

Forgiveness 1:
God's Repentance Enabling Forgiveness
Psalm 65:1-8

Sermon

Hobart, April 26th, 2015

Launceston, May 3rd, 2015

Luke 23:32-43

³² Two others, both criminals, were led out to be executed with him.

³³ When they came to a place called The Skull,* they nailed him to the cross. And the criminals were also crucified—one on his right and one on his left.

³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."^{*} And the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice.^{*}

³⁵ The crowd watched and the leaders scoffed. "He saved others," they said, "let him save himself if he is really God's Messiah, the Chosen One."

³⁶ The soldiers mocked him, too, by offering him a drink of sour wine. ³⁷ They called out to him, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ A sign was fastened to the cross above him with these words: "This is the King of the Jews."

³⁹ One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, "So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you're at it!"

⁴⁰ But the other criminal protested, "Don't you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? ⁴¹ We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn't done anything wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom."

⁴³ And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise."¹

* Sometimes rendered *Calvary*, which comes from the Latin word for "skull."

* This sentence is not included in many ancient manuscripts.

* Greek *by casting lots*. See Ps 22:18.

¹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (Lk 23:32-43). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

Psalm 65 *For the choir director: A song. A psalm of David.*

- 1 What mighty praise, O God,
belongs to you in Zion.
We will fulfill our vows to you,
- 2 for you answer our prayers.
All of us must come to you.
- 3 Though we are overwhelmed by our sins,
you forgive them all.
- 4 What joy for those you choose to bring near,
those who live in your holy courts.
What festivities await us
inside your holy Temple.
- 5 You faithfully answer our prayers with awesome deeds,
O God our savior.
You are the hope of everyone on earth,
even those who sail on distant seas.
- 6 You formed the mountains by your power
and armed yourself with mighty strength.
- 7 You quieted the raging oceans
with their pounding waves
and silenced the shouting of the nations.
- 8 Those who live at the ends of the earth
stand in awe of your wonders.
From where the sun rises to where it sets,
you inspire shouts of joy.²

²Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (Ps 65:1-8). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

INTRODUCTION:

I. ONE OF THE MOST CENTRAL AND DIFFERENTIATING ASPECTS OF CHRISTIANITY IS "FORGIVENESS"

A. IT IS SEEN AS UNREASONABLE AND WEAK BY MANY NON CHRISTIANS THAT WE SHOULD FORGIVE PEOPLE WHO HAVE TREATED US BADLY

1. The view is that we should demand justice, and seek retribution, get even in whatever way we can
 - a) We see this in families, in the workplace, in sport, in the courts and in international relations
 - b) In places like Papua New Guinea retribution, or payback causes extreme, ongoing, escalating violence
 - (1) One wrong leads to another, and it gets perpetuated in a vicious spiralling cycle that can go on for generations
 - (2) We see the same thing in Northern Ireland, and in Africa and the Middle East

B. MANY CHRISTIANS BELIEVE AND TEACH THAT WE ARE NOT FORGIVEN UNLESS WE FIRST REPENT

1. And that we do not need to forgive others unless they repent and apologise for what they have done against us
2. This question is fundamental to our understanding of the Gospel, and a key to human relationships

C. TODAY

1. We are going to look at God's forgiveness
 - a) And whether repentance is a necessary prerequisite for God forgiving us
2. Another time, I plan to look at our own forgiving of others, and deal with some of the challenging scriptures on the topic, such as John 20:23

D. PRAYER

BODY:

II. IS FORGIVENESS CONDITIONAL?

A. DO WE NEED TO REPENT FIRST IN ORDER TO BE FORGIVEN?

1. Many scriptures talk about repentance and forgiveness in the same breath

B. MARK 1:4: JOHN THE BAPTIST CALLED ON PEOPLE TO BE

“baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven.

1. Jesus soon after proclaimed;

Mark 1:15 “The time promised by God has come at last!” he announced. “The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!”

2. Were they both saying that in order to be forgiven, in order to be part of the Kingdom of God we need to repent first?

3. That is what is commonly believed.

C. DISCUSS: DO WE NEED TO REPENT IN ORDER TO BE FORGIVEN?

III. UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

A. WITH ALL QUESTIONS LIKE THIS WE NEED TO FIRST ASK WHO IS GOD?

1. What is his nature, his will, his way in regard to forgiveness?

B. WE KNOW THAT AT HIS HEART AND CORE NATURE AND IN HIS ACTIONS, GOD IS LOVE

1. Forgiveness is part of who God is as well, part of his loving nature
2. And so as being created in his image—to be like him—we are to be by nature forgiving as well
 - a) That is our starting point

3. Ralph Wood

...forgiveness is...God's business: his essential occupation, his constant activity, his diligent engagement—indeed, his very nature.³

C. BUT DOES THAT MEAN OUR FORGIVING GOD FORGIVES BEFORE OR AFTER WE REPENT?

1. Is forgiveness only given to those who repent?
 - a) After all it doesn't seem fair that the unrepentant should be let off the hook
 - b) Surely we should see the error of our ways and change our attitudes and actions before God or anyone else has to forgive us
2. Ralph Wood shows how it is a fundamental aspect of God's nature, and central to the gospel and our salvation that God's forgiveness precedes repentance

The common assumption, found even in the most standard textbooks and dictionaries of theology, is that our forgiveness remains conditional upon our repentance: first we repent, and then God forgives. The word "repentance" means literally a turning back, a reversal of one's course.

³ Ralph C. Wood, *God's Repentance-Enabling Forgiveness*, Copyright © 2001 The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, <http://www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/ForgivenessarticleWood.pdf>

Only when we do a moral and spiritual about-face, according to this understanding, can we expect God's mercy.

Many biblical texts seem to speak this way. Jesus himself declares, in his Model Prayer, that unless we forgive others, we ourselves have no hope of forgiveness.

...the Hebrew prophets warn that elaborate sacrifices will not win mercy from God, unless they are preceded by broken and contrite hearts.

"I hate, I despise your festivals," declares Amos. "Take away from me the noise of your songs." God desires not such symbolic acts of repentance, the prophet thunders, so much as ethically transformed lives: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21).

Yet this way of reading these texts often leads to moralism and atheism. It makes our forgiveness contingent upon our good deeds, as our acts of repentance form a necessary symmetry with God's mercy.

3. With this moralistic approach, in which repentance depends on our first repenting, we end up with a legalistic, religious, moralistic focus
 - a) The weight and responsibility is placed upon us. We have to act first for God to respond.
 - b) God isn't the initiator or first cause, we are. His actions become dependent on and controlled by us.
4. It would be like children determining the love and forgiveness of their parents, and the parent not being able or willing to act until the child deserved it
 - a) We see the damaging results of this conditional approach in all types of relationships all around us

D. GOD'S WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS

1. God is the initiator in relationships and fixing our broken lives.
2. God forgives first, and that forgiveness is what enables and encourages and frees us to repent and accept his love and forgiveness

3. Wood points out that this is what the Scriptures are really telling us about the order of forgiveness;

Yet there is another and drastically opposed way of construing not only these particular texts but the whole biblical tradition as well. It insists upon the paradoxical reversal of the seemingly obvious order: we repent, not in order to be forgiven, but because we have already been forgiven.

The Psalmists, for example, take endless delight in the Law of the Lord; it is God's gracious and merciful provision for Israel, not a grinding requirement to which she must reluctantly submit. Only because God has already shown Israel his boundless mercy is she called to be his people living in high moral excellence.

Amos is angry because his people have not lived out the radical ethical consequences of God's forgiveness.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer was to complain in the 20th century about modern Christians, the ancient Israelites had cheapened God's abundant grace into an excuse for their own moral laxity.⁴

E. IN PSALM 65 WE SEE HOW GOD'S FORGIVENESS IS THE CAUSE OF WORSHIP AND JOY.

Psalm 65:1-8

65 For the choir director: A song. A psalm of David.

¹ What mighty praise, O God,

belongs to you in Zion.

We will fulfill our vows to you,

² for you answer our prayers.

All of us must come to you.

³ Though we are overwhelmed by our sins,

you forgive them all.

⁴ What joy for those you choose to bring near,

those who live in your holy courts.

⁴ Ralph Wood

What festivities await us
inside your holy Temple.

⁵ You faithfully answer our prayers with awesome deeds,
O God our savior.

You are the hope of everyone on earth,
even those who sail on distant seas.

⁶ You formed the mountains by your power
and armed yourself with mighty strength.

⁷ You quieted the raging oceans
with their pounding waves
and silenced the shouting of the nations.

⁸ Those who live at the ends of the earth
stand in awe of your wonders.

From where the sun rises to where it sets,
you inspire shouts of joy.

1. The Psalms show God as the initiator and creator of all things, the powerful one who intervenes for us
2. God rescues us from our overwhelming sins, from the sins of others
 - a) His initiating actions of love and forgiveness, of rescue and redemption lead us out of our sinful rejection and lack of trust and obedience, and free us to receive his love and to respond with love and worship
3. In other words, God's actions free us and release us from our cycle of sin and independence
 - a) His love and forgiveness free us to repent, which means to have a change of heart and lifestyle

³ Though we are overwhelmed by our sins,
you forgive them all.

⁴ What joy for those you choose to bring near,

4. Bible Knowledge Commentary;

The psalm begins with a mention of mankind's preparation to **praise** God because He hears **prayer** (vv.1-2). The occasion for the prayer was apparently their overwhelming **sins**, but God **atoned for** their **transgressions** (v.3).⁵

⁸ Those who live at the ends of the earth
stand in awe of your wonders.
From where the sun rises to where it sets,
you inspire shouts of joy.

5. We respond to God in faith and praise, because of what he does, because of who he is

- a) He hears our prayers, so we praise him
- b) He forgives, he atones for our sins so our hearts are turned to him

6. In other words his forgiveness initiates our repentance, our turning to him in faith and praise

- a) Because God has said yes to us, we are able to say yes to him, rather than continually saying no, I don't want you in my life
- b) If he starts by saying no to us, then we are unable and usually unwilling to say yes to him, so our situation is hopeless

7. The commentary adds;

One who thereby is brought **near to** the presence of the Lord will experience happiness (he is **blessed**; cf. 1:1) and satisfaction (**with . . . good things**, 65:4). Atonement for sin made possible the praise of the people and their entrance on festival days into the **courts** of the tabernacle.⁶

8. Ralph Wood shows how this order; God's forgiveness leading to our repentance is also found in the NT;

⁵Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (841). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

cf. *confer*, compare

⁶Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B.,

The New Testament pattern is very much the same. In Mark's gospel, Jesus approaches the paralytic and tells him, to the great astonishment of all, that his sins are forgiven. The poor man had not sought forgiveness but healing!

It seems evident that Jesus is interested in how the paralytic will live, now that his health has been restored—whether he will be satisfied with mere wellness (as we call it) or whether his forgiveness will produce a transformed life of metanoia, of true repentance and conversion.

So it goes in John's gospel, with the woman who has been caught in adultery. Jesus tells her that her sins are forgiven, and then he instructs her to go and sin no more.

Her new freedom is conditional upon her forgiveness, therefore, not upon her repentance. Jesus has set her free for an endlessly penitent life—not only asking forgiveness for her past sins, but also for the sins that she shall surely commit (even if ever so much more reluctantly) in the future.⁷

F. THIS IS BASIC TO THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL

1. Too often we as human beings, particularly religious ones, insist that everything be logical and just according to our own reasoning
2. Grace, unconditional love and forgiveness seems unreasonable, and even unjust and unfair
3. But Jesus continually confronted such thinking in his day
 - a) He came to turn our minds and our worlds upside down
 - b) To show us who God really is, and the good news of his loving us while we were still sinners

G. THE MOST CLEAR AND DRAMATIC REVEALING OF THIS TRUTH IS JESUS' CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION

1. At the moment of our greatest sin, our rejection of Jesus, the Son of God, God in the flesh, God forgave us

⁷ Wood

2. Ralph Wood points this out and goes on to show how God's acting first, breaks the human pattern of rejection that usually leads to further rejection and breakdown in relationships, both humankind's relationship with God and with each other;

The supreme example of this priority which forgiveness holds over repentance is found in Christ's own words from the cross.

He asks God to forgive those who are crucifying him, not because they have repented and begged his mercy, but because he wants to break the chain of vengeance that has entrapped them. If he curses them, by contrast, then the vicious cycle of unrepentance will remain forever closed.⁸

3. Our human tendency is to raise the stakes when someone corrects us or seeks to punish or reject us
 - a) We either turn on them with anger or turn away from them in shame or indignancy
4. God in his loving mercy seeks to find us while we are sinfully rejecting him, when we are lost and hopeless
 - a) If he waited for us to repent, to turn our lives to him first, he would be waiting a long time
 - b) So instead, as theologians like Luther and Calvin made clear, God turns the assumed order of things around, employing his paradoxical forgiveness-enabling-repentance sequence, rather than the assumed repentance-enabling-forgiveness formula

H. IT WAS AT THE CROSS THAT THE HEIGHT OF OUR SIN WAS MADE MANIFEST

1. That was the point when those who God had been dealing with most closely turned and rejected him in complete unbelief, to the point of murdering God in the flesh, their Messiah
 - a) Wood tells us how Luther saw unbelief as being at the heart of what sin is

⁸ Ralph C. Woods

Luther also insisted that sin consists not in adultery or theft or even murder, but rather in unbelief—in the refusal to entrust our lives wholly to the God who has entrusted himself to us.

Yet it is exceedingly hard, Luther added, to discover this most fundamental of all facts. We cannot learn the true meaning of sin by beholding horrible instances of evil—for example, in our own era, by looking at Auschwitz or Rwanda or Hiroshima or My Lai. These are the consequences of sin, but not sin itself.

Sin is truly discerned, said Luther, only at a single place: at Golgotha.

The humiliation and crucifixion of Jesus is the one sin that measures all other sins, the sin that reveals the full and total desperation of human existence.

Yet it is precisely the Easter event—the Father's gracious rejection of our dreadful rejection, the Son's awful assumption of the world's entire burden of sin, the Holy Spirit's infusion of forgiveness into our very lives—that provides our only hope for an utter about-face, for total transformation, for conversion and repentance.⁹

2. At the cross, God says no to our no.

a) He rejects our unbelief and turning away from him

(1) And he comes to us in Jesus, and embraces our sinful unbelief and rejection, and takes it all upon himself, forgiving us in the process, burying our sin

b) Jesus embraces us in our death, in the ultimate consequence of our rejecting him

c) And he then raises us to new life in his resurrection

3. The Easter message is that God has acted for us, and redeemed us, atoned for us, and forgiven and embraced us

a) All of this in the midst of our unbelief and rejection of him

b) This gives us the opportunity then to accept that forgiveness, which is the first step in our repentance, our turning back to God and being with him in living his life of love

⁹ Ralph C. Wood

4. This is the Good News that Jesus came not only to announce, but to bring into being

5. Wood adds;

Calvin declared, along these same lines, that we utterly misread the gospels if we misconstrue their report about how Jesus and John the Baptist called people to repentance because the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand.

The real theological order is exactly the reverse.

Because the Kingdom of God's Repentance-Enabling Forgiveness forgiveness was already at hand, said Calvin, they therefore summoned everyone to repentance. The Gospel would not be Cheering News but Ill Tidings indeed if it were anything other than God's gracious and unmerited and repentance-inducing forgiveness.

6. Wood then tells us a story, that may or may not be true, but that illustrates what we are talking about

Among all modern theologians, surely it is Karl Barth who has most clearly emphasized the radically asymmetrical relation of forgiveness and repentance.

It is reported that Barth was once asked what he would say to Hitler if he ever had the chance to meet the monstrous man who was destroying Europe and who would ruin the whole world if he were not stopped. Barth's interlocutor assumed that he would offer a scorching prophetic judgment against the miscreant's awful politics of destruction.

Barth replied, instead, that he would do nothing other than quote Romans 5:8 to Hitler: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Only such unparalleled mercy and forgiveness, such unstinted Gladness, could have prompted the Führer's genuine repentance. To accuse him, though justly, of his dreadful sins would have prompted Hitler's self-righteous defense, his angry justification of his "necessary" deeds.

Here we see the precise relation of God's anger and mercy. It is the Easter event—the Father's gracious rejection of our dreadful rejection, the Son's awful assumption of the world's entire burden of sin, the Holy Spirit's infusion of forgiveness into our lives—that provides our only hope for repentance. ¹⁰

¹⁰ Ralph C. Wood

I. **THE WHOLE POINT OF THE GOSPEL IS THAT GOD ACTS FIRST OUT OF LOVE**

1. This is who God is
2. He creates us, we didn't create ourselves
3. He initiates a relationship with us, because of who he is, not because we deserved or caused it
4. We make a fundamental mistake when we then reverse that order from then on, especially regarding forgiveness, and insist that we have to act before God can

J. **THE TRUTH OF OUR HUMAN PREDICAMENT, OUR HUMAN NATURE, IS THAT WE ARE UNABLE TO ACT UNLESS GOD ACTS FIRST**

1. We are unable to truly repent and turn our lives around unless God acts to forgive us and enable us to change through his Spirit

K. **GOD IS A GIVING AND FORGIVING GOD BY NATURE**

1. God, who is unalterable love flowing between Father, Son and Spirit, spilled out his love in the creation of all things. We were the pinnacle of that creative love.
2. But sin entered in and corrupted the creation. We turned against God and his love.
3. As Miroslav Volf writes in his book, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*,
...the inexplicable intruder, sin, came into the world, harming creation and dishonouring God. And the God who gives became the God who forgives. Or rather, in view of the fact that before creating the world God knew humans would sin, the God who gives by creating was from the start also the God who forgives.

The same love that propelled God to create by giving propelled God to mend creation by forgiving.¹¹

¹¹ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, p.141

Amazingly, God doesn't wait until we've confessed to offer and even enact forgiveness; God forgives before we confess. We know from the start that whatever it might be that we confess it will not count against us.

We are loved notwithstanding our offence. We are forgiven so we can be freed from the burden of our offence and return into the arms of the loving God.¹²

CONCLUSION:

I. AT THIS TIME OF YEAR OUR NATION TAKES TIME TO REMEMBER THOSE INVOLVED IN WARS, PAST AND PRESENT

A. WAR IS SOMETHING WE REMEMBER

1. Occasions like Anzac Day are a time for commemoration, certainly not for celebration, as there is a risk of it becoming

B. WE HOLD THESE COMMEMORATIONS

1. For those who fought for our country, especially those who gave their lives
2. We should also do it to remember how destructive and abhorrent war is
 - a) We remember hopefully so we will not repeat the mistakes of the past
3. We want to remind us of the need to break the cycle of retaliation and retribution, of vengeance and selfish ends

C. GOD REMEMBERS OUR WAR AGAINST HIM IN THE CRUCIFIXION OF THE SON OF GOD

1. But he refuses to buy into the human cycle of repeated retaliation and unforgiveness

¹² Volf, p.154.

2. God shows that his way of forgiving the undeserving and wicked before they repent is the only hope of halting the cycle of destructive behaviour and sin

D. THAT IS THE GOSPEL, THE GOOD NEWS

1. The message of Easter
2. God offers unconditional forgiveness to all, because of who he is, and his loving plan to rescue and redeem us all and give us new life in his Son through the Spirit
3. All we, and anyone has to do, is accept it
4. And then we are freed from our guilt and enabled to repent, to turn to God, to rejoice and worship and gratefully live the life of faith and love
5. Which we will see another time, includes forgiving others

E. PRAYER
