

I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins

SCOTT HOEZEE

In Buechner's novel, *The Final Beast*, a pastor counsels with a woman who is heartbroken over having had an extramarital affair. Later, another person asks the pastor if he had told this woman God had forgiven her. No, the pastor said, but I told her I forgave her; and that prompts the other person to say: But, she doesn't know God forgives her. That is the only power you have, Pastor, to tell her that. What on earth do you think you were ordained for? What indeed; the forgiveness of sins; it is such an important truth, it gets its own line in the Apostles' Creed. Today on *Groundwork*, we will ponder our confession: I believe in the forgiveness of sins. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now the eleventh program in our overall series of 12 programs on the whole Apostles' Creed; and it is actually the third program in the third section...the Holy Spirit section of the Apostles' Creed; and we have been noting, Dave, that in this third section, after we confess our belief in the Holy Spirit, that we are looking at things that count as the work of the Holy Spirit; and just to refresh our memories, here is how it goes in the Creed: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting, amen. Today we are just on that line, the forgiveness of sins.

DAVE BAST

Right; and so, in the last program, we looked at the work of the Holy Spirit in gathering the Church; the Lord Jesus does it through his Spirit and with his Word. So really, it is the Word of God—the Gospel—the scriptures under the power of the Spirit that brings people to faith in Christ and become part of the Church; and that is also the communion of the saints, this wonderful community of fellowship with God in Christ, and with one another. So, now we have come to this next wonderful truth about forgiveness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The forgiveness of sins is sort of, Dave, what gets us into that community...what gets us into that holy catholic church, what gets us into that communion—that fellowship of the saints. It is God's forgiveness of us; and the phrase, Dave, is only four words long in English, but boy, it packs a wallop, because what we have in the forgiveness of sins is really the core of the Gospel...the core of what makes the Good News good news.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and it is one of the most wonderful truths about God that we could ever imagine...that God is a God of forgiveness...God is a God of grace and mercy. You know, it makes me think of the little story in the Gospel, Scott, where Jesus is confronted with a man who is paralyzed, and he says to him...the guy who was let down through the roof...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And he says to him: Your sins are forgiven; and the bystanders look at that and say: What is he saying? Only God can forgive sins. Bingo! That is exactly right; that is the point. So, God is the one who can and does forgive.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The bystanders are also a bit gobsmacked by that, because it is like: Lord, he came to get his legs fixed; but Jesus said: First things first—the forgiveness of sins, then I will fix your legs...

DAVE BAST

Yes, as if the more important thing is that, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and you know, Dave, we know that Jesus, in the New Testament, talked about forgiveness and so forth, but it is not just a New Testament thing. All through Israel, and the history of God's people in the Old Testament, God's penchant, we could say...God's eagerness to extend love and grace is his number one trait; and it gets celebrated in places like Psalm 103.

DAVE BAST

Yes; these are familiar words, I hope. I hope this psalm is dear to you, but it begins: Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. ²Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits...(and then it begins to enumerate them, beginning with): ³Who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit...

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁸The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. ⁹He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever. ¹⁰He does not treat us as our sins deserve... ¹²As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

That is God's reputation; he is a forgiver; and that was true in Israel. I think we have noted before, Dave, one of the oldest heresies in the Church...it was taught by a man named Marcien, who said: Boy, you know, the God of the Old Testament is just angry and vindictive. It must be a different God than the one that Jesus calls Father in the New Testament. Well, not true. God is a forgiver from Genesis to Revelation—first to last.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we mentioned Psalm 103...I also think of Psalm 131*, a brief psalm that has the question: Psalm 130:3 If you, Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? ⁴But there is forgiveness with you, that you may be feared.

I love that line: But there is forgiveness with God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Because, you know, there is not forgiveness with a lot of people. There is no forgiveness, really, on Twitter, or at least very little; but God is different. God is willing and ready and compassionate to forgive our sins, and he doesn't, you know, necessarily keep a record of them...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

You know, jot everything down.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God's *chesed* in Hebrew...that is the number one word for which, in the psalms in particular, God is praised. *Chesed* is that untranslatable word. It means loving-kindness. It is really the Old Testament equivalent of grace. It is by grace you have been saved. It is by grace that God forgives your sins; and in fact, Dave, in a kind of humorous, upside-down way, God's reputation for being a forgiver was something you even saw in the character of Jonah, right? So, we remember the story, many of us. Jonah was called by God to go preach repentance to the Ninevites, and Jonah runs away. He goes to Tarshish; he says: I am not going to do it; and early in the book, we are not sure why. Was he afraid they were going to attack him? Was he afraid he was going to fail? No. It turns out that Jonah's big fear was that he would *succeed*, and that they would repent; and then he says...when God does forgive them near the end of the book...and God does...he forgives them; and Jonah is ticked about it and he prays to God about it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and this is from Jonah 4; this little masterpiece, just four chapters long, that tells the story of Jonah, but the climax comes in the last chapter, where we are supposed to look at Jonah and say: How ridiculous can you get? Because ²Jonah prays to the Lord: Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? This is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Jonah there is quoting the heart of the Old Testament confession of praise to God. He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, in the old version; or abounding in love in that *chesed* that you were talking about; and Jonah uses it as a criticism...I knew it! This is the problem with you, God! I knew if I preached to those Ninevites you were going to go soft on them, and I want them...I want them wiped out!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; Jonah quotes beautiful words with a sneer, but the point is, that is how well known God's reputation for forgiveness was; and unfortunately for Jonah...and the lesson of the book of Jonah, for course, is that this is such a great gift, you cannot just keep it at home...you cannot hoard it just for Israel. You should want it to come to more people. Actually, when we close this program today, we are going to talk a little bit more about that...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, the point being, even Jonah knew that God...it is not that God is a softy, right? I mean, God's wrath on sin is real, and we will think about that in the next segment, too, but he is quick to forgive; and in this case, when it came to the Ninevites, it made Jonah angry; but, that was God's reputation. He likes to forgive...he's desperate to forgive. Yes, he will judge sin if we refuse his forgiveness, but if we want it, he is so happy to give it to us.

DAVE BAST

Right; but forgiveness is not the same thing as pardon. God will never just excuse sin. He will never just say: Oh, it doesn't matter. Don't worry about it. Forget about it; like we sometimes do with little things. Sin is such a serious problem that for God to forgive it is going to take some pretty serious action on his part, and we will look at that next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and in this program, the second to the last program, Dave, in our series on the Apostles' Creed, we are thinking about the forgiveness

of sins; and you just said, Dave, forgiveness is not pardon, right? Sometimes we can excuse things: You step on my foot on the bus by mistake, I don't have to forgive you. I can just sort of let it go. It is like: Ah, no big deal. It is not that sin isn't a big deal; in fact, it is a problem all through the Bible, because, Dave, even the best people in the Bible...and we can make a list...the best of the best, the most righteous, the people God tapped for special tasks...even they were perpetually in need of forgiveness.

DAVE BAST

Well, that is the story of the Old Testament...well, New Testament as well. I mean, you think of Abraham, the father of the faithful, he is called, and yet, the first time he is tested, when he goes into another country, he is afraid, and so he lies about Sarah being his wife; and of course, David, the prime example...the man after God's own heart, it says, and he has this terrible sin, where he not only commits adultery, but he murders in a very cowardly way his lover's husband; and on and on it goes. Peter denies Christ. We all stumble and fall. So, the need for forgiveness is repeated and regular in all of our lives, including the great saints.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so the question becomes as you read the Bible: What could possibly snap this history-long pattern—this history-long cycle of even the best of people forgiving? Apparently, it is going to, you know, take something pretty big to get this whole rotten mess of humanity out of this sinful condition; and of course, it did take something big. It took the incarnation of the Son of God becoming flesh—becoming a real person—and it took his murder...it took his execution; and Paul writes about that in many places, but 2 Corinthians 5 is a classic.

DAVE BAST

Yes; here is a good passage that kind of gets at the heart of this, where Paul writes: ¹⁸All of this is from God (this wonderful Good News of the Gospel)...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰We are, therefore, Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
Just a profound passage.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; Jesus paid it all. Jesus created kind of an entire ocean worth of water of forgiveness, and it is baptismal water. It will never run dry, and when we are baptized...when we get doused by that sea of forgiveness that Jesus' supreme sacrifice made possible, we are forgiven; or as Paul famously put it in Romans 8: There is, therefore, now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ²because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death
Again, Dave, this isn't God's excusing of sin or winking at it, or just sort of saying: Meh, no big deal. No, this is taking sin extremely seriously, and that is what forgiveness involves; and we will think about that a little bit in a minute, in terms of even our own lives.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, Neal Plantinga says: What is forgiveness? And here is Neal Plantinga's very brief definition of forgiveness: Forgiveness is letting go of an anger you have a right to feel. In other words, something truly bad was done here. Well, that is God writ large. God had a right to be angry about sin and evil. It marred his good creation...his good plan. He was right to be angry, and it took a lot for him to be able to drop it.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; you know, Paul says...it is so profound, that passage that we read from 2 Corinthians 5...because Paul begins by saying: God reconciled the world to himself. Normally we think, well, I have to be reconciled to God, in the sense of something has to happen in me that makes me turn to God or want God, or I have to repent or something; but what Paul says is, no, first something had to happen in God...namely, dealing with that righteous anger...that wrath; and he did that by making Christ to be sin for us so that our sin becomes his, his righteousness becomes ours. It is a profound mystery, really, how that all works, and we don't fully understand it, but we know that however it was, it was Christ's death on the cross that made it possible for God to forgive us, and to do so righteously and justly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And indeed, that is what let God let his justifiable, righteous anger go. He let it go. One of the key Greek words, Dave, in the New Testament for forgiveness is the same word that means to release, to just let something go, to let something drop; and not only did God do that for all of our sins, but also now because we are kind of between the times yet, right? We have been redeemed, baptized, but we are not fully made new yet. We still mess up, and we are covered on that, too.

So, here is the Apostle John in his first letter:

^{2:1}My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin; but, if anybody does sin, (and John wrote this because we all do) but, if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ²He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world.

DAVE BAST

Yes; wonderful as well. I quoted earlier in the program from Psalm 131*: There is forgiveness with you, (the psalmist says to God) that you may be feared; which is an interesting thing to add. We might say, why didn't he say that you may be thanked or praised or loved, which is all true; but I think it is because we never take forgiveness lightly...we never take it for granted...when we do go on sinning...John says: I don't want you to sin, that is why I am writing this; but if you do, just be sure that we still have this advocate...we still have this Lord on our side...this Savior who died for us; and our sins can be forgiven. So, yes; we kind of walk, as you said, Scott, a middle way. Not wanting to sin, but when we do, knowing that God will forgive.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, that is because...and I like John's line there. It is not just our sins, but the sins of the whole world; and of course, there is a debate in theology...Universalism versus Particularism...is everybody going to be saved? One thing all Christians agree on, though, is that there is enough *power* in Jesus to save all people; and if, in the end, those who are Universalists who say hell will be empty, everybody will be saved; Jesus won't have to do anything extra to make that happen. It is already there. If it doesn't happen for everybody, well, that is a whole area we cannot go into now; but there is enough there...and so, when, on a rolling basis, even in our lives as Christians, when we find ourselves needing to be forgiven again...sometimes by a spouse, but always by God...every sin is ultimately a sin against God...we are covered, right? We are standing in grace.

DAVE BAST

I think of a wonderful line one of my seminary professors suggested long ago, that Christ's death is *sufficient* for the sins of the whole world; it is *efficient* for the sins of those who belong to him...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, that is just a wonderful thing to remember. Yes, we need to come to Christ and be in Christ and trust in Christ, but his death is of such wonderful efficacy that it could cover everything.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But obviously a gift this big has some implications for all of us who receive it, and before we close out this program, we will ponder what *our* receiving of the forgiveness of sins implies for how we behave every day. Stay tuned.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we are concluding now this program, Dave, on the forgiveness of sins, which is a powerful little part of the Apostles' Creed, in the Holy Spirit section of the Creed. Our sins have been forgiven once and for all by grace alone, but if we have received this enormous gift, surely it implies a few things for how we are supposed to live from here on out.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; you know, I was just thinking...you just reminded me of a story I heard Rich Mouw tell. He said when he is backed into a corner theologically, he often quotes a hymn; and he was once asked: What is the distinctive thing about evangelical Christianity—evangelical faith? He said: My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought; my sin, not in part but in whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more; even so, it is well with my soul.

So, one great implication is we don't have to bear any guilt or any sense of sin anymore, because Christ has covered it all—he has borne it away.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the implication of *that*—if we feel joy about that—and we do, right? O the bliss of this thought...that hymn Rich Mouw quoted that you just mentioned, Dave...well then, we should go and do likewise. We are called to be forgivers, too. God has a reputation for forgiving...we said that even in the Old Testament God was...his number one characteristic was...well, he is a forgiving God. People are supposed to look at us and say: Those are forgiving people, and that is the kicker line from the Lord's Prayer: Forgive us *our* sins *as* we forgive those who sin against us. That packs a punch, because it is sort of saying: If you don't forgive other people, you just show you don't get it—what it means that God forgave you, because if you get it, you are going to want to spread that joy to others and let their sins drop.

DAVE BAST

Jesus repeats this in a longer way in Matthew Chapter 18, in a conversation that he had with Peter; because Peter came up to him once and said to him: ^{21b}“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Note how Peter is thinking: Wow, that is a lot, you know; seven is a perfect number...

²²Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times but seventy-seven times...(actually, some manuscripts read: seventy times seven times, which would be 490)

I think the point that Jesus is making is, don't keep count. You just keep on forgiving, because that is how God treats us. We have just been talking about that. We continue to sin, he continues to forgive...and then Jesus added a little parable.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, the unmerciful servant, a well-known story, I think. There was a man who owed the king, let's say, five billion dollars. No way could he ever pay it back. The king forgives him: Eh, I am tearing it up. And oh, the man is happy; and he goes out and he sees a guy who owes him five bucks for lunch last week...the guy doesn't have the five bucks, so he throws him in prison. The king hears about that, releases the five-dollar debtor and throws *this* guy in prison because he showed he didn't get it: I [the king] forgave you five billion bucks and you couldn't let five bucks go?! You didn't get it. And then, the parable ends with this rather chilling line: ³⁵"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from the heart." So, those of us who have been forgiven are called to be forgivers; and unlike Jonah, whom we looked at earlier, who loved it when he was forgiven as an Israelite, but he didn't want to see the Babylonians or the Ninevites or the Egyptians forgiven. That cannot be true of us. We want to forgive as we have been forgiven, because that is the family style of God.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God has a reputation to be a forgiver, we should be of the same reputation in our lives.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and you know, that parable really invites us to stop and reflect on our own experience. People can do pretty horrible things, and this is not to make light of the harm that people do to each other. You may have had some experience where somebody deeply hurt you, something horrible, but compared to what God has forgiven us, that is relatively much less; and so, we need to have this sense of proportion...this sense of perspective...that God has done so much for us; he has been so gracious to us; we need to try to be a little bit gracious toward each other as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and the other implication that we want to look at before we close in a moment, Dave, is not only do we forgive others, but we call others to come to God's repentance; and that began on the Day of Pentecost, as soon as the Spirit was poured out: Repent and be baptized, Peter preached; every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. That is there for you. It comes up elsewhere in the book of Acts as well. Here is a line from Acts 10. The apostles are saying:

⁴²He (Jesus) commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him, that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

That is the heart of our Gospel proclamation; this is our witness.

DAVE BAST

Right; we offer freely the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name. So, that preacher that you mentioned in the very top of the program, Scott...he should have pronounced God's forgiveness, not just his own, to those who do repent, who turn from their sin and embrace Christ by faith; that is really the Good News...that is the essence...the heart of the Gospel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and even when we call people to repent, we do so with hopefulness. This is what makes our Gospel witness winsome...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is what makes it attractive.

DAVE BAST

It is like Jesus' invitation: Come to me. If you are weighed down by a sense of sin, if you are weighed down by guilt, then come to him and learn from him. His yoke is easy and his burden is light. That is the Good News of forgiveness in Jesus' name.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. Join us again next time as we conclude our study of the Apostles' Creed by studying the scriptures that inform our beliefs about the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Meanwhile, connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com. Tell us what *Groundwork* means to you. Make suggestions for future *Groundwork* programs.

*Correction: The audio of this program misstates the reference for this passage as Psalm 131. The correct reference is Psalm 130:3-4.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/i-believe-in-the-forgiveness-of-sins>

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