

THE WORD OF FORGIVENESS

LUKE 23:32-38

Guilt. It's interesting to observe how our culture attempts to deal with it. Some years ago, pop psychologist, Wayne Dyer authored a best-seller entitled Your Erroneous Zones. He claimed feeling guilty was a big waste of time. Guilt only keeps you upset and psychologically immobile. A doctor, Tom Harris, wrote another best-seller from years ago entitled I'm OK, You're OK. He said our parents programmed us to feel guilty and that we can get rid of guilt by being liberated from what he called "the tyranny of the parental ego". A comedian by the name of Cathy Ladman expresses a view that's becoming more and more common. She says, "All religions are the same: religion is basically guilt with different holidays." Whatever. I think guilt is more like a nearly 40-year-old Doritos bag that washed ashore in 2018 on an Outer Banks beach in North Carolina. The National Park service said it believed the bag had been floating in the ocean for nearly 40 years when it was found along with other storm debris. The bag design looked odd to those who found it until they noticed the date in the lower corner—1979! It certainly highlighted how long plastics can remain in the environment, didn't it?

The debris of guilt – like that really old Doritos bag - can float around in your soul for a very long time, too. Although we might feel that what we have done in the past is past, the debris of sin and the guilt it leaves behind in your soul can still be very much present. Can you really resolve guilt without bringing God into the discussion? No. It does no good to proclaim happily, "I'm OK and you're OK" when you know and feel you're anything but OK. The Bible is quite clear. You and I don't start out OK. Guilt is real because sin is real. But the Bible never stops with that negative spiritual diagnosis. In fact, the Bible's only purpose in pointing out the obvious – we aren't OK – is to show us how we can become OK in God's sight today and forever. God's OK is the only one that matters. His OK satisfies. His OK rips out guilt roots and all. His OK removes it forever. His OK replaces it with forgiveness and joy.

Today, I'm beginning a new message series I've entitled *Crosswords: Jesus' Statements Before He Died*. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John record seven statements by Jesus as he hung on the cross over some six hours – from the moment He was nailed to it right through to the moment He died. Today is the first Sunday in the Christian season of Lent – a period of 40 days not counting Sundays - that goes through the Saturday before Easter Sunday. The word "Lent," by the way, is based on an old English word for spring. I grew up in a Christian tradition that didn't recognize Lent. A lot of Baptist churches don't observe Lent either. But I've learned to value observing Lent in some way, shape, and form. After all the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of our faith. Each of the four Gospel writers spent far more space telling us about the last week in Jesus' earthly life than any other period of time in His life. It benefits all of us to think deeply about the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection over a longer period of time.

Why forty days? Forty days is a biblical time frame that often points to preparation. For example, Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for forty days prior to beginning His public ministry. So, rather than cramming all of our worship and reflection about what

Jesus did for us into one week – Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday – observing these forty days of Lent give us the opportunity to think more deeply, reflect more meaningfully, and appreciate more fully what Jesus accomplished at the cross and through the empty tomb. This morning I want us to reflect together on Jesus first “cross words” as He hung on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” It gets at this whole issue of sin, guilt, and God’s forgiveness. Jesus’ magnificent statement revealed God’s love and forgiveness are at the core of spiritual reality. It revealed the only real and lasting remedy for your guilt and mine. It provided the basis for the one and only spiritual “OK-ness” available to us. Here...

JESUS OFFERS AUTHENTIC FORGIVENESS.

The Bible is a book that proclaims the reality of God’s forgiveness. But forgiveness is only possible if sin is acknowledged. Now, there is such a thing as false guilt. Those are bad feelings over something that isn’t really a sin. For example, a parent’s unreasonable expectations can result in false guilt. Mom or Dad wanted you to be a doctor, or a teacher, or a professional athlete, but your life went in a different direction. People can feel bad about letting their parents down, but that’s not guilt. Some people can feel guilty about not being busy enough, but in most cases that’s false guilt, too. Sometimes Christians can feel guilt and remorse for doing stuff they’ve been taught is unbiblical. I can vividly recall, as a young kid, literally weeping with guilt and remorse for having committed the unpardonable sin of square dancing at school. I was raised in a very conservative Christian environment – while well-meaning, sincere, and wonderful in many ways – that had a knack for making up rules that had no biblical foundation whatsoever. I was a victim of false guilt when it came to square dancing. Who knows? I may even take it up in retirement! How careful we need to be not to make up rules for things the Bible never addresses! We end up making following Jesus far narrower than God ever intended.

But, careful, let’s not throw the baby out with the bath water! Guilt is true and real because sin is true and real. The ability to discern true guilt from false guilt is important because it’s God’s warning signal telling us something is wrong spiritually and needs attention. The Bible teaches you are a creation of God, but you’ve been separated from Him spiritually because of this thing called sin. Since you were made by God and for God, you can’t ever live a truly joyful life disconnected from Him. And yet sin does just that. It disconnects you from God. That’s why God takes sin very seriously. It’s what’s wrong with the universe He created to be perfect and good.

Sin is determined disobedience of His will. It’s a deliberate slap in His face. It’s a rebellious attitude within each of us that seeks to live independently from God and what pleases Him. The more we sin, the more we want to get away from God. And the inevitable consequence of our sin is that we lose fellowship with God. The relationship dwindles and disappears. We’re cut off from the very One who is the source of all life. Our lives then fill up - gradually, but inevitably – with all kinds of anxieties, fears, addictions, and frustrations that lead to despair. God created you for a life of peace and harmony with Him, but unresolved sin and guilt will make frustration the dominant reality

in your life. Because our sin is real, our guilt before a holy, righteous God is real – this same God who loves you even more than He hates your sin.

Peter Miller was a Baptist pastor during the American Revolution. He lived in Pennsylvania and one of his dearest friends was General George Washington. In the town where Miller lived there also lived a spiteful troublemaker named Michael Wittman who did all he could to oppose and humiliate Miller. One day, Wittman was arrested for treason and sentenced to death. When he heard the news, Miller set out to Philadelphia to plead for the life of his enemy. After walking seventy miles—on foot—Miller petitioned his friend, General Washington, to spare Wittman’s life. “No, Peter,” General Washington said. “I cannot grant you the life of your friend.” “My friend?” exclaimed Peter Miller. “He’s not my friend. In fact, he is the bitterest enemy I have.” “What?” said an astounded Washington. “You’ve walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in different light. I’ll grant your pardon.” And he did. That day, Peter Miller and Michael Wittman walked back home together. When they arrived home, they were no longer enemies. They were friends. Because of our sin, we became God’s enemies. The story of the cross and the empty tomb is God’s effort to make us His friends.

Why was Jesus hanging on a cross in the Bible verses we read today? Was it just some tragic accident or mistake? Was it because Jesus just didn’t play his cards right? No, the Bible makes it abundantly clear that the cross was God’s deliberate plan for dealing with real sin and real guilt. The cross was and is God’s only way of offering real forgiveness. He did this in and through a Person – Jesus of Nazareth, God become flesh. On the cross, Jesus took upon Himself your sin and my sin, your guilt and my guilt. He accepted the penalty God had determined for anyone who sins: death. He paid the debt to God that we owed. God offers us forgiveness through His Son, Jesus – an authentic, real forgiveness. Now, secondly...

JESUS OFFERS PERSONAL FORGIVENESS.

“Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” (Lk 23:34 NLT) But wasn’t Jesus just talking to the Roman soldiers who actually crucified Him? Wasn’t it addressed to the Jewish religious leaders who conspired against Him? Yes, but it’s significance and impact extends outward to every human being who’s ever lived or will live. To grasp this statement’s breadth, width, height, and depth, we need to see ourselves at the foot of the cross needing Jesus’ forgiveness every bit as much as those who actually spat in His face, drove spikes into His wrists and feet, and sneered at His suffering. We are just as guilty. My sins and your sins put Jesus on the cross. It wasn’t just the Romans or the Jews that crucified Jesus. Humanity – including you and me – nailed Him to the cross. I understand when Mel Gibson filmed the scene in his movie, “The Passion of the Christ,” where the spikes were driven into Jesus’ wrists that it was his own hands that held the spikes and the hammer. It was Gibson’s way of acknowledging he was personally responsible for Jesus’s suffering. You’re responsible. I’m responsible. Humanity, as a whole, made the cross inevitable for Jesus.

That hillside outside of Jerusalem on that day was the single most horrible scene in the world's history. But in the midst of the worst degradation and humiliation, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." Greek grammar experts tell us Jesus could have actually made that statement over and over again. In other words, He could have said "Father, forgive them" when they nailed His hands. Again, "Father, forgive them" when they hoisted Him up and dropped the cross into its hole in the ground. Yet again, "Father, forgive them" as they jeered, sneered, and scoffed at Him. What does that scene tell us about God? It tells us God's ability to forgive you and me is beyond our comprehension. It destroys the lie God is an aloof, remote, Supreme Being who know and cares little about us. It underlines the fact His forgiveness is free, but it's not cheap. After all, it required the death of Jesus. Nothing was or could have been more precious – more costly – to God than the life of His Son. Truly, it's the only forgiveness that removes our guilt. The Bible says, "He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of His Son and forgave our sins." (Eph 1:7 NLT)

You have a part in making this forgiveness personal. Jesus wasn't asking His Father to cancel our guilt without some kind of response from us. There's all the difference in the world between forgiveness offered and forgiveness received. The fact that God's forgiveness is offered today and everyday is an eternal, perpetual fact. But to receive that forgiveness – to enter into it – we must repent. And what is repentance? It's simply admitting God is right about you. You're not OK. You really are a sinner deserving of eternal Hell and damnation. You have – by both action and attitude – defied God, rejected God, and disobeyed God. We need to feel the weight of that reality in our souls. But it doesn't end there. We throw ourselves on God's mercy and grace by accepting what God has done for us on the cross as the one and only remedy. The Bible calls that faith. It's what happens when you first surrender to Jesus as your Savior and Lord. It's also what you do any and every time you commit a sin. You know your repentance is real by your willingness to re-orient your values, your attitudes, and your behavior towards what you know pleases God. When both repentance and faith happens, God forgives. He takes down every barrier and removes every obstacle to a relationship with Him. Our sin is removed, forgotten, and covered. We get released from the chains of our guilt. We even receive an authentic sense of our being OK. It's the only OK that matters. It's the OK that comes from God through Jesus.

There's a story about a young boy named Johnny who, while visiting his grandparents out in the country, was given the gift of a slingshot. He practiced using it out in the woods, but he couldn't ever hit the intended target. As he came back into the backyard, he saw his grandma's pet duck. On sheer impulse, he loaded the slingshot, took aim, and let fly. Wouldn't you know the stone hit the duck and killed it! It was an accident, but that didn't help the duck. Johnny panicked. Desperately, he hid the dead duck in the woodpile only to look up and see his sister watching. Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing. After lunch that day, Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But Sally said, "But Johnny told me he really wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn't you, Johnny?" Then she whispered to her brother, "Remember the duck!" So, Johnny did the dishes. Later, Grandma asked if the kids wanted to go fishing. Sure! Grandma

said, “I need Sally to help make supper before we go.” Sally smiled and said, “That’s all taken care of. Johnny wants to do it.” Again, she whispered, “Remember the duck!” And so Johnny helped make dinner that evening. After several days of Johnny doing both his and Sally’s chores, he couldn’t stand it any longer. He confessed to Grandma that he’d killed her duck. She gave him a hug and said, “I know, Johnny, I know. I was standing at the window and saw the whole thing. Because I love you, I forgave you. But I wondered how long you would let Sally make a slave of you.”

What’s the point? Have you allowed guilt to make a slave of you? Does something constantly whisper to your soul, “Remember the ...”? God’s forgiveness is out there just waiting for you to enter into it. God’s forgiveness is authentic and personal, but you must receive it. That happens when you repent and put your faith in who Jesus is and what He did for you for the first time or for the 1,000th time. That moves us toward a third wonderful fact about His forgiveness.

JESUS OFFERS CONTINUAL FORGIVENESS.

“Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” (Lk 23:34 NLT) Did you notice Jesus’ statement is actually a prayer? Prayer was central to Jesus’ everyday life. In every circumstance of His life – and even as He faced death itself – Jesus prayed. That – in and of itself – is a challenge to you and me. Do we pray in every circumstance of our lives? But there’s a deeper significance to prayer here than the mere fact Jesus prayed at this most difficult moment in His life. What did He pray about or for? He’s praying for you and for me. The simple fact is that Jesus was interceding on our behalf. No, that doesn’t mean Jesus had to convince God to forgive you of your sins as if the Father was reluctant to do so. But it does mean that we have an Advocate in Heaven continually representing us before a loving Father. It underlines the fact that Jesus – in one sense – continually points to the wounds in His hands and feet as reason enough to forgive every sin and remove any guilt as you confess your sins. Jesus’ wounds remind the entire universe that your debt was paid in full and you bear the guilt of your sins no longer.

Like the old hymn say, “My sins – O the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin – not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more: Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul! It is well, it is well with my soul.” What does God’s Word say? “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 Jo 1:9 NLT) There it is: the promise of continual forgiveness as we continually confess. This is God’s promise that our guilt is continually removed because forgiveness is continually applied to our lives.

That’s what Jesus did on the cross. This was ultimate intercession on your behalf and mine. And He still intercedes on our behalf today. The Bible puts it this way, “Therefore he is able, once and forever, to save those who come to God through him. He lives forever to intercede with God on their behalf... Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God’s right hand, pleading for us.” (Heb 7:25; Rom 8:34 NLT)

What a great comfort! Right now at this very moment, Jesus is interceding, pleading, and advocating for you. Both His desire and His ability to forgive you is as strong and deep today as it was back then on the day He literally hung on the cross. No sin you have committed or will commit can tongue tie the Lord Jesus Christ! Are you a follower of Jesus today? You may have grieved the Holy Spirit deeply through some sin you've committed, but right now Jesus is pleading your case. You might feel as barren and spiritually unfruitful as some old diseased apple tree. You may deserve to be cut down and cast aside. But if you confess your sin, you can be sure God will forgive you. He will separate you from the guilt of your sin as far as the east is from the west. You're not a follower of Jesus today? You've been resisting and rejecting God's love for a long time. If you feel that strong inner tug of God's Spirit in your heart today, it means Jesus has not given up on you. He is at this very moment pleading for you before His Father's throne. No one earns God's forgiveness. No one deserves His love. But it's being offered to you at this very moment. Don't turn away from it! Jesus offers you forgiveness: authentic, personal, and continual forgiveness. He alone can make you spiritually OK today and forever. His is the only OK that matters.

An Anglican archbishop tells the story of another archbishop who heard confessions of sin from three hardened teenagers from his church. All three boys were trying to make a big joke out of it. They met with this archbishop and confessed to a long list of ridiculous and terrible sins that they hadn't committed. It was all a joke. The archbishop, seeing through their bad practical joke, played along with the first two who ran out of the church laughing. But then he listened carefully to the third prankster. Before he got away, he told the young man, "Okay, you've confessed these sins. Now I want you to do something to show your repentance. I want you to walk up to the far end of the church and I want you to look at the picture of Jesus hanging on the cross, and I want you to look at His face and say, 'You did all that for me and I don't care that much.' And I want you to do that three times." And so this young man went up to the front, looked at the picture of Jesus and said, "You did all that for me and I don't care that much." And then he said it again, but then he couldn't say it the third time because he broke down in tears. And the archbishop telling the story said, "The reason I know that story is that I was that young man."

There is something about the cross. There's something about Jesus dying there for us that leaps over all the discussions of how we explain it this way or that way. It reaches out and grasps us. And when we get grasped by it, somehow we have a sense that what is grasping us is the love of God. "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." Jesus offers us authentic forgiveness, personal forgiveness, and continual forgiveness.