

The Forgiveness of Sins

The apostle Paul once said, "To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe" (Phi. 3:1). How often we, who think we are "mature," are impatient with a young preacher when we hear him speak about the "simple and basic" elements of the faith. "Oh, when will this babbler finish so that we can move on to deeper things?", we might say to ourselves. Yet Paul did not despise such "review lessons." In fact, he said that it is a safeguard for us all. How true this is, especially with the most fundamental concept of the Gospel: How are one's sins forgiven?

One might think that all missionaries (including "assembly" missionaries) are 'rock solid' on the Gospel, but the frank reality is that many on the mission field do not have a good grasp of the fundamentals and their message is confusing and uncertain. I remember one time that a evangelical missionary came to my house and bore his heart to me saying that he was uncertain about whether or not a believer could lose his salvation. Imagine that! A missionary that is supposed to be the 'cream of the crop,' in the bonds of doubt concerning the security of the believer! Sad, but true.

Paul himself asked for clearness in his Gospel preaching. He said, "...and for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 6:19). If the apostle needed such help, what about us missionaries? Let us, therefore, have a brief refresher course on "How are one's sins forgiven?"

The Ground of Forgiveness

Much confusion exists and many false ideas abound concerning the forgiveness of sins. For example, during a recent solar eclipse, the tribal priests of the native Indians in Nabusimake, Columbia taught that the eclipse cleansed the universe of humanity's sins. Muslims believe that fasting from all food and drink from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan will make atonement for their own sins over the previous year.

However, the only ground for true forgiveness is through the blood of Jesus Christ, "in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7). How can a guilty sinner be made right with God? It is not by a solar eclipse, nor by a month of fasting. It is only through the blood of Christ.

The Bible says, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 3:23). Instead of us dying, Christ died on the Cross for our sins. All our sins were laid on Him when He was nailed to the cross, "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor 5:17). He died, His blood was shed, so that we might be brought to God, "for Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit" (1 Pet. 3:18).

This forgiveness of sins is not an on-going process, but happens instantaneously when a lost soul puts his trust in Christ; "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13). Immediately, at the very instant a sinner calls on the Lord, a divine transaction

is made, a soul passes from death to life and receives the forgiveness of sins from the penalty of the lake of fire.

Is there is anything as beautiful and as simple? Yet, in Christendom, confusion abounds as to exactly what sins are forgiven at this precious moment. The frank reality is that most people believe that forgiveness is only from their 'past' sins.

The Extent of Forgiveness

When a person calls on Christ for salvation, are only his past sins forgiven? The answer is that all of one's sins are forgiven of the penalty of being cast into the lake of fire, even one's future sins.

How can such a bold declaration be substantiated? From the Lord Himself! He stated, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death into life" (John 5:24).

Praise God! A saved sinner "shall not come into condemnation." This means that he who believes on Him will never be condemned to the lake of fire. Why? Because the whole issue of the sinner deserving the penalty of the lake of fire has been resolved, the debt has been paid, the matter of judgment for sin is finished. This includes even our future sins.

Consider the thief on the cross. When he called on the Lord for salvation, what did the Lord declare? "Verily, I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). At that very instant, the repentant thief was declared fit for heaven. Yet, was it not several hours before he died? Is it possible that during those next hours that the thief sinned with a wicked thought or angry word against the mockers who surrounded him? Frankly, the thief would have been more than a man if he did not sin during that time. However, when did Christ declare him fit for heaven? Was it during the thief's final, dying breath when he no longer had the possibility of committing any future sin? No! It was hours before when He said, "Verily, I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise." From that moment on, there was no condemnation against that sinner. It was at that precise second that the penalty of sin was settled once and for all. All of his sins were immediately forgiven. The condemnation of being cast into the lake of fire was completely and forever annulled.

Two Types of Forgiveness

Perhaps someone will object to the above by citing a verse like 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness," and state that forgiveness is not all-inclusive, but that it is dependent on the sinner confessing his sins on a continual basis.

To answer this objection, the careful Bible student must note that two kinds of forgiveness are found in the Bible. He must learn to distinguish them, or else he will always be mired in a sea of doctrinal confusion and doubt. In short, the Bible speaks of "judicial" and "parental" forgiveness. Although these names are not found in the Bible, their concepts most certainly are. "Judicial" forgiveness is the once-for-all act where God forgives a repentant sinner of the penalty of his sins (eternal death) the moment he believes in Christ (John 5:24; Eph 1:7; Col.

2:13). Thus, the forgiven sinner enters into a new relationship: God is no longer his Judge, but his Father. In an unguarded moment, the child of God commits a sin. What happens? Is the child in danger of eternal death? No. Is he cast out of the family? No, thank the Lord! Among the great benefits of the New Covenant is that it is unilateral: God commits Himself to perform it and there are no conditions on the human side. And with respect to sins, it is clearly stated concerning those who belong to Him: “and their sins and iniquities will I remember no more” (Heb. 10:17). However, when a child of God sins, his fellowship (not his relationship) with the Father is broken. He receives “parental” forgiveness as soon as he confesses his sin. Thus, “parental” forgiveness involves the restoration of broken fellowship with the Father. (1 Jo 1:6; 1:9; Psa. 32:5).

Now one might think that the above is Bible 101, but so many, even so-called “evangelical” missionaries, do not grasp these important distinctions. For example, a missionary once said this to me concerning 1 John 1:9,

“...We can only say what scriptures clearly teach over and over, that a TRUE Christian (a sheep) does and must continually forsake and confess all known sin in his life. 1st Jn. does not speak of “parental” but of REAL forgiveness.”¹ (emphasis in the original).

This interpretation is utterly wrong and is nothing more than a form of salvation by works. ‘Real’ forgiveness (i.e. judicial forgiveness) is not dependent on whether or not I forsake and confess ‘all known sin’ in my life. If it was, who then could be saved? While a believer will naturally confess and forsake sin as the fruit of salvation, continual confession and forsaking of all known sin are not the conditions for ‘real’ forgiveness (from eternal death). The necessary and sufficient condition for that is believing on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Confusion about these two types of forgiveness will naturally result in confusion about the various tenses of salvation: we are saved from the penalty of sin (e.g. Eph. 2:8 and Tit. 3:5), we are being saved from the power of sin (e.g. Phil 2:12 and Rom. 5:10), and we will be saved from the presence of sin one day (e.g. Rom. 13:11 and Heb. 9:28). I recall a conversation with a disciple who had sat for several years under the ministry of the above mentioned missionary. When asked to explain Phil 2:12, “Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” the poor fellow started to ramble and go around in circles, and after about five minutes of embarrassing and poor reasoning he gave up. He really had no clue on how to explain it. However, from what he did say, his emphasis was on keeping one’s salvation by works. It is no wonder, since when the missionary is confused, his disciples will be confused also. What happened next? A 15 year old boy, saved for about a year, raised his hand and said, “Excuse me, but Phil 2:12 isn’t speaking of salvation from the penalty of sin. That happened immediately at the moment of conversion. Rather, it is speaking of salvation from the power of sin, that is, how we need to be very careful in our daily walk knowing that we can easily disgrace our reputations and that of the Lord’s. For these reasons, we should have fear and trembling, not from the fear that we can lose our salvation.” Not bad for a fifteen year old!

The Error of Partial Forgiveness

When a person doesn’t clearly understand the ground of forgiveness, the extent of it, and the

various types of Biblical forgiveness, the natural outcome will be a belief in 'partial' forgiveness at the moment of conversion. That is, only 'past' sins are forgiven.

Quoting a well-known Mennonite teacher we see this confusion [emphasis mine].

"When we seek the Lord in true repentance and all that it involves, and trust in the promises of God, we are forgiven all our past sins ... It is God's will that we should ever grow in grace and in the knowledge of the truth... So disobedience and neglect must be guarded against, and if not, then they who have been the most brightly saved may become darkly and hopelessly damned. (Heb. 6:4-6) ...It is a great error that some teach that if we are once in grace, we are sure finally to be saved, and that one's standing or acceptance cannot be forfeited and that it is not necessary to salvation that we are faithful in obedience to the Word... 'Once a son, always a son' is a false doctrine."²

This above is a clear denial that forgiveness is complete at the moment a sinner calls upon the Lord. Instead, according to this teacher, only one's past sins are forgiven at conversion, and the forgiveness of future sins is dependent on one's performance. Notice also that he denies the truth of eternal security.

Notice also the total confusion from this "evangelical" preacher. Quoting a cassette tape, we read [emphasis mine],

"...Now here we have 1 John 1:9. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. So we actually obtain forgiveness from God and the penalty, eternal penalty, or the penalty of hell is canceled. When, if we let our sins accumulate in our life, our sins will condemn us, our sins will judge us at the last great day. But when we confess that, that clears the slate, it brings forgiveness... [are] accepted back into Him, into His arms, into His family... Confession of sin applies the blood. Now the blood was shed for the sins of the whole world, was it not?... And as far as God is concerned they are atoned for, but as far as man is concerned they are still there until they are repented of and confessed and then the blood is applied. The blood is not applied on all sins, as I understand it, before they are confessed. They will stand before you, they will haunt you, they will judge you at the great day when you stand before God unless you have confessed them."³

Obviously, this preacher does not believe in a once-and-for-all act of complete forgiveness, but rather in partial forgiveness. Imagine the poor soul who listens to such teaching. Would he not believe that forgiveness from the penalty of Hell is an on-going process dependent on continual confession? How could the poor soul even sleep at night, perhaps he had forgotten to confess something!

Partial forgiveness is directly related to conditional salvation. Such a philosophy says that, yes, through faith in Christ a sinner is saved, but not completely. The initial act of belief in Christ only forgives one of his past sins, but sins committed in the future must be continually cleansed through religious acts, obedience to some standard, or, as in the above case, through on-going confession.

Yet, the Bible says "for by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). This means that forgiveness from the penalty of the lake of fire is entirely by grace. It is not based on fasting,

religious acts, the frequency of my prayers of confession, or on how 'holy' of a life I live.

The Denial of Eternal Security

When people do not have a clear grasp of the doctrine of forgiveness, another 'fruit' (that is, bad fruit) will be the denial of eternal security. "Be careful, or else" is the theme of such teachers. Listen to this 'evangelical' preacher.

"...I believe that I finished two weeks ago by saying that I don't believe that you can lose your salvation. And I want to reaffirm that this morning. I do not believe that you can lose your salvation. Many times people ask me that especially because my background is Baptist. And people often ask me, "brother Denny, do you believe that you can lose your salvation? And I tell them "no." That puts their heart at ease right away. But I do also finish by saying "But I believe that you can throw it away."⁴

Clever words - You can't lose your salvation, but you can throw it away! But the end result is the same - a denial of complete forgiveness and the eternal security of the believer. It also becomes a system of salvation by works.

The doctrine of eternal security is non-negotiable. Anyone with a clear understanding of the Gospel and the complete forgiveness of sins will understand that a denial of it leads to 'another gospel.' Listen to our brother R.E. Harlow,

"Eternal Security is one of the most cherished doctrines of Scripture....Without eternal security, you have to add works to keep yourself saved. This subtly, but profoundly, modifies the Gospel of God's grace. You are saying that the work of Christ was not and is not adequate to save entirely. In this way people are getting "another gospel" which is not another. The preacher, even an apostle or angel, is under the curse of God, repeat, the curse of God (Gal. 1:8-9)."⁵

An Examination on Complete Forgiveness

Now that we have had a 'review' lesson, let us take an examination. The exam consists of only two problems which are listed below. Each problem is a teaching from a evangelical preacher that, we will suppose, has been invited to speak in your assembly. Your grade will be based on how well you can discern the error. Obviously, you will fail the exam if you are fooled. Go ahead and start with the first problem.

"... Hebrews 12:14 says "...and holiness without which no man shall see the Lord." Brothers and sisters, tonight I want to say to you that without holiness we are not going to make it.... there are three stages of salvation. The first stage is justification. That is the time when we are born again ... After justification comes stage 2 and that is sanctification and that is a holy life.... Stage 3 is glorification....You must have justification and sanctification to get glorification.... Let me give you some Biblical mathematics tonight. Justification plus sanctification equals glorification. You got that? Justification plus sanctification equals glorification. But, justification minus sanctification equals damnation.... And there is a philosophy today going around that justification minus sanctification equals a loss of rewards. But the Bible says that justification minus sanctification is a loss of your soul."⁶

Your answer should be that not only is this bad mathematics, but also very bad doctrine.

According to the author there are stages of salvation, not complete forgiveness. The Bible says “whom he justified, them he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30). Likewise, sanctification becomes a condition of glorification instead of the fruit of salvation.

Now continue with the second problem.

"In Christ's blood we have the forgiveness of all our sins P.P.&F [past, present and future]. ... Its [sic] all by grace, only His blood, by faith in Him. How & [sic] when does all of God's grace become practical? Now the scriptures also says if we walk in the light...the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sins. If we confess He forgives. If we sin we have an Advocate. ... We need Christ from the beginning to end. We need His blood to continually cleanse us from our sins ."⁷ (emphasis in the original)

How confusing! First of all, the fundamental mistake of this author is that he mixes together statements from what looks like Eph. 1:7, Col. 2:13 and 1 John 1:7-2:1, verses that do not speak of the same aspect of forgiveness at all. The verses Eph. 1:7 and Col. 2:13 speak of judicial forgiveness, whereas 1 John speaks of parental. Secondly, since the two aspects of forgiveness are ‘lumped’ together, the poor reader is then forced to conclude that the author is, in some way, simultaneously speaking of both types of forgiveness. Thirdly, the author then comes to a very confusing conclusion concerning the forgiveness of sins. On one hand, in Christ’s blood we have the forgiveness of all of our sins, but, note carefully, not quite yet! The blood is only applied as we fulfill the condition of confession. Only then is the sinner cleansed, and this cleansing takes place on a continual basis; not a once for all act! This gradual application of the blood of Christ sounds very much like Catholic doctrine. Note carefully that the author places a condition on receiving forgiveness. Our spiritual radars should go on full alert whenever we hear a preacher speak of a condition (besides faith in Christ) for the forgiveness of sin without a clear distinction being made between the two aspects of forgiveness. Any message is suspect when it comes across that salvation and forgiveness are never fully complete or secure, only past sins are forgiven, and the forgiveness of future sins is conditional on something the sinner must do.

Did you pass the exam? Or were you deceived?

Conclusion

Confusion about the forgiveness of sins is nothing new. Even in days of the New Testament false teachers tried to persuade the believers that, yes, one needed to have faith in Christ, but one also needed to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to be saved (Acts 15:5). Fortunately, the brethren quickly concluded that such teachings were ‘subverting your souls’ (Acts 15:24).

We, including us missionaries, need to be just as discerning with the gospel today. May God give us all a baptism of clear seeing on the forgiveness of sins!

Endnotes

1. Personal letter on file, emphasis in the original.

2. Rightly Dividing the Scriptures, George R. Brunk I, Christian Light Publications, Inc., Harrisonburg, VA, p. 46-47.
3. The Confession of Sin, Mose Stoltzfus, Cassette tape #1452, 1994, Charity Gospel Tape Ministry, Leola, PA, USA.
4. Warnings from Hebrews on Perseverance (Part 2), Denny Kenaston, Cassette tape #1556, Charity Gospel Tape Ministry, Leola, PA, USA.
5. The Right to Die, R.E. Harlow, Missions Magazine, January 1999.
6. Without Holiness No Man Shall See God, Jerry Mawhorr, Cassette tape #2002, 1997, Charity Gospel Tape Ministry, Leola, PA, USA.
7. Personal letter on file, emphasis in the original.