the Holy Spirit, who enables us “to will, and to do, of [God’s] good pleasure.”⁶ It is his good pleasure to grow us in Christlikeness.

God says,

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you (8).

⁵ R.C. Sproul, “What Does Repentance Look Like?”, accessed February 23, 2023, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/what-does-repentance-look>.

⁶ “The Confession of Faith” 16.3, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 69-70.

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God has given us his Word, that we may read it and meditate upon it, that we know his will and so obey it. And he has given us his Spirit, to instruct and teach us, to counsel us, according to his Word, and to go with us, watching over us for our good and holiness.

The problem is the inheritance grandfather Adam gave us just won't go away. We've yet to disinherit it. And it's not one of those inheritances you can safely lock away. It's actively in pursuit of its pleasure and abhors anything that would thwart it. Which means that when it encounters the Spirit of Christ, it becomes less than sub-human but like an animal.

This does not mean that we are helpless victims, for Christ has given us the Helper, and he says to us,

Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
which must be curbed with bit and bridle,
or it will not stay near you (9).

God can in fact bridle us, and in his discipline he will, but shall we resort to our baser instincts when we have been given the mind of Christ (1 Co. 2:16)? By God's grace through faith in Christ, we are children of the kingdom of heaven, "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Ro. 8:17). We are royalty! But when we sin, well, as Martin Luther put it less subtly, "You're a gross, ungrateful clod, worthy of being numbered among the beasts."⁷ As a forgiven sinner, I am never more like a stupid mule than when I sin, wallowing in the muck and mire when meant for glory.

Therefore, David encourages us not to delay but to go to the Lord now, while he "may be found," not implying that God leaves us or hides from us but that we must never procrastinate when it comes to confessing our sins. Time is of the essence, when it comes to confession. Why? Because harbored sin can swell like a tsunami. But when we confess our sins, "the rush of great waters" goes out to sea.

Undoubtedly, we will face the temptation to sin, but the Lord always protects us in the temptation and provides the way of escape (1 Co. 10:13), not to the enclave of our willpower but the "hiding place" of his Spirit's provision. And by his empowerment, when we follow the path of obedience, we find that we are not running from pleasure but being preserved from trouble. The sorrows of sin are reserved for the wicked, not the child of God, who trusts not in the promises of the world, the flesh, and the devil but in the promises of God and his gospel.

And in trusting the Lord we become "like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruits in its season, and its leaf does not wither" (Ps. 1:3), but we are not a lone tree but one of a healthy forest, a fellowship with others who also trust in the Lord, growing together in the Lord's provision. We come together weekly on the Lord's Day to worship our Triune God through his means of grace. We assemble not yet as the church triumphant but the church militant, confessing our sins to one another and praying for one another (Jas. 5:16), but also rejoicing in the forgiveness and fellowship with enjoy, with songs of deliverance. The Lord is indeed faithful

⁷ Martin Luther, "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 46, accessed February 23, 2023, <https://ergofabulous.org/luther/>.

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and just to forgive us, and cleanse us, and protect us, and hide us, and preserve us, and surround us with other forgiven sinners that we may be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, and sing for joy to the Lord.

Though great our sins and sore our woes
His grace much more aboundeth;
His helping love no limit knows,
Our upmost need it soundeth.
Our Shepherd good and true is He,
Who will at last His Israel free
From all their sin and sorrow
From all their sin and sorrow.⁸

⁸ "From the Depths of Woe I Raise to Thee" *Trinity Hymnal*, Revised Ed. (Suwanee: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 554.