

“Forgiveness”
Apostles Creed
Various
08/27/2023

Introduction

Tim. Pastor. **Psalm 130.**

As you're turning there, let's stand and read the Creed together.

THE APOSTLES CREED

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead. 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.

PRAY.

Historical Backstory. One of the things I love about the Creed is that it doesn't appear out of thin air. Church history is so important and how the key doctrines of our faith came to be articulated is important for us to learn from.

This line, similar to “descended to hell” from a few weeks ago, is a late addition to the Creed. While the majority of the Creed can be found as early as 100 or 200 AD, this line doesn't show up as a part of the Creed until the 4th century. It's not that Christians before the 4th century didn't believe in forgiveness from God, it's just that it hadn't come under fire such that they needed to defend it via a confession.

You see what happened is that in the year 303 AD, under the Roman emperor Diocletian, for a whole variety of reasons, a massive persecution breaks out in the Roman Empire against Christians. Their homes are taken, their bibles are burned, and their places of worship are destroyed. And what the emperor declares is that those who are found to be Christians, are to be killed, unless they are willing to make sacrifices to the Roman gods.

Now, you can go back and read some of the stories of these martyrs, folks who were faithful to Jesus, did not sacrifice to the false gods, and were killed because of it. But just like there were some who remained faithful, there were also many who capitulated and gave in.

Those who gave in, came to be known in the church as “the traitors”.

About 10 years later, Diocletian steps down, Galerius takes his place as emperor and officially ends the persecution of the Roman Christians through what's called the Edict of Milan.

Now, the Church was in a different sort of crisis. They were now faced with a question – What were they going to do with these so-called “traitors”? Can they just come back into the church? Do they have to go through baptism again? Should they be permanently excluded from Christian fellowship? What about clergy? Are they allowed to minister again?

The Church had to wrestle with these questions.

As Ben Myers puts it, the question became **“Is the Christian community a church of the pure (as some called it), or can struggling, weak, and uncertain souls also find a place within that community?”**

These early Christians needed to figure out – ***what do we believe and what does the Bible say about this whole ‘forgiveness’ thing? How broad and wide and ongoing and lasting is the mercy and grace of God for sin and sinners?***

And we, 1700 years later, would benefit from asking the same questions – ***what do we believe and what does the Bible say about this whole ‘forgiveness’ thing? How broad and wide and ongoing and lasting is the mercy and grace of God for sin and sinners?***

And the answer they arrived at, which I hope we will see today from the Scriptures and find both convicting and encouraging became this line of the creed – **“I believe in the forgiveness of sins.”**

This line gets put into the Creed as a reminder for Christians in the 4th century and for centuries and generations to come – that though our sins are many, God’s mercy is more. God’s forgiveness reaches farther. God’s grace is ever wide for those who repent and turn to Him.

That there is an offer, in Christ Jesus, for the forgiveness of sins.

What is Sin + How We View Our Sin

But before we talk about forgiveness, we first have to talk about sin. We’ve said this every week in our corporate confession during this series – To understand how good the forgiveness of God is, we must understand how evil our sin is.

So we’ll start there, turn with me to **Psalm 130**. Hopefully you’re there, we’ll start in v1.

V1-2

1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord! 2 O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

Now, Psalm 130 isn’t a Psalm with a whole lot of context. We’re not exactly sure who is writing it, or why they’re writing it, or what’s going on in their lives – we only know the Psalmist is expressing their desperate need for God. “Out of the depths I cry to you” is their plea. They’re lamenting, crying, calling out with pleas for mercy.

Why? Look at v 3...

3 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

The word “iniquities” is one of a few ways the Scriptures describe this idea of sin. And on a baseline level it simply means “an act of guilt”, it’s a violation of an established standard. And sin, among many things is just that. God, as the creator and designer and author of all life, has told us, His creation, how to live. And when we do not live in line with that, either through doing/loving/being/thinking what we should not OR by not doing/loving/being/thinking what we should...that is iniquity. That is sin.

And the Psalmist says – This is a big deal. If you, O lord, should mark iniquities. That is – keep a record of our sins...who could stand? If God kept a record of all of the ways I rebelled against Him and His ways...I’d be in trouble.”

He's crying out to God for mercy because he knows the alternative is fair and right and true judgment. His sin, he knows, is against a holy God and is therefore grievous. Weighty. Wrong.

It's worth pausing here to talk for a minute about how different the Psalmist's view of sin is, then ours is today as modern Americans.

Knee Pain. Last fall we were on vacation with my family in Hilton Head, it's something we do every year. And my mom wanted to do a family photo shoot. Get all dressed up, take some photos on the beach like you do. Fun times.

For context – I have two older brothers, we are all solidly in our 30s, grown men with jobs and lives and responsibilities. But something happens when we all get together that it's like we're instantly like 8, 10, and 12 all over again. You know what I mean? It's ridiculous, but it's the dynamic. And so they thought it'd be fun to jump in the pool as our "closing shot".

And so we did. The problem is that they wanted to jump off of this elevated ledge, and the deepest the pool got was like 3 feet. And so we jump in and I go to tuck my knee in and it slips out of my hand and so my entire body weight lands on my left leg, and I can feel it in my knee instantly. Just sharp pain.

And so the rest of the week I'm in pain, but thinking like 'ok, no big deal', it'll go away. Fast forward a month...still pain. 3 months...still pain. Finally about 6 months later I decided (and by that I mean Lindsay told me) to go to the doctor. So I did. Finally admitted – "I think something is broken. I think something is off with my leg."

Had a great visit. He says "let's get an MRI, we'll call to schedule it." Between that visit and the following week when they called to schedule, I found out how much the MRI was going to cost, and the surgery that might follow depending on what they find. And so I did what every responsible adult does. I ghosted. I never answered the calls, I never responded to the emails. And here we are with a hurt left knee that flares up about once a week.

In my experience, how I've treated my knee, is how many of us tend to think about and deal with our sin.

We press it a little bit, we see how there's brokenness within us, we start to ask for help, we explore the idea of confession, we explore the idea of our depravity, we sort of wade into the waters of repentance, and then all of a sudden it starts getting costly, painful, hard, and vulnerable and we bail.

We start just sort of denying it's there in the first place. Sort of denying that there's even a problem, or start downplaying the severity of the problem.

Unlike the Psalmist who is honest about the gravity of his sin, we so often want to deny both our sin and our sinfulness.

And I think we do this in a few really prominent ways that I think would profit us to spend a few minutes talking about.

Ways we Deny our Sin:

1. Self-Righteousness

We deny our sin by inflating our view of ourselves. We are convinced of our own "rightness" – that's what it means to be self-righteousness. We don't say with the Psalmist – "If the Lord keeps record of our sin who can stand?" But rather – "If the Lord keeps record of our sin, I think I'd be doing alright, at least given my circumstances and for sure in comparison to these other people."

- Self-righteousness sounds like “Well, I’m not really a bad person, I just occasionally do the wrong thing.”
- It sounds like “Well I have some faults...but I don’t commit any ‘bad sins’.”
- It sounds like “Yeah, I know that I shouldn’t have done that, but look at the 10 things I’ve done well. Surely the good outweighs the bad.”

Self-righteousness denies our sin by attempting to justify ourselves before God and others. It’s the thing that rises up within us when we’re in group time and we’re confessing but we have to put like 7 justifications on it about how “it was only one time” or “I’ve already apologized” or “I’ve already processed this with a trusted friend or counselor.”

Now maybe those things are all true – maybe it was just one time. Maybe you have already apologized. Maybe you have already processed it. Self-righteous denial of sin is when we use those things in an attempt to nullify the gravity of sin and sort of sweep it under the rug.

2. Legalism

Legalism in the Scriptures is “doing Christian things in an effort to earn God’s forgiveness.” Rather than the picture the Scriptures paint which is God’s love driving us to a life of holiness and discipline, legalism flips the equation and says a life of holiness and discipline will get me God’s love.

It’s not Christian. It’s not the Bible. AND it’s actually a way we deny our sin.

Because in saying “I can earn God’s forgiveness” we are subsequently denying that (1) we are as rotten at our core as the Bible says we are...more on that in a second but (2) our sin is not so grave that we aren’t able to pay for it ourselves.

And so we try to earn our forgiveness by making promises to God – “I won’t ever do this again” – or by in asking for forgiveness listing out a record of our good deeds – “Please forgive me, can’t you see how hard I’m trying? Can’t you see how I’m serving you? Can’t you see how I’m reading my Bible and praying and going to church? Won’t you forgive me?”

That’s legalism, and it’s a denial of the depth of our sin and depravity.

****But those are the more Christian ways we deny our sin, let me push a little bit more on a few ways I’ve seen even more recently in our sort of cultural moment...**

3. Victim Mentality

I am not responsible for the things I do, especially those that are against the design of God, because...”well let me tell you about my childhood trauma.” That’s victimhood.

I am not responsible for anything, because I am solely and only the byproduct of what has happened to me. I am powerless over sin, I can no longer choose to say ‘no’ to temptation because of what I have experienced.” So any behavior, anything wrong that I think, say, or do is just a response to the wrong that has been done to me.

This is everywhere in our culture right now. One sociologist recently called it “the race to the bottom.” Whereas in previous generations and centuries everyone wanted to be on top, now we all decided the way to achieve power is to become the greater victim.

Let’s just call it like it is – if my life was harder than yours, I win. I’m more of a victim than you, and therefore I get to treat you however I want and act however I want.

That's a way to deny our sin. That's a way to try and nullify our culpability and responsibility before God and before others for what we have chosen to do. That's a way to try to get ourselves out of the weight of obedience God has called us to if we are followers of Jesus.

And I see this play itself out all the time:

- We talked about this a little last week – “I don't have to be obedient to God and interweave my life with other Christians in a local church, because I've been hurt by the church before. My pain justifies my disobedience.”
- “I don't have to follow a historic Christian sexual ethic because purity culture was kind of messed up and said some stupid things. My story justifies my disobedience.”
- And we aid one another in this too – so someone will confess losing their temper at their kid. And in a sincere effort to be helpful, we'll say something like “hey, being a parent is really hard, give yourself some grace.” What's that saying – “Your circumstances justify your disobedience.”

If I'm tired enough, overwhelmed enough, gone through enough – that just about justifies most sins.

Listen – I'm not saying you haven't suffered. I'm not saying you haven't experienced pain or hurt or sorrow. I'm not nullifying your story. I'm not saying your current situation or circumstance is not extremely difficult.

I'm just saying your story or circumstance doesn't exempt you from obedience. Your sinful actions aren't nullified because they are a response to pain or struggle. Your pain might lead to sinful responses, but you are still responsible before God.

4. Personality Quirks

I'm a big fan of personality tests. Meyers-Briggs, StrengthsFinder, the Enneagram (when actually used correctly) but one of the ways it can go wrong is when the personality traits we learn about ourselves become a means by which we justify and therefore deny sin and sinfulness.

- I can't be expected to obey Christ and share the gospel with my coworker because I'm an introvert.
- Well I know I should work on my anger but I'm an enneagram 8 and I just prefer to be in charge and have authority.
- I don't mean to always pick on people and tear them down with my jokes, but I'm just quick witted, it's who I am and how I'm wired.

This is a way we deny sin. We justify it by labeling it as, “this is my personality. This is my temperament. This is just who I am.”

5. Therapeutic Values

Now before you email me, I'm not against therapy. I am however adamantly against bad therapy. And bad therapy, among many things, one of the ways you know it's bad is that it stays in the level of emotions. Bad therapy only works at the level of your emotions and emotional responses, and never gets down to the root of why and what's going on internally that is driving that.

So bad therapy wants to go after the feelings of guilt, without ever asking if the guilt should be there in the first place. And so all of the discussions between a therapist and a client are around systems and solutions for you not to be so hard on yourself and to feel guilty, without ever considering maybe there's something you should actually feel guilty for.

You see what I mean?

But focusing solely on the feelings of guilt, and not the actual guilt itself, is another way we deny sin. We minimize our sinfulness.

And this pervades its way down to where when we seek to help one another in our walk with Christ, we focus almost exclusively on how the person is feeling, without ever considering maybe it's valid they feel that way.

So we're in group time, and someone confesses real heavy weighty evil sin. And we spend most of our time trying to alleviate their conscience, trying to help them fight against the feelings of guilt, rather than asking – maybe the feelings of guilt are there because there's real guilt and what they need is not to have their *feelings of guilt appeased* but their *actual guilt atoned for*.

Without Sin, No Forgiveness

****I'm not saying all this to try and tear us down. I'm not saying all this to make us feel bad. I'm after our good in Christ.**

I want to point all this out because I don't want you to miss the overwhelming and shocking beauty of what is actually offered to us in the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of Christ.

If we deny sin, we deny forgiveness. If we deny forgiveness, we deny the forgiver.

Much to our own pain and detriment and sorrow and struggle...

- Because if you're **self-righteous**, what need do you have for a Savior? You don't need a Savior, you're already judge and jury. But if you're judge and jury, do you feel the enormous weight you carry that you must be the one who can declare over yourself "righteous, ok, good". That's an unbearable, impossible weight.
- If you're **legalistic**, you don't need Jesus the Savior, you just need Jesus the Helper. Don't worry Jesus, thanks for dying and all, but I'll take it from here. But if I know anything from my own legalistic bent, I know that the list of things we must do to make ourselves right with God, never ends.
- If you're solely a **victim** of your past, then sin is just a thing out there in the world that harms you, and not also something in here that harms you from the inside out. And so you don't let Jesus, the Great Physician, come in and do His good and necessary work.
- If you don't have sin, just **personality quirks** then you have no need for redemption, no need for forgiveness, you just need Jesus' help to help you become more fully you. Because you're awesome, and so Jesus just needs to help you not live into a false self anymore and be your authentic true awesome self. But if the stats about depression and anxiety and loneliness are true – the great "project you" experiment of the modern west is crumbling all around us.
- And if you just need rescuing from your **feelings of guilt** and not an actual declaration of guiltiness, then you don't need Jesus the sacrificial lamb, you just need Jesus the empathetic therapist. Who is here to keep those bad feelings away from you and remind you you're great. But do the feelings not keep coming back?

If you deny sin, you deny forgiveness. If you deny forgiveness you deny the forgiver.

In the words of theologian Thomas Watson – **"Until sin be bitter Christ will not be sweet."**

What does the Bible say about Sin?

And I don't know about you...but I want more of the sweetness of Christ in my life. I want to love Him more, cherish Him more. And so I need sin to grow more and more bitter in my heart and in my life.

And so we push through all of the ways we want to justify ourselves. We, in the words of JI Packer – “Do violence to our own perverted instincts of self-righteousness.” We learn to see ourselves rightly in line with the testimony of the Scriptures.

And so we open the Word of God...

- And we read **Luke 5**, which tells us that sin is like being **sick**. It makes us unwell. It hurts us from the inside out and we need a great physician.
- And we read **Isaiah 64**, which tells us that sin is a **pollution**, it corrupts all of us and makes us unclean and we need to be washed and cleansed and made new.
- And we read **Isaiah 1**, which tell us that sin is like a **heavy burden**, and we need a new teacher who shows us his light and restful ways.
- And we read **Romans 6**, which tells us that sin is like a **cruel slave master**, and we need a Father to come and rescue us and call us not slaves but children.
- And we read **Colossians 2**, which tells us that sin **puts us under a debt** we can never pay, and we need someone to come and pay our ransom, purchase our redemption.
- And we read **Ephesians 2**, which tells us that **sin makes us dead**, unable to respond to the mercy of God and we need someone to die and rise so we too can wake up from the dead.

The Hope of Forgiveness

And we realize – I can never be good enough. I can never work my way out of this. This is too pervasive, too corrupting, too overwhelming, too ingrained into my being. I'm sick, I'm polluted, I'm not just someone who sins, I'm A sinner through and through. The debt I owe to God is too great. And if that's not enough, I can't even begin to try because I'm dead in my sin.

I mean we just sang about it, right? I could not love Him, because I'm so blind and unfeeling (callous, hard hearted). I have no merit to woo or delight God. I have no wisdom or powers to employ.

I need what only Jesus can give – I need a Savior. I need mercy. I need this confession in the creed to be true – I need the forgiveness of sins.

Albert Mohler – “This is the great paradox of the Christian life. The world longs for us to run away from our guilt. Guilt is seen as an enemy that must be killed. Self-help books fill the shelves of bookstores as people ruthlessly try to squash the inner feeling of guilt. For the Christian, however, guilt is a gift. That feeling of unquenchable, unyielding guilt, leads us to the only hope we have. Sinners must embrace the infinite guilt they live in if they are to find the infinite grace of God. As we embrace our guilt, then and only then can we come to that crimson fount of hope, the blood of Jesus that washes us clean.”

And that's exactly what the Psalmist takes us too...

V 3-7

3 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? 4 But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. 5 I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; 6 my soul waits for the Lord more than

watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. 7 O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. 8 And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

If you kept a record of our sins, Lord, who could stand. BUT with you there is forgiveness. With you there is plentiful redemption. Not a little bit of redemption. Not redemption that only goes so far. Plentiful redemption. Our sins and sinfulness is great, Church. But the grace of God is even greater.

The sins of the “traitors” in the 4th century were great. They walked away from God, offered sacrifices to idols. Can you imagine the amount of betrayal you would feel? Here’s someone you’re meant to be arm and arm with. Family of God. Staying faithful together even under threat of death. And yet they abandon you, they give in to the pressures, they sacrifice to false gods, they turn their back on you and on Christ.

Of course you don’t welcome them back now that times are easy. Of course you don’t receive them into fellowship even if they express sorrow.

UNLESS...You believe in the forgiveness of sins.

Unless God’s redemption is plentiful. Unless the sacrifice of Christ reaches even that far.

And if it reaches that far, surely it is plentiful enough for you. Surely there is forgiveness on offer for you too.

Surely you don’t have to deny your sin and settle for false saviors.

For Christ, who knew no sin. Who never sinned. Who was the only one who ever lived to actually be righteous, went to the cross. Died the death we and our sins deserved. And in what theologians call the great exchange – He takes our sin/our punishment/our judgment and gives us freely by grace through faith His righteousness.

So not only, if we trust in Him can we be *forgiven*. Though that is ridiculous. We can be declared righteous. Not just brought to neutrality with God, but we can be welcomed into His family as sons and daughters, heirs of the kingdom.

All we must do is repent and believe.

We match our cries to the cry of the Psalmist in v1 – **1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord! 2 O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!**

We face our sin, we look at the state of our own hearts in all of their brokenness, wickedness, selfishness and pride. We bring all of that before the Lord, we confess it to Him – we don’t deny, we don’t hold back, we don’t self-justify – we own the reality of our sin as what we’ve done and who we are – and then we cling to His offer of forgiveness. Of redemption. TO wash us clean and make us new.

Conclusion

LUTHER.

I’d love to leave us with a quote from the famous reformer Martin Luther. Before he became a leader in the Protest Reformation of the 1500s, Luther was a monk. And as a monk he suffered greatly. He could not find a way to deal with his feelings of guilt. He would wake up at 3am to spend hours in prayer. He would push his body to the breaking point by fasting to the point of emaciation. It is said that at one point he even fastened a whip he would strike himself with trying to pay penance for his sins.

He could not find a way to justify himself. And then as the story goes, through reading the book of Romans God opened His eyes to the incredible offer of forgiveness found only in the person and work and grace of Jesus. And Luther confessed his to the Lord, repented, put his faith in Christ, believed the gospel and received what his soul longed for – cleansing, forgiveness, a declaration that he is righteous not based on his own deeds but based on the finished work of Christ on the cross.

And it was a few years later, in a letter to his friend Melanchthon, Luther writes this incredible paragraph. And it's where we'll close.

If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but the true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world...It suffices that through God's glory we have recognized the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day. Do you think such an exalted Lamb paid merely a small price with a meager sacrifice for our sins? Pray hard for you are quite a sinner.

Let's be a gospel church. A church not for the pure and clean and put together. But also not a church that takes sin lightly. But a church that deals with our faults. A church that deals with our shortcomings and failures. A church that owns our sin, confesses our sin fully and freely. Because the exalted lamb has not paid merely a small price with a meager sacrifice.

"I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

May we believe and live as if that's true.

Pray.