

“THE FORGIVING FATHER”

The subject under consideration today is one of the most thrilling things we could possibly discuss from the Word of God.

Micah 7:18-19 “Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? He retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy. He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.”

Why do we need to be forgiven of our sins? How are we forgiven of our sins? What does all of that mean?

Let’s begin our investigation with a question: what is your image of God? What is He like? How does He look at you and the rest of the world? Perhaps you think that God looks down at man and trembles with rage and is just waiting to unleash His unbridled wrath on every person who has ever sinned. Or maybe you think of God as the ultimate grandfather who sits benignly up in heaven doting on us and smiling at everything we do, a pushover who just can’t bring Himself to punish man for his sins. Well, both concepts are wrong. It is true that God not only has the capacity to punish sin, but He has also promised to do so. In fact, the very nature and character of God demands that He do so. God is absolutely holy and righteous, and He cannot be touched by sin. Sin is the transgression of His law, and His holiness demands justice for every act of disobedience. You know, if you don’t approach God’s Word with that foundation, you’re going to misunderstand it from cover to cover. It is not as simple as God just choosing to overlook our sin and acting as though He doesn’t see it. When God forgives, He does so on the basis that His law is satisfied by sin being punished and every single trace of it being removed from the sinner. The bottom line is that we can never enter the presence of God with our lives stained by sin. But the beauty of God’s plan is that He provided a vicarious sacrifice to take our blame and our punishment. He allowed the demand for justice to be satisfied, while allowing the sinner to go free in mercy, by providing Jesus His Son as the unblemished Lamb to be sacrificed for our sins. And when we reject that sacrifice by continuing in sin and refusing to submit to the righteousness of God in obedient faith, the only thing left for the sinner is to face the unlimited wrath of a jealous and holy God.

What I want you to see today is that God’s disposition toward man is not one of hatred or vindictiveness. His disposition toward even the vilest sinner is one of love and concern. God has revealed Himself in the person of His Son Jesus and in His blessed Word in that way. His heart aches when we sin. His wrath is kindled within Him, like a parent becomes angry with a rebellious child, but that anger is tempered by an undying love for the sinner, and a desire for that sinner to repent and be saved. So, I hope you don’t think of God as a mean and spiteful monster who sits in heaven looking down on man in contempt, anxious to squash him like a bug. God is longsuffering.

II Peter 3:9-10 “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens

shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.”

One day, He WILL judge the world and He will judge man’s outstanding transgressions, but He is longsuffering toward us and wants ALL to come to repentance. But God doesn’t forgive us in our rebellion. He demands repentance, but He is ever so anxious to forgive us. He longs for us, His prodigal sons, to come home and be reconciled to Him. No matter what you’ve done or how far into sin you have sunk, God’s arms are open and His great desire is to see you come walking down the homeward trail. The Bible teaches us, in the beautiful parable of the wayward son that when He sees you coming, He will run to meet you (**Luke 15**). He will wrap you in His arms and He will forgive you freely. The world needs to hear that message. Maybe YOU need to hear that message today. You feel guilty, unlovable, you feel like God is unapproachable. But I want you to know that there is a God in heaven who loves you more than any parent loves a child, and He wants to forgive you. He wants fellowship with you if you’ll meet Him on His terms.

Nehemiah 9:16-17 “But they and our fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their necks, and hearkened not to thy commandments, And refused to obey, neither were mindful of thy wonders that thou didst among them; but hardened their necks, and in their rebellion appointed a captain to return to their bondage: but thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not.”

Isaiah 55:6-7 “Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

The marginal reading of that last verse says that He will “multiply” to pardon. God wants to show mercy to us.

Psalms 103:8-14 “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.”

The psalmist doesn’t say that God *unconditionally and automatically* forgives our sins. But he does say that God understands our weaknesses and our fragility. He remembers that we are mortals and not divine, and that allows Him to be patient and give us every opportunity to repent of our sins and be forgiven.

I mentioned ‘the parable of the prodigal son’ in **Luke 15**. That parable could just as easily be called ‘the parable of the forgiving father’ because it is as much about the father as it is about his rebellious son. I mean, here is a young man who had done everything to hurt, disappoint and anger his father. His father loved him, yet that arrogant kid didn’t want to live by daddy’s rules. So, one day, he haughtily demanded

his portion of the father's estate and the Bible tells us that he went out and wasted every penny of it on sin and profligacy. We have reason to assume that he spent his father's hard-earned money on wine and harlots. At least, that's what his older brother assumed. However, it wasn't long until he learned what every sinner eventually learns: the good times don't last forever. The far country, with its sinful crowd, left this young man high and dry. He was hungry, destitute, dejected and unloved in that strange land that he at one time had thought was so enticing and so inviting. So with a heavy heart and a head bowed low in shame and disgrace, he warily starts down the familiar road home. I'm sure he wondered what his father would say. I'm sure he wondered if his father would ever want to see his face again and he probably recited the apology he was going to make a thousand times as he trudged along that road toward home. He finally made it back to the country that he knew so well. The familiar sights of home and his childhood were scattered along the way as he got close to the old home place. There must have been a long trail leading up to the house. I don't know, but I like to think of that home as having a stoop or a porch across the front of it, and perhaps his old father was sitting there with a sad, forlorn look, watching the roadway, just looking out over the distant horizon. I imagine he had spent time there every day since his boy had left home, just watching, hoping and praying. All of a sudden, he sees something way off in the distance. He sees a familiar form coming over the hill. His heart skips a beat and he watches it come closer, and in a moment, he knew that his prayer had been answered. It just had to be his boy.

Luke 15:20 "...But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him."

Regardless of where he'd been or what he'd done, the father smothered his humble confession in a loving embrace and he welcomed his son back home again. Do you realize that Jesus in this parable draws one of the most powerful pictures that we have of God in all of the scriptures? God is ready to forgive your sins, but you've got to make the first move toward home.

I also want you to know that God is willing to forgive EVERY sin—even the very darkest of sins. Sometimes people get to thinking that their sin is just too horrible for God to ever forgive. Sometimes we're willing to forgive someone if they haven't done something that seems too serious, but now, if it is scandalous or if we've been hurt by it or if it's just too hard for us to forgive, then that's that. It's very difficult for us to wrap our minds around the love and the capacity of forgiveness in the heart of God.

Isaiah 1:18 "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

The word "scarlet" there means '*double-dyed or twice dipped.*' It's a picture of a garment that has been dipped into the vile vat of pollution time and time again, yet God says it can be made as white as snow. Wouldn't you love for your life to be as white as the wind-driven snow in the sight of God? That's the power of God's grace!

Paul's prayer was for the Ephesians to know how much God loved them:

Ephesians 3:17-19 “...that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God.”

God’s love reaches down into the lowest gutter of sin and picks the vilest sinner up out of his condition.

One of my favorite hymns has an incredible story behind it. There was a mentally ill, deranged man locked away in an insane asylum for many years. He had a pitiful life, lonely and dejected. But perhaps he understood much more than people gave him credit for, and more than many of us understand. He died, and when a worker was cleaning out his cell, he found some words penciled on the wall near his bed:

*Could we with ink the ocean fill and were the skies of parchment made
Were every stalk on earth a quill and every man a scribe by trade
To write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry
Nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky.*

You know, the Bible tells us about some people who were rescued from the depths of depravity and it’s demonstrative of God’s love. The very people who constituted the first converts to Christianity, for example, were a bloodthirsty mob who called for the murder of God’s Son. Yet, God loved them enough to forgive them when they repented and obeyed the truth. Consider the people who made up the church at Corinth. Those weren’t your good neighbors down the street. They were moral lowlifes. Their sins were as bad as sins can get.

I Corinthians 6:9-11 “...Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.”

That’s quite a list! That’s a dark picture. Here were the lowest of the low, yet Paul said that they had been redeemed and washed in the blood of Jesus Christ. Friend, if God can forgive people like that, I assure you that you haven’t done anything that God cannot forgive YOU for, if you’ll turn loose of it and seek God’s pardon on the terms of the gospel.

But what does it mean to be forgiven? Perhaps one of the best ways to understand it is to look at what God does with our sins when He forgives them.

Acts 3:19 “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.”

That literally means that God removes the notation of the offence from His record. The fact that God KEEPS such a record should concern all of us. Did you realize that God makes a notation of every sin,

every offence that you commit? That's filed away in the infinite mind of God. He knows about it and He's writing it down and one day, if you refuse to confess it to Him and seek His forgiveness, He is going to read that list off one by one, as it were. But how wonderful to know that just as easily as God can write a sin down, He can erase it from His book and He WANTS to do that.

Hebrews 8:12 "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more."

Once He forgives our sins, He remembers them no more. He restores the offender to his former position of love and grace. Not only that, but the Bible says that God covers our sins.

Psalms 32:1 "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered."

He removes our sins from us.

Psalms 103:12 "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us."

He obliterates them from His memory forever.

Jeremiah 31:34 "...for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

He hides His face from our sins.

Psalms 51:9 "Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities."

Also, the Bible says that He does not impute sins that have already been forgiven.

Romans 4:8 "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin."

That word 'impute' is actually a mathematical or bookkeeping term. Sin incurs a debt to God. God is keeping a ledger of our debts. However, when He forgives us of our sins, He no longer has a record of it on His ledger. The Bible also assures us that when God forgives, He will never mention those sins again.

Ezekiel 18:22 "All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him: in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live."

Often, we humans fall very short of that. It's always a temptation to hold someone's past over their head. Maybe if they sin again, we go back and dredge up their deeds of the past. Not so with God. When He forgives, we are given a clean slate upon which to write.

We can also discover the meaning of forgiveness by looking at its synonyms. That is, words meaning the same thing. For example, the forgiveness of sins is also called the *remission of sins*.

Matthew 26:28 "For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

Acts 2:38 “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...”

That’s a good word, because remission means *to remit payment for*. After all, sin renders us in debt to God. In other words, when God forgives our sins, He marks the debt ‘Paid in Full.’

The Bible also calls forgiveness a *cleansing*. Why? Sin renders us unclean in the sight of God.

Psalms 19:12 “...cleanse thou me from secret faults.”

Psalms 51:7 “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”

I John 1:7 “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.”

Forgiveness is also called *justification* because sin renders us guilty.

Romans 3:24 “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:”

The Greek word for ‘justified’ means *to set right; to regard or show one as innocent or just*. You know, if the facts of the case were all that were shown and we had no advocate in Christ and no sacrifice of His blood, we would immediately be declared guilty in the courtroom of heaven and condemned. But because of the advocacy and the reconciliatory work of Jesus Christ upon the cross, the person who is washed in His blood is declared innocent of all charges, even though he did in reality commit the crime and the offence.

The word *pardon* is also used to describe forgiveness.

Psalms 25:11 “For thy name’s sake, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity; for it is great.”

That’s the case because sin automatically renders us as worthy of punishment. A criminal is irrevocably convicted in a court of law, and all that’s left for him to hope for is a pardon from the governor or the president. You see, salvation is our pardon. We didn’t deserve it, but by His grace, it is our pardon from the consequences of our crime.

Forgiveness is the same thing as *healing* because sin leaves our souls diseased to die. Forgiveness is *freedom* because sin binds us and leaves us enslaved. To be forgiven means *to be reconciled*. That’s why the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is called *an atonement*. We must be reconciled because sin leaves us estranged from God.

Isaiah 59:1-2 “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.”

You see, God’s holiness demands that He separate Himself from the sinner. It puts man at odds with God—eternal odds with God. But when Jesus died on the cross of Calvary, He, as it were, reached up

and took the pure and holy hand of God and reached down and took the wretched and defiled hand of man and clasped them together on His bloody chest and said, "It is finished." "Echei teleiosei." "Paid in full." And He repaired the broken relationship between God and all who would turn to Him in repentance and obedience.

How does God forgive us? It's only through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Zachariah 13:1 "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness."

That blessed fountain was nothing less than the blood of God's own Son.

Acts 22:16 "And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord."

Have you done that? If not, I hope you will today.