

The Forgiveness of Sins

SCOTT HOEZEE

In early 2014, a disaster happened off the coast of South Korea when a ferry tipped over, drowning most of the school-aged children aboard. After it became clear that the captain of that ship had neglected his duties and then made sure to save his own life by being the first to flee, the South Korean president called his actions unforgivable. Unforgivable. That word sends chills up and down our spines, doesn't it? Can there be anything worse than the prospect of never being able to start over? Of forever being marked by something bad we did? Then again, is there anything more life-giving, more joyous than hearing that we can have a fresh start; that our sins will not define us forever? Well, just a couple of lines before it comes to an end, the Apostles' Creed reminds us that we believe in the forgiveness of sins. Today on Groundwork, let's think about why that little line contains so much joy and hope. 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

I am Scott Hoezee.

SUE ROZEBOOM

And I am Sue Rozeboom.

DAVE BAST

And Sue, welcome once again. Dr. Sue Rozeboom, a professor of Liturgical Theology at Western Seminary in Holland, Michigan. It is so great to have you with us on this very theological series we are doing on the Apostles' Creed. We are just doing the last section of the Creed that deals with the Holy Spirit and the various ministries and works that He does. So we have already looked at the Holy Spirit Himself and what that means, and the Church, the communion of saints, and now Scott and Sue, today we come to the fact that we believe in the forgiveness of sins.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Mostly what we are going to talk about in this program is God's forgiveness of us, which is the main thing that actually we are thinking about in that line from near the end of the Apostles' Creed; and in order to access this topic, I think we need to begin with a couple of acknowledgements; we need to lay the background here. What do you have to believe to want to have forgiveness of sins, and I think one of the things that we say we have to believe is that we need it in the first place, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. There are actually a couple of things that lie behind the fact of forgiveness, and as you say, the first of those is just the acknowledgement that we have sin in our lives that needs to be forgiven, that we are sinners, not always the most popular of Christian doctrines.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, it has not been popular lately, but it has probably never been terribly popular. If somebody forgives you and you accept their forgiveness, you are at the same moment saying, “Yep, and I am guilty, too.” If you think you are not guilty and somebody says, “I forgive you.” Your first instinct is, “Why? Don’t say that to me. I didn’t do anything wrong.” So, to welcome forgiveness means I am acknowledging sin at the same time.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Right, and within us we know that we do carry around a lot of junk, but it is God’s gift of grace to us that God knows us better than we even know ourselves. And God comes to us and says, “I know you better than you know yourself. Unload that burden.” Isn’t this what happens in worship, in that moment when we are invited to confess sin and this is itself a gift of God’s grace. “I know you better than you know yourself. Unload the burdens that you bear. Unload the junk that you carry. Pass it off to Me. You are already forgiven in Christ. Unload that, and then hear again the promise that was first proclaimed to you and sealed to you in baptism. That you are indeed forgiven in Christ.”

DAVE BAST

But, let’s be perfectly frank here about the general reluctance to do that very thing. I think back, was it the Watergate hearings that popularized the phrase, “Mistakes were made.” The euphemisms that we use so often to skirt the need to say that word, *sin*. Or to acknowledge that we are sinners, sinful by nature, which is part of our baptismal liturgy. We with our children are sinful by nature. And then we get a bad rap for that because a lot of people out there say, “See, you’re so negative. You’re always putting people down. You’re heaping guilt upon them.” Part of our sin, I think, is our reluctance to acknowledge it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Another thing the Watergate hearings popularized, Dave, and I remember this from when I was a kid watching them, was the line, “I have no recollection of that, Senator.” But that, Sue, is where what you said comes in. We do not have to remember all of our sins. God knows them and God knows we need this forgiveness very, very badly because our relationship with God has been fractured. And I think another thing to say, is that sin is serious enough that God cannot just wave it away. God cannot just say, “Oh, no biggie...”

DAVE BAST

That is the second thing that you need for forgiveness to work into the equation; first the acknowledgement of sinfulness, and second, the need for justice and for God to do justice and to be seen to be doing justice. I think about Paul’s classic formulation in Romans where he says that He may be just and the One who justifies the person who believes in Christ. So God has to somehow not do this in a way that pooh-poohs sin or blows it away or says it is nothing. The wonderful Roman Catholic writer, Richard John Neuhaus, who died a few years ago, says of the atonement that God cannot simply say sins do not count without saying to us, “You do not count.”

SUE ROZEBOOM

And isn’t that the profound thing, then, about Jesus’ baptism? That Jesus would offer himself for this cleansing, thereby identifying with us in our sin. We have mentioned Neal Plantinga before and I remember him preaching a sermon on Jesus’ baptism, and the title of it was: The Perfect Penitent.

DAVE BAST

Yes, because John the Baptist, when Jesus came and said, “Here, I want to be baptized, too.” John says, “What are You doing here? You ought to be baptizing me. I don’t have any right to....” No, Jesus said, “Just do it. Just do it so that everything can be fulfilled.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, Jesus had to come, He had to become human, He had to identify with us, and He had to die because sin should not be. It is like adultery living at the middle of a marriage. In a marriage where people have made vows, adultery wrecks the relationship, and it wrecks it so profoundly that nobody can just say, “Uh, no biggie. Let’s just go on and pretend...” No, no. Something has to be done if that relationship is going to have a future, because it is so ruinous what happened.

Well, God’s solution of what had to be done to forgive us and restore us was Jesus, and in a moment, we are going to see that in action from that same Jesus in a story from Luke 5; so stay tuned.

BREAK:

SUE ROZEBOOM

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation of our lives. I am Sue Rozeboom.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SUE ROZEBOOM

We were saying that God’s solution to the big problem is Jesus, and Jesus shows us this Himself with respect to His baptism in saying, “I need to receive this baptism.” He identifies with us in our sin in order that He might be, so to speak, the solution for sin. And of course, that baptism points forward to the baptism that He will endure on the cross.

DAVE BAST

Exactly, which is how He describes it in Luke’s gospel, “I have a baptism to undergo that I have to go through.”

SUE ROZEBOOM

And this is a baptism that we share by virtue of our baptism. We are identified with Christ in our baptism.

DAVE BAST

In His death and resurrection, right. So, we could, at this point, do the whole rest of the program on the atonement and that great biblical doctrine and great Reformation doctrine that Jesus had to die. It is not just some kind of illustration. It is not just simply identifying, but the justice of God somehow, in some unfathomable way, required that a price be paid and He paid it Himself in the Person of Jesus. That is often criticized today, but that is a given, and that is what lies behind the scripture that we want to look at now, that shows Jesus just sort of blithely giving forgiveness to people, and what lies behind that is that He knows the whole plan and His part in it, and He is going to pay the price.

So we come to Luke’s version of a story that you have probably heard before of a healing miracle of Jesus. Luke 5:17ff:

¹⁷One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from all over. The power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick, ¹⁸And some were carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. ¹⁹When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. ²⁰When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

These friends went through a lot of trouble to get this man... They dig a hole through the roof and they lower him down. That is a lot of work, they were probably sweating, and it was perfectly obvious to everybody

there why they put this man in front of Jesus. His legs do not work; he cannot walk and they want him to be healed. And so, he is plunked right down in front of Jesus; everybody knows what the problem is; Jesus takes one look and says, “All right, you’re forgiven.” And I have always imagined people going, “Huh? Jesus, he did not come here for forgiveness; fix the legs,” but Jesus starts with forgiveness. What does that tell us about how Jesus was thinking at all times?

DAVE BAST

Well, not only did he start with it, he scandalized the people who were looking on, right?

SUE ROZEBOOM

Right. Who has the authority to forgive sins but God? Who does this guy think He is? Well, He is, indeed, God. This is precisely what He came to do, was to come to forgive in God’s Name; and therefore, grant to us communion with God again because of the redeeming work that Christ is accomplishing. In some sense you might say that forgiveness is the main event. It is overcoming the wrong that was done that brought about not only the sin in our hearts, but quite frankly, evil in the world.

DAVE BAST

The way the story goes on, it is masterfully told in all the versions, but Jesus kind of hears this rumbling, this grumbling, this complaining; He somehow he perceives what his critics are thinking, and so He puts a question to the crowd, to the audience, ^{22b}“Which is harder; to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or ‘get up and walk’?” And that is a very subtle question, isn’t it?

SUE ROZEBOOM

It is.

DAVE BAST

Because it also invites us to ask, which one is more important? Which need is deeper? Jesus’ implication is, well, it is much harder to forgive, and that is much the deeper need, ²⁴“but just so that you can see,” as He puts it, “that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins”

SUE ROZEBOOM

This goes back, even, to this notion that we were talking about earlier about how God knows us better than we know ourselves. So we might perceive our primary need being thus, and yet, God knows...

DAVE BAST

Let me walk; I need to walk...

SUE ROZEBOOM

I need to walk.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You think it is your legs, I know it’s your heart, not your physical heart, either. It is your soul. And so, for Jesus to send this man away walking but unforgiven would not do him any good in the long run; not in eternity. So, Jesus starts with what is foremost in His mind, which is His mission to forgive peoples’ sins; as Sue said, to bring us back into community with God, to restore the shalom that was fractured when we sinned. This is so on Jesus’ mind that even though, yes, everybody knows why this man has been lowered through a hole in the roof, but Jesus starts with the main need, and then when He does heal the man’s legs, and He does, the man does walk home; but to Jesus, it is to say, “See, the thing I said about forgiveness is true, too. I will do the lesser thing to prove the greater thing.” But here is the thing, just to go back to something Sue was saying a minute ago, too, and that is in the text: You had better be God to do that; because otherwise you do not have any business forgiving... So, Dave, if you hurt Sue’s feelings, Sue needs to forgive you. So what sense would it make for me, Scott, to come up to Dave and say, “I forgive what you

did to Sue?” Sue is going to tell me to butt out because it has nothing to do with me. You are going to think it is odd that I would forgive you for what you did to Sue. Well, I cannot do that, but every sin is a sin, finally, against God, in the long run, so only God can go around giving blanket forgiveness. So, the Pharisees are right when they say, “He is blaspheming,” because if Jesus is not God, then He is blaspheming, because He is doing something only God should do. But of course, our faith tells us, He was perfectly right to do that because He is, indeed, the Son of God.

DAVE BAST

Just a phrase you used, Scott, a moment ago, “Every sin is ultimately against God,” and that is a deeply biblical insight, too, that God has the authority, He is the only one with the ability, but ultimately, He is the injured party; and you think of a famous penitential psalm, Psalm 51:

⁴Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight. This is traditionally David, who killed a guy and committed adultery with his wife; and he says, “Against You, You only...” because at its deepest level, it is God who is the injured party.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think we may have used this analogy on Groundwork before, but it bears repeating, that I have often thought that Jesus, as the Holy Son of God on this earth, no one perceived the sins around Him on a more regular basis more than Jesus did; and I have used the musical analogy, right? If you only know as much about music as I do, I can go to a symphony concert and I am not going to hear too many of the mistakes the musicians made, but if I am the conductor of the orchestra, I am going to hear way more mistakes, and if I am the composer of the piece, I will hear every mistake the orchestra made. Well, Jesus is the composer of creation, so He heard every dropped note. He was keenly aware that our need for forgiveness is indeed, as Sue said, the main event. That is what has to happen.

SUE ROZEBOOM

We are talking about this article of the Creed: I believe in the Holy Spirit; and going back to Psalm 51, it is so striking that even there the Spirit appears in such a profound fashion. So David says, ⁴“Against You, You only, have I sinned,” but then recognizes that this brokenness of communion with God is what is tantamount; so, he prays:

¹⁰“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹Do not cast me from Your presence. Do not cast me from Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit from me. ¹²Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and grant me a willing Spirit to sustain me.”

DAVE BAST

What does this mean for us? Let’s try to bring it down to a practical, daily life level, as we think about that in just a moment.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast and Sue Rozeboom, and you are listening to Groundwork. Just before the break, Sue, you were reading from Psalm 51, David’s great psalm of confession, and in addition to asking to be forgiven, David says: ¹⁰“Create in me a clean heart and renew a new Spirit within me,” which indicates that when we are forgiven, we are also supposed to be changed. It is not just like we get a clean slate, but now we are changed, and I think what we want to think about, Sue and Dave, in this last segment is, what does that imply for us in our lives? What does it mean to be forgiven? One of the things we are going to talk about it means is that we are forgiving people over against others who hurt us in this life.

DAVE BAST

As we think about the dynamics of forgiveness, how does this actually happen? How does it work? How do we experience it? It comes as an announcement of good news. It comes as an article of faith, right? It is part of our Creed. We believe it; but it is interesting to notice how often in the scriptures we see this being offered even before people maybe know they need it or ask for it or desire it. It is not like God is standing around up

there with His arms folded, saying: You better come and say you're sorry first, and maybe I will forgive you, but I will check out your behavior for a while before I actually do that. It is just like the paralyzed guy. The first thing Jesus says to him is, "You are forgiven."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; Jesus just lavishes it on people again, and again, and again. Which again, that is the main event. It is what He came to do.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Right. God receives us as we are, but then does not leave us as we are. By the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, God loves us into the likeness of Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We talked about repenting, saying you are sorry. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who died under the Nazis, he once wrote: In one sense, repentance prepares us to receive God's grace; but in another, more profound sense, we discover through our repentance that God's grace has already found us. So, we get caught up in grace, and even that is what might lead us to say, "I'm sorry" in the first place.

DAVE BAST

It is not a straightforward transaction. I do not want to get complaints and people writing in and emailing and criticizing me for this, but the hymn – we used to sing it in our church as a kid – it is a revival hymn, *Just As I Am*, and there is a stanza in that hymn that goes: Just as I am Thou wilt receive; wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve; because Thy promise I believe.

And that is not exactly right. It is not because we believe that God cleanses and pardons and welcomes us. I am not saying we do not need to repent and we do not need to receive it and we do not need to accept it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, even our repentance is a response...

DAVE BAST

Even that is a response... yes.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

to Jesus' prior action.

DAVE BAST

Grace is first. Grace is prior, and we open ourselves to it, and that, too, is a gift, is a work of the Spirit.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Exactly right. Faith is a gift and it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is not something that we can strive to attain. Belief is not something we can strive to attain. It is a gift to us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I liked what you said, Sue, earlier, too. You said that we are forgiven into, and by forgiveness the image of Christ is renewed in us, which means we are to be Christ to others; which is why there is that little word, it is only two letters in the Greek, and it is only two letters in the English, in the Lord's Prayer: Forgive us our sins *as* we forgive those who have sinned against us.

Somebody once noted that that little particle, *as*, is one of the most daunting words in the whole Bible because it reminds us there is a connection between what Jesus did for us and what we are now to do for others.

SUE ROZEBOOM

There is another occasion in the Gospels where that word, *as*, is used in a very profound way. John 20, again, where Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, ^{21b}“As the Father has sent Me, so I send you.”

DAVE BAST

John’s great commission.

SUE ROZEBOOM

If the main event is forgiveness, then just as Jesus has been sent to forgive, then so also we are sent to forgive.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is a little passage in Matthew 18, and we do not have time to read the whole parable, but let me just read a couple of verses here. Matthew 18:21:

Peter comes to Jesus and says, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?” And Jesus answered, ²²“I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Or in some translations, “Seventy times seventy times.” In other words, it is Jesus’ way of saying there is no limit to it. And of course, the parable that follows is, the man who is forgiven a million-gazillion-dollar debt by a king, who then turns around and sends to prison a guy who owes him \$1.50. The idea being, that man is going to be condemned because he does not get it. He does not go with God’s flow. If you know how much you have been forgiven by God by grace through Jesus’ terrible sacrifice, how could you withhold that same gift from the people around you who need it also from you, when they hurt you?

DAVE BAST

There is a short story by G. K. Chesterton, one of his Father Brown stories, that makes such a profound point about forgiveness. I do not remember the details, but the punch-line is: Most people only forgive others for things that they do not think really need forgiveness. But, when something really horrible happens, when somebody does something really bad, then they will not forgive, “No, I will never forgive that.” The fact is, if we are going to pray the Lord’s Prayer, that is not an option for us to say that there is something so bad I will not forgive it.

SUE ROZEBOOM

We might think, “How in the world could I ever live up to that? How could I possibly, I do not have that kind of character, I do not have that kind of strength, I do not have that kind of internal fortitude to do that. Stanley Hauerwas has this incredible point where he says, “If that is what you think, you have got it just backwards. The focus is on God. God has already done for you; so, you are forgiven, and in being forgiven, you are given the strength to forgive. That power is already inside you, if you only let the Holy Spirit, who applies God’s forgiveness to you, to flow.”

DAVE BAST

Right, don’t forget; we believe in the forgiveness of sins because we also believe in the Holy Spirit.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Amen!

DAVE BAST

Again, it is the power of the Spirit that creates the Church, that makes the communion of the saints, that connects us with the forgiveness of sins, and that truly is the core good news of the Gospel. We believe in forgiveness for ourselves and for others as well.

SUE ROZEBOOM

My students will recognize this because I am fond of saying this in class, “I believe that in our Reformed tradition we would affirm, and Calvin would affirm, that nothing good transpires anywhere ever apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. Nothing anywhere. Not in our hearts. Not in the world. That is how dynamic the work of the Holy Spirit is.

DAVE BAST

So thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and once again this week, Sue Rozeboom. We would like to know how we can help you to dig deeper into scripture. So, visit us at groundworkonline.com. Tell us what topics or passages you would like to hear.

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