

Jesus forgives sin

I can't help but wonder how people in our day would respond to Jesus, particularly if, as we saw last week, they came to Him for healing and He began by forgiving their sins. "Sins? What do you mean, you'll forgive my sins? I haven't done anything terrible, I don't go around hurting people, I haven't caused grief to those around me. I've basically lived at peace with my neighbours and the people I work with ... and you want to forgive my sins? What are you talking about?"

This kind of response will not only come from people who have no part of the church, but is likely to come from people who attend churches which have made the decision to not talk about sin. There is a new way of describing sin that makes it less necessary to talk about forgiveness -- and that is to describe it as a mistake or a failure. "Everyone makes mistakes" has become a substitute for "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Those terms are not identical. Making mistakes is not "against" anyone; it doesn't mean that you have hurt someone else or that you have rebelled against God in some way -- it just means you are human. "To err is human" as Alexander Pope put it in his "Essay on Criticism". Contrast that with King David who said to the LORD in Psalm 52, "Against You and You only have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight." He is admitting that he has violated the righteous requirement that his Creator has justly placed upon him.

Notice, too, that there's very little blame attached to making a mistake. Obviously, if someone says that they drank too much, got behind the wheel of a car and proceeded to run someone over, there are serious consequences, but not so much when you just hear the phrase, "I've made lots of mistakes in life." To the listener, it might mean, "I turned off at the wrong exit and got lost", or "I added two tablespoons of baking soda instead of two teaspoons." But those kinds of mistakes don't require God's forgiveness.

Are people becoming more blind to the big "mistakes" they have made, the kinds of words and actions that the Bible calls "sin"? In 1973 Dr. Karl Menninger, whose name had become synonymous with the practice of psychiatry in America, published a book titled Whatever Became of Sin. Listen to a few of the words from a brief review of the book on Amazon.com:

In (this) book Dr. Menninger attempts to apply psychiatry to a world-wide affliction, the depression, gloom, discouragement and apprehensiveness which are so prevalent. The word "sin" has almost disappeared from our vocabulary, but the sense of guilt remains in our hearts and minds. The prisoners punished in our jails are a small minority of all the offenders; "all we like sheep have gone astray". While a few deplore their guilt, many remain blandly indifferent or vaguely depressed or bitterly accusatory of others.

I think those three categories -- blandly indifferent, vaguely depressed or bitterly accusatory of others -- make up a pretty accurate assessment of how people in our age deal with their guilt, with the fact that they have sinned against God, whether they

recognize Him or not.

Since the publication of this book, the thrust in our society has been to deal with the guilt problem by trying to make it go away. While a couple of generations ago, people in the West knew what sin was, they now are learning that everyone makes mistakes, that most of the mistakes they make are because their parents and others in authority made mistakes while they were still children and that they must now focus on the positive and move forward. There is some truth in this, of course, but what is being removed from the collective conscience in the West is any sense of responsibility before God for the ways in which we have rejected His loving commands and His forgiveness. So, if Jesus were to tell the man on the street today, "Your sins are forgiven", I'm not sure that many of those people wouldn't first question Him about what sins they have committed.

If you're aware of the world of professional baseball at all, you'll know that Alex Rodriguez is baseball's highest paid player and that he's a cheater, that he has admitted using illegal performance-enhancing drugs, or PED's. After making that admission he was interviewed first by Katie Couric and later by Peter Gammons where he spoke candidly about why he had taken these illegal substances. He said he felt pressured to take them; that the culture was loose; that he was young, stupid, naive. He said he was sorry that he had done that. Notice how the blame is outward -- there were pressures coming at him, mainly the pressure to make a lot of money by being better than everyone else -- is that really a pressure from outside? He says that the culture is loose -- so you can blame the culture. He says he was young and naive -- and how can you be hard on someone who is young and naive? Gammons asked him if he had lied to Couric in the earlier interview in which he had denied using steroids, H.G.H. or other performance-enhancing substances. His reply is revealing: "At the time . . . I wasn't even being truthful with myself. How am I going to be truthful with Katie or CBS?"

What a way to brush off the allegation that he had lied in the earlier interview -- by saying that it wasn't possible for him to tell the truth because he couldn't face the truth himself. There is blame there, somewhere, but it sure doesn't all fall on Alex -- he is a master at making it look like there is something out there that's trying to get him and that he's a victim. He is currently suing Major League Baseball for undertaking a "witch hunt" to force him out of the sport. But what he can't seem to say, the words he chokes on, are, "I've done something wrong. I need to be forgiven."

This takes us to our first passage for today, Luke 7, starting at verse 36:

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so He went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.

Some of you are familiar with the scene from my descriptions of the Last Supper, but the table is a few inches off the floor and it's surrounded by cushions or mats where people recline on their left elbow and eat with their right hand.

When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was

eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is -- that she is a sinner."

Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him 500 denarii and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

Now I'm going to switch to the New Living Translation which is clearer than the NIV in translating this section:

"That's right," Jesus said. Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon: "Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn't offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn't give me a kiss of greeting, but she has kissed my feet again and again from the time I first came in. You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume. I tell you, her sins -- and they are many -- have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love." Then Jesus said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven." The men at the table said among themselves, "Who does this man think he is, going around forgiving sins?"

And Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Jesus is making one point in all these comparisons between His host, Simon, and the woman. He is saying that Simon doesn't think he needs to be forgiven, that he's a good guy, one of the people who is serious about obeying the law, one of the people who teaches others to be careful to follow God's rules and the Pharisees ways of expanding those rules. Simon has his own way of looking at what needs to be forgiven and what doesn't and, in his own eyes, he doesn't need forgiveness and if he does need some, it's not very much. He's like the modern man who, when Jesus offers him forgiveness, says, "What for?"

The woman, on the other hand, is deeply aware of her sin and is filled with shame and, at some point before this story begins, she has met with Jesus and she has received grace from Him in some form. When she hears that Jesus is having dinner at Simon's home, she brings the most valuable thing she owns and pours it out on His feet.

Women in those days didn't have a Visa or Master Card. Her accumulated wealth, which would go towards a dowry or towards funeral expenses was contained in a jar

of perfume. If she was able to save some money, she would buy perfume that she could add to what she had in her jar. This woman who had encountered grace through Jesus poured out her life savings on His feet. We're not told when that encounter took place, but it had been life-changing for that woman and she was so grateful, so deeply impacted, that she couldn't help but show her love and thankfulness and she chose to do it in a lavish way.

She had been forgiven much, so she loved much. Simon, who felt no need for forgiveness, certainly not from Jesus, showed no love. He didn't even offer Jesus the common courtesies that any other guest would receive. He felt that he was above Jesus, that he had a more respectable position in society, that he had the upper hand in dealing with this country boy from Nazareth -- so he showed Him no respect, no courtesy. I don't think it's reading too much into the text to say that Simon the Pharisee didn't think he needed Jesus. To him, Jesus was a curiosity, the object of some interest for him, but not someone he needed to impress or to even be courteous towards.

Two things right near the end of this story should be noted. First, when Jesus repeats to her the message that her sins are forgiven, there is a reaction from the men who are sharing this meal with Him. "Who does this man think he is, going around forgiving sins?" We saw this last week in the story of the paralytic who was lowered from the roof so that Jesus could heal him, only to have Jesus first respond to their faith by telling the man that his sins were forgiven. Again, the reaction is, "Who do you think you are, Jesus, to forgive someone's sins. Only God can forgive sins and you are certainly not God."

That's a real tip-off to the person who is paying attention: Jesus knew that He was God and He repeatedly did the things that only God can do -- things like forgiving sins, raising people from the dead, speaking things like healing and deliverance and having them occur. When people say that Jesus was just a good man, or that he was a wonderful teacher and example of love, they need to see passages like this where He forgave sins that a woman had committed, not against Him personally, but against the God who had given His people the laws of Moses. They need to see that Jesus was tried and condemned, not for being a nice guy that did and said nice things, but because He was a man who claimed to be God and who did the things that only God can do.

The last thing I want to bring to your attention from this passage is Jesus' final statement to the woman: "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Jesus was always looking for faith in the people He spoke to and ministered to. Where He found faith, whether in a foreigner up the seacoast in Tyre or an officer of the Roman army helping the foreigners oppress Israel, He responded quickly to faith. He praised it on numerous occasions and asked for it on others. He had seen faith in this woman and I have no doubt that she demonstrated her trust in Him on the earlier occasion when He ministered to her, and she is obviously showing deep gratitude here -- another expression of her trust in Him, her reliance on Jesus to be her healer or

deliverer -- and her forgiving God. All of those options would require faith and Jesus tells her that her faith has saved her and that she can go her way in peace, in the shalom, the wholeness and goodness and grace that only God can give.

One of the most powerful stories of forgiveness occurs in John 8 where Jesus is confronted by a crowd of Pharisees dragging a woman caught in adultery before Jesus to be judged by Him. "The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?"

We looked at this passage a few months ago, so won't go through it again, but I bring it up here to point out again how Jesus responded. When He asked that the person without sin throw the first stone, He was speaking to a generation and a culture that understood what sin was. Slowly they turned and walked away, beginning with those who were oldest and apparently most aware of their sins. When all had left, Jesus stood up and said to the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" "No, Lord," she said. "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

The turning point in her life was when Jesus refused to condemn her, even though she was guilty under the law that had been given to Moses. But the second part of His statement was also the second part of her salvation: "Go and sin no more. Don't do this anymore. Don't dishonor God and shame yourself by living this way. You've just been spared - now use your freedom to live a new life."

So, let's take a few minutes to gather some practical applications from these stories of forgiveness.

1. Jesus saw this as a huge need, the fundamental need in the people to whom He ministered. It was more important than healing people of blindness or paralysis, because of the two things it accomplished: it freed people from the guilt and shame that separated them from God and it opened up the possibility of a new life. You see Him emphasizing this second aspect on several occasions, including His conversation with the woman I just talked about from John 8. Guilt, whether admitted or not, affects a person's ability to have enough self-esteem to make positive changes. Forgiveness releases people to hope again and to leave old ways behind. When you forgive people for the wrongs they may have done against you, you are liberating them from the guilt that keeps them bound to the past ... you give hope.

2. A second application is something I've already talked about and that is that we need to know, when we're talking to people about who Jesus is, that He is the one person who has ever lived on this planet who has the authority to forgive people for sins they've committed against others ... and against God. He's not just a good guy, an amazing example, a wonderful teacher ... He is God come to earth and He forgives sin.

3. Third, we need to embrace for ourselves that Jesus is our sin-bearer, that He came to announce forgiveness, that His message was grace upon grace to those humble enough to admit their need. If you're counted among the humble ones, then

Jesus has forgiveness for you. This is His gift to you -- accept it, embrace it, don't ever doubt it.

4. Here's the hard one. I began this message by talking about the world we live in and how the man or woman on the street might react to Jesus offering forgiveness. How many would humbly receive the offer and how many would say, "I don't need that"? Part of our job in evangelism has to be to show people their need for forgiveness. Alpha has two illustrations that make the point

- a. What's the standard? If mass murderers and cruel tyrants are the worst and Mother Teresa and some of the Christian martyrs are the best, where do we fit in? Then, is the standard the average of all of us? No, it's the sky!
- b. Youth Alpha: if a seagull flies overhead while you're eating an ice cream sundae and drops a load of waste on top of your food, how much scraping of the ice cream before you'll be ready to eat the rest? No matter how hard you try to clean things up, it's still contaminated -- I'll pass.

-- One great challenge for our day is to convince people that we're all in need of forgiveness ... them included.