

Forgiveness



J. C. RYLE (1816-1900)

FORGIVENESS

Contents

1. Our Need of Forgiveness	3
2. The Way of Forgiveness	4
A. Where will you go?	4
B. The one way	5
C. The soundness of this way	6
D. Questions you must ask yourself	6
3. Encouragement to Be Forgiven	7
A. What this forgiveness is	7
B. The standing of the forgiven soul	9
4. Marks of Having Found Forgiveness.....	10
A. Marks of the forgiven soul	10
B. Your response to these marks	12
5. Applications.....	12
A. Are you forgiven?	12
B. A solemn warning to those not forgiven	13
C. An earnest invitation to those desiring forgiveness.....	14
D. A word of exhortation to all forgiven souls.....	14
Questions for personal reflection and group discussion.....	16

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FORGIVENESS

“*Your sins are forgiven you.*”—1 John 2:12

THERE is a clause near the end of the *Belief, or Apostle’s Creed*¹ that I fear is often repeated without thought or consideration. I refer to the clause that contains these words, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” Thousands, I am afraid, never reflect what those words mean. I propose to examine the subject of them in the following paper, and I invite the attention of all who care for their souls and want to be saved. Do we believe in the “resurrection of our bodies”? Then let us see to it that we know something by experience of the “forgiveness of our sins.”

1. Our Need of Forgiveness

Let me show, first of all, our need of forgiveness. All men need forgiveness because all men are sinners. He that does not know this knows nothing in religion. It is the very A-B-C of Christianity that a man should know his right place in the sight of God and understand his deserts.²

We are all *great sinners*. “There is none righteous, no, not one”; “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:10, 23). Sinners we were born, and sinners we have been all our lives. We take to sin naturally from the very first. No child ever needs schooling and education to teach it to do wrong. No devil or bad companion ever leads us into such wickedness as our own hearts. And “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). We must either be forgiven, or lost eternally.

We are all *guilty sinners* in the sight of God. We have broken His holy Law. We have transgressed His precepts. We have not done His will. There is not a commandment in all the ten³ that does not condemn us. If we have not broken it in deed, we have in word; if we have not broken it in word, we have in thought and imagination—and that continually. Tried by the standard of the fifth chapter of St. Matthew, there is not one of us that would be acquitted. All the world is “guilty before God.” And, “as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this [comes] the judgment,” we must either be forgiven, or perish everlastingly (Rom 3:19; Heb 9:27).

And then, *what is the Lord God*, Whose eyes are on all our ways and before Whom we have one day to give account? “Holy, holy, holy” is the remarkable expression applied to Him by those who are nearest to Him (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8). It sounds as if no one word could express the intensity of His holiness. One of His prophets says, “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst

¹ **Apostle’s Creed** – early statement of Christian belief, widely used for both liturgical and catechetical purposes. Its first mention is in AD 390 and may have been associated with the belief, widely accepted in the fourth century, that under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit each of the twelve apostles contributed an article to the creed.

² **deserts** – what one deserves.

³ **the ten** – the Ten Commandments (Exo 20:3-17).

not look upon iniquity” (Hab 1:13). We think the angels exalted beings, and far above ourselves; but we are told in Scripture, “His angels he charged with folly” (Job 4:18). We admire the moon and stars as glorious and splendid bodies; but we read, “Behold even to the moon, and it shineth not, the stars are not pure in his sight” (Job 25:5). We talk of the heavens as the noblest and purest part of creation; but even of them it is written, “The heavens are not clean in his sight” (Job 15:15). What then is any one of us but a miserable sinner in the sight of such a God as this?

Surely, we ought all to cease from proud thoughts about ourselves. We ought to lay our hands upon our mouths and say with Abraham, I am “dust and ashes”; and with Job, “I am vile”; and with Isaiah, “We are all as an unclean thing”; and with John, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (Gen 18:27; Job 40:4; Isa 64:6; 1Jo 1:8). Where is the man or woman in the whole catalogue of the Book of Life that will ever be able to say more than this: “I obtained mercy” (1Ti 1:13)? What is the glorious company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, the noble army of martyrs—what are they all but pardoned sinners? Surely there is but one conclusion to be arrived at: *we are all great sinners, and we all need a great forgiveness.*

See now what just cause I have to say that to know our need of forgiveness is the first thing in true religion. Sin is a burden, and must be taken off. Sin is a defilement, and must be cleansed away. Sin is a mighty debt, and must be paid. Sin is a mountain standing between us and heaven, and must be removed. Happy is that mother’s child amongst us that feels all this! The first step towards heaven is to see clearly that we *deserve hell*. There are but two alternatives before us: we must either be forgiven, or be miserable forever.

2. The Way of Forgiveness

A. *Where will you go?*

Let me point out, in the second place, the way of forgiveness. I ask particular attention to this point, for none can be more important. Granting for a moment that you want pardon and forgiveness, what ought you to do? Whither will you go? Which way will you turn? Everything hinges on the answer you give to this question.

Will you turn to **ministers** and put your trust in them? They cannot give you pardon; they can only tell you where it is to be found. They can set before you the bread of life, but you yourself must eat it. They can show you the path of peace, but you yourself must walk in it. The Jewish priest had no power to cleanse the leper, but only to declare him cleansed. The Christian minister has no power to forgive sins; he can only declare and pronounce who they are that are forgiven.

Will you turn to **sacraments and ordinances**,⁴ and trust in them? They cannot supply you with forgiveness, however diligently you may use them. By sacraments “faith is confirmed and

⁴ **sacraments and ordinances** – “A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ, wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers”—*The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 92. Many Protestants today use the word “ordinances” instead of “sacraments” to distinguish from the Roman Catholic Church. The Bible teaches there are two ordinances instituted by Christ in the New Testament: baptism and the Lord’s Supper, both of which are His gifts to the church by which the church is blessed in remembering Christ. The Roman Catholic Church erroneously believes its seven sacraments are meritorious for earning God’s favor.

grace increased,” in all who rightly use them (*see* Article 27⁵). But they cannot justify⁶ the sinner. They cannot put away transgression. You may go to the Lord’s Table every Sunday in your life; but unless you look far beyond the sign to the thing signified, you will after all die in your sins. You may attend a daily service regularly, but if you think to establish a righteousness of your own by it in the slightest degree, you are only getting further away from God every day.

Will you trust in your own *works and endeavours*, your virtues and your good deeds, your prayers and your alms? They will never buy for you an entrance into heaven. They will never pay your debt to God. They are all imperfect in themselves and only increase your guilt. There is no merit or worthiness in them at the very best. The Lord Jesus Christ says expressly, “When you have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants” (Luk 17:10).

Will you trust in your own *repentance and amendment*? You are very sorry for the past. You hope to do better for time to come. You hope God will be merciful. Alas, if you lean on this, you have nothing beneath you but a broken reed! The judge does not pardon the thief because he is sorry for what he did. Today’s sorrow will not wipe off the score of yesterday’s sins. It is not an ocean of tears that would ever cleanse an uneasy conscience and give it peace.

B. The one way

Where then must a man go for pardon? Where is forgiveness to be found? There is a way both sure and plain, and into that way I desire to guide every inquirer’s feet.

That way is simply to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour. It is to cast your soul, with all its sins, unreservedly on Christ; to cease completely from any dependence on your own works or doings, either in whole or in part; and to rest on no other work but Christ’s work, no other righteousness but Christ’s righteousness, no other merit but Christ’s merit, as your ground of hope. Take this course and you are a pardoned soul. “To [Christ],” says Peter, “give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins” (Act 10:43). “Through this man,” says Paul at Antioch, “is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins, and by him all that believe are justified from all things” (Act 13:38). In Him, writes Paul, “We have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:14).

The Lord Jesus Christ, in great love and compassion, has made a full and complete satisfaction for sin by suffering death in our place upon the cross. There He offered Himself as a sacrifice for us, and allowed the wrath of God, which we deserved, to fall on His own head. For our sins, as our Substitute, He gave Himself, suffered, and died, the just for the unjust, the innocent for the guilty—that He might deliver us from the curse of a broken Law, and provide a complete pardon for all who are willing to receive it. And by so doing, as Isaiah says, He “shall bear” our sins; as John the Baptist says, He “taketh away” sin; as Paul says, He “purged our sins,” and “put away” sin; and as Daniel says, He “make[s] an end of sins,” and “finish[es] the transgression” (Isa 53:11; Joh 1:29; Heb 1:3; Heb 9:26; Dan 9:24).

Christ, in one word, has purchased a full forgiveness, if we are only willing to receive it. He has done all, paid all, suffered all that was needful to reconcile us to God. He has provided a garment of righteousness to clothe us. He has opened a fountain of living waters to cleanse us.

⁵ **Article 27** – one of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, the confession of faith of the Church of England and the Episcopal Church, formulated in the Canterbury Convocation in 1563.

⁶ **justify** – declared to be right by God as Judge.

He has removed every barrier between us and God the Father, taken every obstacle out of the way, and made a road by which the vilest may return. All things are now ready, and the sinner has only to believe and be saved, to eat and be satisfied, to ask and receive, to wash and be clean.

And faith, simple faith, is the only thing required, in order that you and I may be forgiven. That we will come by faith to Jesus as sinners with our sins—trust in Him, rest on Him, lean on Him, confide in Him, commit our souls to Him, and *forsaking all other hope, cleave only to Him*—this is all and everything that God asks for. Let a man only do this and he shall be saved. His iniquities shall be found completely pardoned and his transgressions entirely taken away. Every man and woman that so trusts is wholly forgiven and reckoned perfectly righteous. His sins are clean gone and his soul is justified in God's sight, however bad and guilty he may have been.

C. The soundness of this way

This is the doctrine that is the ***true strength of any church*** on earth at this day. It is not orders, endowments, liturgies, or learning that will keep a church alive. Let free forgiveness through Christ be faithfully proclaimed in her pulpits, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her (Mat 16:18). Let it be buried or kept back, and her candlestick will soon be taken away (Rev 2:5). A church is only useful so far as she exalts *free forgiveness through Christ*.

This is the doctrine that, of all others, is the ***mightiest engine for pulling down the kingdom of Satan*** (2Co 10:4). Preach salvation by the sacraments, exalt the church above Christ, and keep back the doctrine of the atonement, and the devil cares little—his goods are at peace. But preach a full Christ, and a free pardon by faith in Him, and then Satan will have great wrath, for he knows he has but a short time.

This is the only doctrine that will ever bring ***peace to an uneasy conscience*** and rest to a troubled soul. A man may get on pretty well without it so long as he is asleep about his spiritual condition. But once let him awake from his slumber, and nothing will ever calm him but the blood of atonement and the peace that comes by faith in Christ.

D. Questions you must ask yourself

You should ask yourself *whether you have really received the truth* that I have been dwelling on and know it by experience. Jesus, and faith in Him, is the only way to the Father. He that thinks to climb into Paradise by some other road will find himself fearfully mistaken. Other foundation can no man lay for an immortal soul than that of which I have been feebly speaking. He that ventures himself here is safe. He that is off this rock has got no standing ground at all.

You should seriously consider *what kind of a ministry you are in the habit of attending*, supposing you have a choice. You have reason indeed to be careful. It is not all the same where you go, whatever people may say. There are many places of worship, I fear, where you might look long for Christ crucified and never find Him. He is buried under outward ceremonies, thrust behind the baptismal font,⁷ and lost sight of under the shadow of the church. "They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him" (Joh 20:13). Take heed where you settle yourself. Try all by this single test, "Is Jesus and free forgiveness proclaimed here?" There may be comfortable pews; there may be good singing; there may be learned sermons. But if Christ's gospel is not the sun and center of the whole place, do not pitch your tent there. Say

⁷ **baptismal font** – small basin used for sprinkling infants.

rather with Isaac, “Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb?” (Gen 22:7). Be very sure this is not the place for your soul.

3. Encouragement to Be Forgiven

A. *What this forgiveness is*

Let me, in the third place, encourage all who wish to be forgiven. I dare be sure this paper will be read by someone who feels he is not yet a forgiven soul. My heart’s desire and prayer is that such a one may seek his pardon at once. And I would fain⁸ help him forward by showing him the kind of forgiveness offered to him and the glorious privileges within his reach.

Consider, then, for one thing, that the forgiveness set before you is a **great and broad forgiveness**. Hear what the Prince of Peace Himself declares: “All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies, wherewith soever they shall blaspheme” (Mar 3:28). “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall become as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isa 1:18). Yes: though your trespasses be more in number than the hairs of your head, the stars in heaven, the leaves of the forest, the blades of grass, the grains of sand on the sea shore—still they can all be pardoned. As the waters of Noah’s flood covered over and hid the tops of the highest hills, so can the blood of Jesus cover over and hide your mightiest sins. His blood “cleanseth us from all sin” (1Jo 1:7). Though to you they seem written with the point of a diamond, they can all be effaced from the book of God’s remembrance by that precious blood. Paul names a long list of abominations that the Corinthians had committed, and then says, “Such were some of you: but ye are washed” (1Co 6:11).

Furthermore, it is a **full and complete forgiveness**. It is not like David’s pardon to Absalom—a permission to return home but not a full restoration to favour (2Sa 14:24). It is not, as some fancy, a mere letting off and letting alone. It is a pardon so complete that he who has it is reckoned as righteous as if he had never sinned at all! His iniquities are blotted out; they are removed from him as far as the east from the west (Psa 103:12). There remains no condemnation for him. The Father sees him joined to Christ and is well pleased. The Son beholds him clothed with His own righteousness and says, “Thou art all fair...there is no spot in thee” (Song 4:7). Blessed be God that it is so! I verily believe if the best of us all had only one blot left for himself to wipe out, he would miss eternal life. If the holiest child of Adam were in heaven all but his little finger, and to get in depended on himself, I am sure he would never enter the kingdom. If Noah, Daniel, and Job had had but one day’s sins to wash away, they would never have been saved. Praised be God that, in the matter of our pardon, there is nothing left for man to do! Jesus does all, and man has only to hold out an empty hand and to receive.

Furthermore, it is a **free and unconditional forgiveness**. It is not burdened with an “if,” like Solomon’s pardon to Adonijah: “*If* he will show himself a worthy man” (1Ki 1:52). Nor yet are you obliged to carry a price in your hand, or to bring a character with you to prove yourself deserving of mercy. Jesus requires but one character, and that is that you should feel yourself a sinful, bad man. He invites you to “buy wine and milk without money and without price,” and declares, “Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely” (Isa 55:1; Rev 22:17). Like David in the cave of Adullam, He receives everyone that feels in distress and a debtor, and rejects none

⁸ **fain** – gladly.

(1Sa 22:2). Are you a sinner? Do you want a Saviour? Then come to Jesus just as you are, and your soul shall live.

Again, it is an ***offered forgiveness***. I have read of earthly kings who knew not how to show mercy: of Henry the Eighth of England, who spared neither man nor woman; of James the Fifth of Scotland, who would never show favour to a Douglas. The King of Kings is not like them. He calls on men to come to Him and be pardoned. “Unto you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of man” (Pro 8:4). “Ho! Every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters” (Isa 55:1). “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink” (Joh 7:37). “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mat 11:28). It ought to be a great comfort to you and me to hear of any pardon at all; but to hear Jesus Himself inviting us, to see Jesus Himself holding out His hand to us—the Saviour seeking the sinner before the sinner seeks the Saviour—this is encouragement, this is strong consolation indeed!

Again, it is a ***willing forgiveness***. I have heard of pardons granted in reply to long entreaty, and wrung out by much importunity. King Edward the Third of England would not spare the citizens of Calais till they came to him with halters round their necks and his own Queen interceded for them on her knees. But Jesus is “good and ready to forgive” (Psa 86:5). He “delighteth in mercy” (Mic 7:18). You and I may well come boldly to the throne of grace. He Who sits there is far more willing and ready to give mercy than we are to receive it (Heb 4:16).

Besides this, it is a ***tried forgiveness***. Thousands and tens of thousands have sought for pardon at the mercy seat of Christ, and not one has ever returned to say that he sought in vain. Sinners of every name and nation—sinners of every sort and description—have knocked at the door of the fold, and none have ever been refused admission. Zacchaeus the extortioner, Magdalen the harlot, Saul the persecutor, Peter the denier of his Lord, the Jews who crucified the Prince of Life, the idolatrous Athenians, the adulterous Corinthians, the ignorant Africans, the bloodthirsty New Zealanders—all have ventured their souls on Christ’s promises of pardon, and none have ever found them fail. If the way that the gospel sets before us were a new and untraveled way, we might well feel faint-hearted. But it is not so. It is an old path. It is a path worn by the feet of many pilgrims, and a path in which the footsteps are all one way. The treasury of Christ’s mercies has never been found empty. The well of living waters has never proved dry.

Besides this, it is a ***present forgiveness***. All that believe in Jesus are at once justified from all things (Act 13:39). The very day the younger son returned to his father’s house, he was clothed with the best robe, had the ring put on his hand, and the shoes on his feet (Luk 15:22). The very day Zacchaeus received Jesus, he heard those comfortable words, “This day is salvation come to this house” (Luk 19:9). The very day that David said, “I have sinned against the Lord,” he was told by Nathan, “The Lord also hath put away thy sin” (2Sa 12:13).

The very day you first flee to Christ, your sins are all removed. Your pardon is not a thing far away, to be obtained only after many years. It is nigh at hand. It is close to you, within your reach, all ready to be bestowed. Believe, and that very moment it is your own. “He that believeth *is not* condemned” (Joh 3:18). It is not said, “He shall not be,” or “will not be,” but “*is not*.” From the time of his believing, condemnation is gone. “He that believeth...*hath* everlasting life” (Joh 3:36). It is not said, “He shall have,” or “will have,” it is “*hath*.” It is his own as surely as if he were in heaven, though not evidently so to his own eyes. You must not think forgiveness will be nearer to a believer in the Day of Judgment than it was in the hour he first believed. His complete salvation from the *power* of sin is every year nearer and nearer to him; but as to his for-

givenness and justification, and deliverance from the *guilt* of sin, it is a finished work from the very minute he first commits himself to Christ.

Last, and best of all, it is an *everlasting forgiveness*. It is not like Shimei's pardon—a pardon that may some time be revoked and taken away (1Ki 2:9). Once justified, you are justified forever. Once written down in the book of life, your name shall never be blotted out. The sins of God's children are said to be cast into the depths of the sea, to be sought for and not found, to be remembered no more, to be cast behind God's back (Mic 7:19; Jer 50:20; 31:34; Isa 38:17). Some people fancy they may be justified one year and condemned another; children of adoption at one time, and strangers by and by; heirs of the kingdom in the beginning of their days, and yet servants of the devil in their end. I cannot find this in the Bible. It seems to me to overturn the good news of the gospel altogether, and to tear up its comforts by the roots. I believe the salvation Jesus offers is an everlasting salvation, and a pardon once sealed with His blood shall never be reversed.

I have set before you the nature of the forgiveness offered to you. I have told you but a little of it, for my words are weaker than my will. The half of it remains untold. The greatness of it is far more than any report of mine. But I think I have said enough to show you it is worth the seeking, and I can wish you nothing better than that you may strive to make it your own.

Do you call it nothing to look forward to death without fear, and to judgment without doubts, and to eternity without a sinking heart? Do you call it nothing to feel the world slipping from your grasp, and to see the grave getting ready for you, and the valley of the shadow of death opening before your eyes—and yet to be not afraid? Do you call it nothing to be able to think of the great day of account, the throne, the books, the Judge, the assembled worlds, the revealing of secrets, the final sentence—and yet to feel, "I am safe"? This is the portion, and this the privilege of a forgiven soul.

B. The standing of the forgiven soul

Such an one is *on a rock*. When the rain of God's wrath descends, the floods come, and the winds blow, his feet shall not slide, his habitation shall be sure.

Such an one is *in an ark*. When the last fiery deluge is sweeping over all things on the surface of the earth, it shall not come nigh him. He shall be caught up and borne securely above it all.

Such an one is *in an hiding place*. When God arises to judge terribly the earth, and men are calling to rocks and mountains to fall upon them and cover them, the Everlasting Arms shall be thrown around him and the storm shall pass over his head. He shall "abide under the shadow of the Almighty" (Psa 91:1).

Such an one is *in a city of refuge*. The accuser of the brethren can lay no charge against him. The Law cannot condemn him. There is a wall between him and the avenger of blood. The enemies of his soul cannot hurt him. He is in a secure sanctuary.

Such an one is *rich*. He has treasure in heaven that cannot be affected by worldly changes, compared to which Peru and California are nothing at all. He need not envy the richest merchants and bankers. He has a portion that will endure when bank-notes and sovereigns⁹ are worthless things. He can say, like the Spanish ambassador when shown the treasury at Venice, "My Master's treasury has no bottom." He has Christ.

⁹ **sovereigns** – British gold coins minted from 1489-1932, equal in value to one pound.

Such an one is *insured*. He is ready for anything that may happen. Nothing can harm him. Banks may break and governments may be overturned. Famine and pestilence may rage around him. Sickness and sorrow may visit his own fireside. But still he is ready for all: ready for health, ready for disease; ready for tears, ready for joy; ready for poverty, ready for plenty; ready for life, ready for death. He has Christ. He is a pardoned soul. “Blessed” indeed “is he whose transgression is forgiven, and whose sin is covered” (Psa 32:1).

How will anyone escape if he neglects so great salvation (Heb 2:3)? Why should you not lay hold on it at once, and say, Pardon me, even me also, O my Saviour! What would you have, if the way I have set before you does not satisfy you? Come while the door is open. Ask, and you shall receive (Mat 7:8).

4. Marks of Having Found Forgiveness

A. *Marks of the forgiven soul*

Let me, in the last place, supply the readers of this paper with some marks of having found forgiveness. I dare not leave out this point. Too many persons presume they are forgiven who have no evidence to show. Not a few cannot think it possible they are forgiven, who are plainly in the way to heaven, though they may not see it themselves. I would fain raise hope in some and self-inquiry in others; and to do this, let me set down in order the leading marks of a forgiven soul.

Forgiven souls *hate sin*. They can enter most fully into the words of our Communion Service: “The remembrance of sin is grievous unto them, and the burden of it is intolerable.” It is the serpent that bit them; how should they not shrink from it with horror? It is the poison that brought them to the brink of eternal death; how should they not loathe it with a godly disgust? It is the Egyptian enemy that kept them in hard bondage; how should not the very memory of it be bitter to their hearts? It is the disease of which they carry the marks and scars about them, and from which they have scarcely recovered—well may they dread it, flee from it, and long to be delivered altogether from its power! Remember how the woman in Simon’s house wept over the feet of Jesus (Luk 7:38). Remember how the Ephesians publicly burned their wicked books (Act 19:19). Remember how Paul mourned over his youthful transgressions: “I...am not meet¹⁰ to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1Co 15:9). If you and sin are friends, you and God are not yet reconciled. You are not meet for heaven, for one main part of heaven’s excellence is the absence of all sin.

Forgiven souls *love Christ*. This is that one thing they can say if they dare say nothing else: they do love Christ. His person, His offices, His work, His name, His cross, His blood, His words, His example, His day, His ordinances—all, all are precious to forgiven souls. The ministry that exalts Him most is that which they enjoy most. The books that are most full of Him are most pleasant to their minds. The people on earth they feel most drawn to are those in whom they see something of Christ. His name is as ointment poured forth, and comes with a peculiar sweetness to their ears (Song 1:3). They would tell you they cannot help feeling as they do. He is their Redeemer, their Shepherd, their Physician, their King, their strong Deliverer, their gracious Guide, their hope, their joy, their All. Were it not for Him they would be of all men most misera-

¹⁰ meet – fit.

ble. They would as soon consent that you should take the sun out of the sky, as Christ out of their religion. Those people who talk of “the Lord,” and “the Almighty,” and “the Deity,” and so forth, but have not a word to say about Christ, are in anything but a right state of mind. What saith the Scripture? “He that honoureth not the Son, honoureth not the Father which hath sent him” (Joh 5:23). “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema¹¹” (1Co 16:22).

Forgiven souls are **humble**. They cannot forget that they owe all they have and hope for to free grace, and this keeps them lowly. They are brands plucked from the fire, debtors who could not pay for themselves, captives who must have remained in prison forever but for undeserved mercy, wandering sheep who were ready to perish when the Shepherd found them—and what right then have they to be proud? I do not deny that there are proud saints. But this I do say, they are of all God’s creatures the most inconsistent, and of all God’s children the most likely to stumble and pierce themselves with many sorrows. Forgiveness more often produces the spirit of Jacob: “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and all the truth which thou hast showed unto thy servant” (Gen 32:10); and of Hezekiah: “I shall go softly all my years” (Isa 38:15); and of the Apostle Paul: “I am less than the least of all saints...chief of sinners” (Eph 3:8; 1Ti 1:15). When you and I have nothing we can call our own but sin and weakness, there is surely no garment that becomes us so well as humility.

Forgiven souls are **holy**. Their chief desire is to please Him Who has saved them, to do His will, to glorify Him in body and in spirit, which are His. “What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits?” (Psa 116:12) is a leading principle in a pardoned heart. It was the remembrance of Jesus showing mercy that made Paul in labours so abundant, and in doing good so unwearied. It was a sense of pardon that made Zaccheus say, “The half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold” (Luk 19:8). If any one points out to me believers who are in a carnal,¹² slothful state of soul, I reply in the words of Peter, “They have forgotten they were purged from their old sins” (2Pe 1:9). But if you show me a man deliberately living an unholy and licentious life, and yet boasting that his sins are forgiven, I answer, “He is under a ruinous delusion and is not forgiven at all.” I would not believe he is forgiven if an angel from heaven affirmed it, and I charge you not to believe it too. Pardon of sin and love of sin are like oil and water—they will never go together. All that are washed in the blood of Christ are also sanctified by the Spirit of Christ.

Forgiven souls are **forgiving**. They do as they have been done by. They look over the offences of their brethren. They endeavour to “walk in love, as Christ also hath loved” them and gave Himself for them (Eph 5:2). They remember how God for Christ’s sake forgave them, and endeavour to do the same towards their fellow-creatures. Has He forgiven them pounds,¹³ and shall they not forgive a few pence?¹⁴ Doubtless in this, as in every thing else, they come short; but this is their desire and their aim. A spiteful, quarrelsome Christian is a scandal to his profession.¹⁵

It is very hard to believe that such an one has ever sat at the foot of the cross and has ever considered how he is praying against himself every time he uses the Lord’s Prayer: “forgive us our debts, *as we forgive* our debtors” (Mat 6:12). Is he not saying, as it were, “Father, do not for-

¹¹ **Anathema** – *Greek*: cursed.

¹² **carnal** – fleshly; attracted to the world; sensual; natural as opposed to spiritual.

¹³ **pounds** – the basic monetary unit of the United Kingdom.

¹⁴ **pence** – plural for penny. One hundred pence equal one pound.

¹⁵ **profession** – verbal or written expression of faith in Jesus Christ.

give me my trespasses at all”? But it is still harder to understand what such a one would do in heaven if he got there. All ideas of heaven in which forgiveness has not a place, are castles in the air and vain fancies. Forgiveness is the way by which every saved soul enters heaven. Forgiveness is the only title by which he remains in heaven. Forgiveness is the eternal subject of song with all the redeemed who inhabit heaven. Surely an unforgiving soul in heaven would find his heart completely out of tune. Surely we know nothing of Christ’s love to us but the name of it, if we do not love our brethren.

B. Your response to these marks

I cannot conceal from you: these marks should raise in many minds great searchings of heart. I must be plain. I fear there are thousands of persons called Christians who know nothing of these marks. They are baptized. They attend the services of their church. They would not on any account be reckoned infidels. But as to true repentance and saving faith, union with Christ and sanctification of the Spirit, they are “names and words” of which they know nothing at all.

Now, if this paper is read by such persons, it will probably either alarm them or make them very angry. If it makes them angry, I shall be sorry. If it alarms them, I shall be glad. I want to alarm them. I want to awaken them from their present state. I want them to take in the great fact that they are not yet forgiven, that they have not peace with God and are on the high road to destruction.

I must say this, for I see no alternative. It seems neither Christian faithfulness nor Christian charity to keep it back. I see certain marks of pardoned souls laid down in Scripture. I see an utter want¹⁶ of these marks in many men and women around me. How then can I avoid the conclusion that they are not yet “forgiven”? And how shall I do the work of a faithful watchman, if I do not write it down plainly in so many words? Where is the use of crying “Peace! Peace!” when there is no peace (Jer 6:14)? Where is the honesty of acting the part of a lying physician, and telling people there is no danger, when in reality they are fast drawing near to eternal death? Surely the blood of souls would be required at my hands if I wrote to you anything less than the truth. “If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” (1Co 14:8).

Examine yourself, then, before this subject is forgotten. Consider of what sort your religion is. Try it by the five marks I have just set before you. I have endeavoured to make them as broad and general as I can, for fear of causing any heart to be sad that God has not made sad. If you know anything of them, though it be but a little, I am thankful, and entreat you to go forward. But if you know nothing of them in your own experience, let me say, in all affection, I stand in doubt of you. I tremble for your soul.

5. Applications

A. Are you forgiven?

And now, before I conclude, let me put a home¹⁷ question to everyone who reads this paper. It shall be short and plain, but it is all important: “Are you forgiven?”

I have told you all I can about forgiveness. Your need of forgiveness, the way of forgiveness, the encouragements to seek forgiveness, the marks of having found it—all have been placed be-

¹⁶ **want** – lack.

¹⁷ **home** – close, in the sense of bringing the question close to home or heart.

fore you. Bring the whole subject to bear upon your own heart and ask yourself, “Am I forgiven? Either I am, or I am not. Which of the two is it?”

You believe, perhaps, that there is forgiveness of sins. You believe that Christ died for sinners, and that He offers a pardon to the most ungodly. But are you forgiven *yourself*? Have you yourself laid hold on Christ by faith and found peace through His blood? What profit is there to you in forgiveness except you get the benefit of it? Except you lay hold for your own soul, you will be as surely lost as if there was no forgiveness at all.

If ever your sins are to be forgiven, it must be now—now in this life, if ever in the life to come—now in this world, if they are to be found blotted out when Jesus comes again the second time. There must be actual business between you and Christ. Your sins must be laid on Him by faith; His righteousness must be laid on you (2Co 5:21). His blood must be applied to your conscience, or else your sins will meet you in the Day of Judgment and sink you into hell. Oh, how can you trifle when such things are at stake? How can you be content to leave it uncertain whether you are forgiven? Surely that a man can make his will, insure his life, give directions about his funeral, and yet leave his soul’s affairs in uncertainty, is a wonderful¹⁸ thing indeed.

B. A solemn warning to those not forgiven

Let me next give a solemn warning to everyone who reads this paper and knows in his conscience he is not forgiven. Your soul is in awful danger. You may die this year. And if you die as you are, you are lost forever. If you die without pardon, without pardon you will rise again at the last day. There is a sword over your head that hangs by a single hair. There is but a step between you and death. Oh, I wonder that you can sleep quietly in your bed!

You are *not yet forgiven*. Then what have you got by your religion? You go to church. You have a Bible, you have a Prayer-book, and perhaps a Hymn-book. You hear sermons. You join in services. It may be you go to the Lord’s Table. But what have you really got after all? Any hope? Any peace? Any joy? Any comfort? Nothing: literally nothing! You have got nothing but mere temporal things, if you are not a pardoned soul.

You are *not yet forgiven*. But you trust God will be merciful. Yet why should He be merciful if you will not seek Him in His own appointed way? Merciful He doubtless is, wonderfully merciful to all who come to Him in the name of Jesus. But if you choose to despise His directions and make a road to heaven of your own, you will find to your cost there is no mercy for you.

You are *not yet forgiven*. But you hope you will be some day. I cannot away with¹⁹ that expression. It is like thrusting off the hand of conscience and seizing it by the throat to stop its voice. Why are you more likely to seek forgiveness at a future time? Why should you not seek it now? Now is the time for gathering the bread of life. The day of the Lord is fast drawing near, and then no man can work (Joh 9:4; Rev 20:12). The Seventh trumpet will soon sound. The kingdoms of this world will soon become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ (Rev 11:15). Woe to the house that is found without the scarlet line and without the mark of blood upon the door! (Jos 2:18; Exo 12:13).

Well, you may not feel your need of forgiveness now. But a time may come when you will want it. The Lord in mercy grant that it may not then be too late.

¹⁸ **wonderful** – strange, astonishing.

¹⁹ **cannot away with** – cannot bear or endure.

C. An earnest invitation to those desiring forgiveness

Let me next give an earnest invitation to all who read this paper and desire forgiveness. I know not who you are or what you have been in time past, but I say boldly, come to Christ by faith and you shall have a pardon. High or low, rich or poor, young men and maidens, old men and children—you cannot be worse than Manasseh and Paul before conversion, or than David and Peter after conversion—come all of you to Christ, and you shall be freely forgiven.

Think not for a moment that you have some great thing to do before you come to Christ. Such a notion is of the earth, earthy; the gospel bids you come just as you are. Man's idea is to make his peace with God by repentance, and then come to Christ at last; the gospel way is to receive peace from Christ first of all, and begin with Him. Man's idea is to amend, and turn over a new leaf, and so work his way up to reconciliation and friendship with God; the gospel way is first to be friends with God through Christ, and then to work. Man's idea is to toil up the hill and find life at the top; the gospel way is first to live by faith in Christ, and then to do His will.

Come then, willing to receive, and not thinking how much you can bring. Come, willing to take what Christ offers, and not fancying you can give anything in return. Come with your sins, and no other qualification but a hearty desire for pardon, and, as sure as the Bible is true, you shall be saved.

You may tell me you are not worthy, you are not good enough, you are not elect. I answer, You are a sinner, and you want to be saved, and what more do you want? You are one of those whom Jesus came to save. Come to Him and you shall have life. Take with you words, and He will hear you graciously. Tell Him all your soul's necessities, and I know from the Bible He will give heed. Tell Him you have heard He receiveth sinners, and that you are such. Tell Him you have heard He has the keys of life in His hand, and entreat Him to let you in. Tell Him you come in dependence on His own promises, and ask Him to fulfil His word, and "do as [He] has said" (2Sa 7:25). Do this in simplicity and sincerity, and, my soul for yours, you shall not ask in vain. Do this and you shall find Him faithful and just to forgive your sins, and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1Jo 1:9).

D. A word of exhortation to all forgiven souls

Last of all, let me give a word of exhortation to all forgiven souls. You are forgiven. Then know the full extent of your privileges, and learn to rejoice in the Lord. You and I are great sinners, but then we have a great Saviour. You and I have sinned sins that are past man's knowledge, but then we have "the love of Christ, which passeth know-ledge" to rest upon (Eph 3:19). You and I feel our hearts to be a bubbling fountain of evil, but then we have another fountain of greater power in Christ's blood to which we may daily resort. You and I have mighty enemies to contend with, but then the "Captain of our salvation" is mightier still, and is ever with us. Why should our hearts be troubled? Why should we be disquieted and cast down? O men and women of little faith that we are: wherefore do we doubt?

Let us strive every year to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is sad to be content with a little religion. It is honourable to covet²⁰ the best gifts. We ought not to be satisfied with the same kind of hearing, reading, and praying that satisfied us in years gone by. We ought to labour every year to throw more heart and reality into everything we do in our religion. To love Christ more intensely, to abhor evil more thoroughly, to cleave to what is good

²⁰ **covet** – exceedingly desire.

more closely, to watch even our least ways more narrowly, to declare very plainly that we seek a country, to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and be clothed with Him in every place and company—to see more, to feel more, to know more, to do more—these ought to be our aims and desires every year we begin. Truly there is room for improvement in us all!

Let us try to do good to the souls of others, more than we have done hitherto. Alas, it is poor work indeed to be swallowed up in our own spiritual concerns, and taken up with our own spiritual ailments, and never to think of others! We forget that there is such a thing as religious selfishness. Let us count it a sorrowful thing to go to heaven alone, and let us seek to draw companions with us. We ought never to forget that every man, woman, and child around us will soon be either in heaven or hell. Let us say to others, as Moses did to Hobab, “Come with us, and we will do thee good” (Num 10:29). Oh, it is indeed a true saying, “He that watereth shall be watered also himself” (Pro 11:25). The idle, do-little, selfish Christian has little idea what he is missing.

Finally, let us say to everything in the world that interferes between ourselves and Jesus Christ, “Stand aside.” And let us dread allowing ourselves in the least evil habits, lest insensibly they rise up like a mist and hide Him from our eyes. In His light alone shall we see light and feel warmth; separate from Him we shall find the world a dark and cold wilderness (Psa 36:9-12). We should call to mind the request of the Athenian philosopher when the mightiest monarch on earth asked him what he desired most. “I have,” said he, “but one request to make; and that is that you would stand from between me and the sun.” Let this be the spirit in which you and I are found continually. Let us think lightly of the world’s gifts. Let us sit calmly under its cares. Let us care for nothing if we may only ever see the King’s face, if we may only ever abide in Christ.

If our sins are forgiven, our best things are yet to come. Yet a little time, and we shall see “face to face” and “know even as also” we have been known.” We shall “see the king in his beauty” and “go no more out” (1Co 13:12; Isa 33:17; Rev 3:12). Blessed then is “he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” (Psa 32:1).



Questions

for personal reflection and group discussion

The following questions are designed to reinforce understanding and application.

A separate study guide with complete questions covering all aspects of the text also is available, for correspondent, independent, or group study. Contact Mount Zion Bible Institute at the same address or school@mountzion.org.

Our need of forgiveness (1)

1. Why do all men need forgiveness?
2. Describe the ways in which men are guilty sinners.
3. How holy is God? How does this impact our need of salvation?

The way of forgiveness (2)

4. What can our own good works and repentance *not* accomplish? Why?
5. Describe the way of forgiveness.
6.
 - a. What has Christ done for our salvation?
 - b. What is the result of what Christ has done?
7.
 - a. What is required of us in order to receive God's forgiveness?
 - b. How is this different from simply agreeing with the facts of Christ's sacrifice?

Encouragement to be forgiven (3)

8. Using scripture, describe how God's forgiveness is
 - a. "great and broad"
 - b. "full and complete"
 - c. "free and unconditional."

Marks of having found forgiveness (4)

9.
 - a. What does it mean to hate sin?
 - b. What are the two consequences of being friends with sin? Why are these so?
10. Why are forgiven souls humble?
11.
 - a. What is the chief desire of forgiven souls?
Is this your desire?
 - b. Describe the state of a man who boasts that his sins are forgiven, yet lives an unholy life.
12.
 - a. How do forgiven souls treat others?
 - b. What is the unforgiving person saying when he prays the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father...Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Mat 6:12).

Applications (5)

13. Are you forgiven?
14. What is the author's warning to those not forgiven? Can such a person afford to wait?
15. Regarding coming to salvation, contrast man's idea with the gospel way.

16. What do each of the following verses, as used in this booklet, tell us about our need for or God's provision of forgiveness?

- a. Romans 3:23
- b. Romans 6:23
- c. Hebrews 9:27
- d. 1 John 1:8
- e. Psalm 32:1
- f. Psalm 36:9-12
- g. Ephesians 5:2
- h. John 9:4
- i. 1 Corinthians 12:12
- j. 1 John 1:9