

I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins (Lord's Day 21 Q&A56)

Reading: Psalm 32

Introduction

Three words...Only three words.

But they lie at the very heart of the Gospel.

They lie at the very heart of the church.

They are God's words to us.

They ought to be our words to each other.

Three short but important words.

Do you know what they are?

They are: "I forgive you."

According to the Creed, true faith, saving faith, includes a belief in the forgiveness of sins.

It is not enough to believe in God the Father as Creator.

It is not enough to believe in Jesus as the eternal Son.

It is not enough to believe the virgin birth.

It is not enough to believe the suffering under Pilate.

It is not enough to believe the cross and the grave.

In order to be saved you also need to believe in the forgiveness of sins.

The first two Questions & Answers of our Lord's Day this afternoon concerned themselves with the church.

Then comes this Q&A about forgiveness of sins.

Why?

Because it is dealing with one of the gifts that is given to the church by Jesus Christ.

We have forgiveness of sins because of Jesus Christ.

As we speak of the forgiveness of sins.

We should not speak of the forgiveness in any general sense...

As something true of others...but not of me.

This forgiveness of sins is given as a personal gift...

For specific individuals.

The Catechism reflects that by asking what *you* believe concerning the forgiveness of sins, and then laying a personal answer on our lips:

"I believe that God ... will no remember *my* sins."

As we talk about forgiveness this afternoon, we are talking about something given *to us*.

So, what is *forgiveness of sins*?

We know what ‘sins’ are.

That word captures whatever we do or say or think that contravenes God’s commands.

In the Garden of Eden we committed no sins, for we were perfect.

As a result of the fall into sin our hearts have become "deceitful" (Jeremiah 17:9),

so much so that sin covers whatever we do;

even our best works, says Isaiah, are as "filthy rags" before God (64:6).

God’s reaction to our sins is *revulsion*.

The Holy Spirit says through Habakkuk that God’s eyes are too pure to look on evil.

So, when the people of Israel built their golden calf in blatant transgression of God’s expressed command, God was ready to destroy the people, and begin a new nation with Moses.

That is holy God: He cannot stomach sin.

What, now, is ‘forgiveness’?

The Bible uses a variety of images to convey the notion of forgiveness.

There is, for example, the word *‘lift up’*.

Then sin is pictured as a burden, a weight lying on one’s shoulder.

The sin is ‘forgiven’,

and that’s to say that the sin is lifted off the person and put to one side...

so that the person can walk straight up again.

(Pilgrim’s Progress)

Another word used for ‘forgiveness’ is the word *‘let go’*.

The same word is used of a stone in a slingshot.

The stone is ‘let go’ from the slingshot and flies away.

So too sin; it is ‘let go’,

that’s to say that it may fly away and so be gone from the life of the transgressor.

Besides its choice of words to describe forgiveness, the Bible also draws pictures of what forgiveness actually is.

Ps 103 gives us this well-known passage:

"As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (vs 12).

In our day of rapid transportation and communication, east and west are not all that far apart, and so what is moved as far west as you can go can be retrieved.

But that was not the case in David's day.

East and west were the farthest extremes of the world,
and it took you a lifetime to travel as far east as you could go,
let alone as far west.

And then you certainly had no opportunity to retrieve what you'd hidden on your travels to the farthest east.

The point: when God removes transgressions from us "as far as east is from the west", those transgressions are *gone*, completely gone.

Micah uses different imagery to describe what forgiveness is.

He first describes what God is like.

Then the prophet draws a specific picture of what forgiveness actually is,
what God actually does with our sins.

He adds: God "will hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea". (7:19)

They've been down to pick up pieces of the Titanic,
and that's more than 3 kilometers down.

Israel did not have that kind of technology.

Anything buried in more than 3 meters of water was irretrievable.

That's the point of Micah's comparison:

when God pardons iniquity and passes over transgression,
the point is that those sins are *gone*, completely gone.

What, then is forgiveness?

It is this: our sins are *gone*.

They're lifted from our shoulders,
they're let go,

they're removed from us as far as east is from west,
dropped into the depths of the sea.

All those terms and pictures describe the glorious wealth of forgiveness –
our sins are *gone*!

So the very things that anger God...my sins...are no longer there.

So His thoughts and His words and His deeds to me are not driven by anger anymore; His thoughts and His words and His deeds to me are instead driven by His mercy and compassion.

But, says the Catechism, there's more to it still.

It's not just that *my sins themselves* are gone,
that God will no more remember my sins.

The Catechism adds the remarkable line that God also will no more remember "*my sinful nature* against which I have to struggle all my life."

Second, God also forgives my sinful nature...

this is the sin within us, the sin we are born with,
the sin that is part of our makeup in this imperfect world.

For this too we need forgiveness.

Many people don't seem to realize that they need forgiveness for their sinful nature.

They think that because they are born that way,

because it is part of their character,
therefore it is nothing to be forgiven and nothing to repent of.

We hear this kind of argument about homosexuals and alcoholics and gamblers.

But our sinful inclination to be an alcoholic or a homosexual or an adulterer or a thief all needs forgiveness and for all of these inclinations of our sinful nature we need to repent. This sinful nature is like a hereditary disease which produces in man every sort of evil.

Because of Christ's atonement, God forgives my sinful nature too.

God no more remembers my sins, nor my sinful nature against which I struggle all my life long.

On what grounds, now, does God forgive?

On what grounds does He lift our sins off our shoulders,
remove them as far as east is from west, dump them overboard?

The answer of the Scripture is emphatic:

this is simply and only because of Christ's work on the cross.

The people of Israel had to bring sacrifices to the temple time and time again,
and always their sin offerings had to be accompanied by laying the hand upon the
head of the sacrifice (Lev 4).

The point was that sin was transferred from the sinner to the animal,
and the animal –now with sin on board- died in place of the sinner –
and so the sinner could go home free.

Isaiah takes up this imagery in chapter 53 where he says that He was wounded for our
transgressions, bruised for our iniquities and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us
all.

The point is that Christ suffered and died *for* us, in our place;
our sins were piled onto Him so that we might go free (cf Rom 5:6ff).

That statement has implications.
If our sins are forgiven "because of Christ's atonement,"
it follows that there are *no other grounds* for our forgiveness.

We do not have forgiveness of our sins because we go to church.
We do not have forgiveness of sins because we help the poor in the community.

Nothing we do earns us forgiveness;
forgiveness of sins is totally and only *God's grace through Jesus Christ*.

Forgiveness – and salvation – comes only through Christ and His atonement.
It doesn't come through our own efforts.

In every age there are people who believe they'll enter the kingdom of God because they
are good or try to be good or because they go to church.

But the only way into the kingdom, the only basis for the forgiveness of sins,
is the atonement of Christ, His suffering and sacrifice.
This is the only ground of our salvation and the only way of forgiveness.

It's something for which we may be so very thankful.

Martin Luther was taught that forgiveness could be his if he did the right thing –
and you can fill in the blank as to what that right thing might be,
whether paying enough indulgences
or crawling up a hundred stone steps on your bare knees

or even repenting, feeling guilty and rotten about your sins.

But Luther learned that such a doctrine never gives peace,
for the devil will always have you doubt whether you have done enough,
whether you have gone to church often enough or sincerely enough,
whether you have paid enough or feel rotten enough or repented truly enough
or made sufficient restitution for your sins, etc.

The gospel of redemption drives us to look to *Christ alone*;
only His work on the cross obtains forgiveness for our sins.

And that work is so perfect, so complete,
that the Christian need never doubt whether his sins are *really forgiven*.

That's the gift Christ gives to His church, to those whom the Father has given to Him.

If God, then, sees us as righteous, our sins gone, ***how should we now look at ourselves?***

If God for Christ's sake no more remembers my sins,
should I keep on remembering them?

I think we would dearly love to forget the wrongs of which we're guilty.

But we realize that we can't wind the clock back and undo the past,
but the shame we feel on account of what we've done can be so strong that we'd give
much to forget it.

So what can we do when the guilt surfaces...
and we say we are not good enough for God.

Jennifer was a college student, and I came across a letter she had written on the topic.

"I desperately need your help with a problem. I was saved four years ago, and I've tried to live a Christian life. I have messed up a lot, but every time I've asked God to forgive me. And then I'm happy again because I know He forgives.

"But here lately it seems like I'm constantly feeling guilty about things I've done. I've even started feeling guilty about things I'm not even sure if I've done. I've asked God to forgive me if I did do something wrong, but I still feel guilty. I want the joy back that I first experienced when I first became a Christian. Why do I feel guilty?"

I can totally relate to the issue that Jennifer raises.

She understands her guilt...

But fails to grasp the greatness of God's forgiveness...

The depth of his love.
When we receive forgiveness, God promises that he will never stop forgiving us.
It is a once off act by Jesus Christ on the cross that carries on through all of life...
No matter what we do wrong.

Hear what God says in 1 John 1:7
“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another,
and the blood of Jesus, his son, purifies us from **ALL** sin.”

That means God continues to purify us even while we are trying to live the Christian life.

He does that through the blood of Jesus Christ.

While God wants us to know our forgiveness, Satan, the deceiver, is accusing us trying to make us feel guilty, trying to make us think we are unworthy.

The thing is, we are unworthy, it is God who declares you completely forgiven because Jesus paid the penalty for our sins when he died on the cross.

So you see, God has done a truly awesome thing.

The problem is that what we believe about ourselves and God is often based on feelings.
And feelings change so easily!

Even the weather can affect our feelings!

But nothing changes the facts recorded in God’s Word...and that should be our guide.
So when you have feelings of guilt when there’s no basis for that guilt, go back to the facts.

Those facts tell you that you are loved by God, completely forgiven through Jesus Christ and constantly cleansed by the Heavenly Father.

You and I are to be like God.

I always think of what the apostle says to the church in Ephesus:
(Eph 4:32) Be kind and compassionate to each other, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Among us too, sins should be forgiven and put out of sight and out of mind. That's how a husband and wife must forgive – "Never hold it against her." "Never bring it up to him again!"

That's how the communion of saints must forgive and can forgive.

Yet, this is easier said than done. Many times we find it difficult to truly forgive each other from the heart.

Unlike God, when someone sins against us we often cannot let go.

We want to get even.

We want to strike back.

We want to nurse our grudge for a while.

But when someone sins against us we must forgive and forget their sin just like God forgives and forgets our sin.

This is a whole sermon on its own...separate to this catechism Q&A.

Often the reason we do not forgive others is that we ourselves are not convinced we are forgiven.

Conclusion

With the church of all ages, what do you and I believe? We believe "the forgiveness of sins."

Do you believe and accept "the forgiveness of sins"?