

## ARTICLE: Words of Forgiveness

Luther reminds us that confession has two parts: first, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness of sins. Psalm 32 reflects both parts of confession: “I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’ - and You forgave the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32:5). David’s personal account of the two parts of confession is recorded in 2 Samuel 12: “Then David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’ Nathan replied, ‘The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die’” (v. 13).

For a sinner to confess his sins and not hear the assurance of God’s forgiveness is to leave him in a hopeless state of despair. No other word can comfort the guilty conscience. No other counsel can give power for the penitent to amend his sinful life. No other response leads to salvation and life.

When a repentant believer confesses in solitude, he must console himself through Scripture and faith that his sins are forgiven by God. When another believer hears a brother’s admission of sin, that believer fulfils his vocation as ambassador of reconciliation when he declares that God has forgiven his brother’s sins for the sake of Jesus Christ. When the pastor listens to a parishioner’s confession, he speaks of God’s forgiveness because of Jesus’ blood and righteousness.

Only one hearer of the confession can determine for certain whether the penitent is truly repentant. God alone sees into another person’s heart. The rest of us must take care not to withhold the announcement of God’s forgiveness when a sinner repents and confesses. His confession may be weak. It may have holes. It may lack conviction. But who among us sinners can honestly declare that our repentance and confession are complete and perfect before God? Thus, the Good News in Jesus Christ must be proclaimed to one who confesses.

Since the Gospel itself brings about repentance, we encourage a struggling penitent by reminding him of the grace of God in Christ. Paul writes, “Or do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God’s kindness leads you towards repentance?” (Romans 2:4). Sharing the Good News about our Saviour empowers us to live the Christian life, including repentance and confession. Christians sometimes overlook the opportunity to proclaim God’s forgiveness or find it difficult to follow through because of disgust at their brother’s shameful act. But the most significant challenge is announcing personal forgiveness for the person who injured me.

Just as our human nature prompts us to weasel out of admitting sin in confession, that same old Adam prods us to play an angry, merciless “god” when we ought to forgive. Unlike the Lord, who “is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love” (Psalm 103:8), we become indignant and harsh, fuel our anger, hold grudges, stir hatred in our hearts, and commit murder (1 John 3:15). We punish the offender by withholding mercy. Or we demand guarantees as a condition of our forgiveness. Sometimes we torture our aggressor by bringing up past transgressions we so “graciously” forgave before. Without realising what we are doing, we transform into condescending, judgmental gods who resemble the false gods idolised in other religions instead of imitating the true God, who freely forgives us.

In counselling, one man complained to his pastor, “Whenever my wife and I fight, she gets *historical*.” His pastor corrected him, “Don’t you mean *hysterical*?” “No, I mean historical. She brings everything up from the past and throws it in my face!”

Where would you and I be if every time we confessed our sins before God, He would stop us and say, “Just a minute. Let’s review the record, starting with the year you were born . . .” God certainly treats us differently!

Sometimes we declare, “I won’t forgive until I forget!” What if God said He couldn’t forgive us until He forgets? That just wouldn’t work! When God promises, “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:34), it isn’t because He is getting old and suffering from dementia! God chooses not to remember. He makes a decision to forgive.

Then there are those who complain, “I’ve forgiven them. I just don’t want to have anything to do with them. I will never set foot in that accursed building again!” and leave the church. Picture our plight if God asserted, “I forgive you, but I never want to have anything to do with you again. Go in peace, but don’t come back!”

So, a few thoughts about forgiving others may be appropriate.

To help us forgive as God forgives us (Colossians 3:13), Sande recounts four promises of God’s forgiveness (*The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, pp. 189-90). When we forgive, we glorify God and comfort our brother by repeating these same promises. In addition, we avoid some of the temptations that lead us away from biblical forgiveness.

- I will not think about this incident.
- I will not bring this incident up again and use it against you.
- I will not talk to others about this incident.
- I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.

These covenants of love imitate the way that God forgives us. Ambassadors of reconciliation represent their God well when they accurately deliver the message assigned to them.

We know that we are commanded to forgive as God forgives us, but sometimes it seems impossible. Our reluctance to forgive others stems from our inability to grasp the fullness of our own forgiveness in Christ. Peter also struggled with this when he asked Jesus, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). Peter felt confident that his suggestion reflected a most gracious attitude.

Jesus’ answer “seventy-seven times” (v. 22) must have astonished Peter, because it suggested no limitation on the number of times we should forgive. Then, Jesus told the parable of the unmerciful servant, since Peter’s query exposed his lack of faith in the expansiveness of God’s forgiveness for him (Matthew 18:21-35). While Peter attempted to demonstrate his generosity in forgiving others, Jesus’ story pointed back to God’s immeasurable grace for him.