

You may or may not know that on the web you can find places where people anonymously post apologies like the following:

To all of the customers of the local florist who got sneezing powder in their flowers last Tuesday I apologize. You were really not the intended victims. I just wanted to get you angry at the stingy florist who employs me. I wasn't trying to hurt you. Bill

I'm sorry. You were waiting for the car to get out of the parking place so you could back in, and I slid in frontward - I HAD to do this because I was desperate to get into the store so that I could use the mens room, and there were no other spaces. My apologies. I hope you read this and understand. Driver of gray Honda.

To all my high school classmates, I am so sorry for those mornings when I came to school without brushing my teeth. I don't know where I got the idea that if I didn't eat, I didn't need to brush. I know you tried to hint, but I didn't 'get it'.

There are some more serious ones too but...Clearly, some people who post on these sites don't know how to reach those they have wronged, but the desire for reconciliation is so strong in them...that in the off chance that the victim might just read the apology these are posted...in order that reconciliation or at least understanding could possibly be attained.

We crave reconciliation with others.

As Horace Bushnell famous classic preacher and author said ...**"Forgiveness is our deepest need and highest achievement."**

We have a need to make it right...deep down we want our relationships to be healed. There's something godly in us I think that wants to right a wrong, and create peace where there might be enmity.

Paul Tillich was a 20th century existentialist theologian and he wrote the following:

"Forgiveness is an answer, the divine answer, to the question implied in our existence."

Now that may seem a little heady for you but I would suggest that there are at least three questions "implied in our existence" to which forgiveness is God's answer.

How do I keep bitterness, anger, hate or the desire for revenge from consuming me if I have been treated wrongly?

How can I be reconciled to the one I wronged if I have acted poorly?

How can my burden of guilt be removed?

Everyone of us asks questions like these and that's why God's answer of forgiveness is relevant to us all...our existence begs these questions..

At some point all of us have been wronged; at some point we've all failed to intervene to stop someone else from being wronged, and in one way or another we've all wronged others.

If we are not to spend our lives stumbling in the dark as wounded angry human beings we must know and carry with us the ANSWER: GOD'S ANSWER for living an abundant life of joy and freedom is...Forgiveness

So we get that. FORGIVENESS IS GODS ANSWER FOR LIFE.

HOWEVER in order to talk about forgiveness we have to back pedal a little and first talk about a less popular topic which is the topic of SIN.

A Sunday School teacher asked her class one morning..."What do you need to do class to receive forgiveness in Jesus name?" And a boy raised his hand and said "First, you've gotta sin."

If we don't understand SIN we will not understand Forgiveness...

The reason we don't like to talk about SIN is because it brings to mind preachers who use the word to beat people down, or to frighten and intimidate children...applying it to all sorts of acts that aren't really sin - in the old times some of you have told me sin was equated to going to the movies to learning to dance.

But Doctors study medicine *not* so they can go around telling people they are sick, but so they can heal those who are sick...but the healing can't happen until people admit that they are sick. Healing comes, after the diagnosis is made. Right...?

So we speak of sin in order to diagnose the spiritual state of us all.

The Greek and Hebrew words most often translated as sin in the Bible refer to “missing the mark” (as an archer would miss a target) or “straying from the path”.

That's the definition of sin.

And whether you have faith or not usually most of us would agree that there is a way we're meant to live...an ideal path we should take.

And most of us would agree that we don't always do that so well. We stray at times. We miss the mark. The human condition strays...just like sheep stray off and get lost. That's why Jesus was always comparing humans to sheep...

That old hymn...theology wonderful in the hymns...I think I've quoted this one before but its “Come thou Fount of Every Blessing”

*Prone to wander, Lord I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love...*

I am prone to get
drawn away from the path I am supposed to be on

And God has given us this profound, wonderful and dreadful gift – Its called freedom...freedom to walk on the path or stray away from it.

God loves us too much to control us...love does not control people...God seeks a free choice from people to love him back And we often don't choose that path to love God wholeheartedly- we miss the mark....

Its all there, in the first story of the Bible, the book of Genesis....Adam and Eve... straying away, separating themselves from God...missing the mark That's our story too....

Sometimes we stray from the path or miss the mark without even realizing it.

Like when I get pulled over for speeding. Half the time I don't know how fast I'm going. I don't know that I've missed the mark as far as the speed limit is concerned

Adam Hamilton, pastor of the church of the resurrection in Kansas said once when he was speeding and got pulled over he handed the officer his license and said "Sorry, I wasn't paying attention." And that comment actually made the officer give him a second ticket. He was supposed to be paying attention...(of course that's Kansas...I never want to move there...)

Although some of our sin...or our straying from the path is *inadvertent.... other times we make a conscious decision to stray.*

I still remember cheating on a test in school. I remember making the conscious decision to copy off of someone else's paper. I knew I was supposed to be honest but I made the conscious choice not to be. I still remember it to this day... I was determined to ACE the test no matter what (and I didn't even do that because the person I copied off of was wrong) When I did this...I became more important than God.

And over time...the more I start thinking about me, and what will benefit me, I begin thinking less and less about you.

I ignore what is right, I ignore your feelings while seeking to avoid suffering myself.

The more I become the center of the universe, the more I will hurt you and you may well hurt me, and the gap between us widens.

This distance...the gap between you and me...and ultimately between me and God is what we call SIN.

Sin is this gulf...this distance...this irreparable breach..between me and you...and us and God

And when we decide at last to close that GAP...to heal the breach...we must seek out the answer God has provided:

FORGIVENESS

So what are we really looking for then...when we ask to be forgiven?

We are looking for reconciliation, and for the restoration of our relationships.

We are asking the other person to give up their right to retaliate. We are asking for a mending of the gap...

And I know you have a lot of questions right now about specific situations that you may be in...today is a general overview of Gods forgiveness of us – but what I have in the back is a basket with some paper...and if you have a specific concern you want me to address next week in this series on forgiveness I will...

When Tim and I have a conflict, usually because of something insensitive that I have said, I will ask him to forgive me...and what I am asking him to do is to not let what I have done or said separate me from him.

I am asking him not to hold my offense in such a way that there is a gap between us.

My desire is to be in right relationship with him again.

And once there is pardon and restoration...we as a couple...get back on the right path again.

Up until that point, I just don't feel good. Its like I'm carrying a burden, an ache in my heart, I don't feel connected to Tim and I am just going through the motions really, until we are back in right relationship together.

What a lot of people don't understand is that as much as I long to be in right relationship with this or that person...

God desires in the same way to be in right relationship with me

Its God's intense and eternal longing to make what is wrong right; we sin, we stray, we miss the mark

And God says...Here...let me right this wrong on the cross

And God knows that the only way, human nature being what it is can be righted, is if he continually, constantly and eternally holds out his nail scarred hand of forgiveness to us...

See this provision to make right a sinful people and put them together in a new way with a righteous God comes with a price...the death of Jesus...this is not cheap grace by any stretch...God himself comes and hangs on a cross and says this is how much I want to close the gap between us.

Reminds me of a story and this happened way back when I was a kid in the Vietnam War era. One night... a terrifying night mortar rounds pummeled a small village orphanage run by Christian missionaries. The missionaries and two children were killed outright. Several more were wounded, including one 8 year old girl.

The villagers, seeking medical help, raced to a neighboring village which had contact with the American forces. A navy doctor and nurse arrived to triage the wounded. Being the most critically wounded, the little 8 year old girl would die without a transfusion. Using improvised sign language and "pigeon" Vietnamese, the American medical team tried to explain the need for a blood donor. There wasn't time to consider if the donor was a match.

With some blood, the girl "might" live. Without it she would surely die. The villagers strained to understand what the

doctor and nurse were requesting. After a long silence a young boy named Heng raised his hand. The doctor thanked him profusely and laid him on a pallet, swabbed his arm, and inserted the needle.

Heng began to cry. The doctor inquired if the needle was hurting him. Heng shook his head no. Soon the tears gave way to sobs. Again the doctor inquired if he was in pain. Once again Heng answered that he was not. By this time a Vietnamese nurse arrived and she began speaking to young Heng, trying to quell his tears. Suddenly, a look of relief came over his face and the tears ceased. "He thought he was dying," said the nurse. "He misunderstood you. He thought you had asked him to give all his blood so the girl could live."

Heng didn't have to die to save the girl, but Jesus had to die to save us from our sin. He willingly stepped forward In an act of complete surrender and perfect love for his creation
And that is why....

More than any other world religion, Christianity teaches, preaches, veritably shouts FORGIVENESS!!

Christianity is a faith whose central focus is not guilt, but grace, redemption, healing, and mercy.

God wants to relieve us of the burden that comes with a life of sin, and to set our feet back on the right path.

That's why Jesus came.

Story after story we read that Jesus spent time with "sinners"
People who knew what their diagnosis was.

Jesus forgave prostitutes, tax collectors, and adulterers. His last words on the cross? Father forgive them for they know not what they do...

Even in the Old Testament before Jesus we see in the pages of the Hebrew Scripture words that speak to us of the abundant forgiveness of God. The Scripture we read today...from

Isaiah 40:1-2 "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins."

When we read this we might think that this last part means double punishment, but actually it means something entirely different

Let me explain the context...

You may know that we have racked up a national debt of over 14 trillion dollars and an average per capita consumer debt of over \$51K neatly tucked away in personal equity lines of credit, revolving charge cards and the like. It's easy to hide that kind of debt. Our account statements are discretely delivered to our email accounts or curbside mail boxes. It's a private thing...

But not too long ago, one's personal debt was all too public a thing.

In ancient times, when the OT was written, and even in some modern cultures today, unpaid debt was posted openly.

The offended party or lender would write the amount of the debt on a piece of parchment, and publically display it, often on the debtor's own front door or doorpost.

(It was this same practice that inspired Martin Luther, to nail his 95 "charges" against the established church onto the door of the Wittenberg Chapel, publically shaming the hierarchy and effectively launching the Protestant Reformation.)

When a debt was finally paid in full, the open proclamation of debt would then **be doubled over (folded in half) then nailed back in place** to demonstrate that the debtor had been duly released from obligation.

This is a vivid and beautiful picture of the price Christ paid on our behalf to release us from the obligation of debt for our sins *"by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross"* (*Colossians 2:14*).

This **forgiveness** of debt then was in fact what Isaiah was referring to when he stated that the people of Israel had received from the Lord "double for all her sins" (Isaiah 40:1–2): Here the context is clearly **forgiveness** —not that they were punished twice as much as they deserved, but that the decree of debt against them was "doubled over" and marked "paid in full." And as Colossians said...nailed to the cross.

What a picture of grace!

And again in the OT we read it at the beginning but lets read it now...together to remind us who our God...

The Lord is merciful and gracious

Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love

He does not deal with us according to our sins

Nor repay us according to our iniquities

For as the heavens are high above the earth

So great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him

As far as the east is from the west

So far does he remove our transgressions from us

This is the extravagant grace that is God's heart and character. Even before Jesus, people who walked closely with the God of Israel knew this to be his true nature...

We sometimes fail to understand and experience God's grace, which is offered freely to us and we continue to carry burdens that we have acquired as a result of our sin

These burdens God has already paid the price to remove...through his forgiveness

Having been a pastor for many years I hear all kinds of things that break my heart because people continue to carry guilt and burdens around with them when they don't have to...

Things like "*I struggle almost daily. I see how God works in other people's lives, but in my own, I struggle. I know that*

God loves me no matter what I've done or been in my life, but I really don't feel that way at the core of my being."

Or someone once said, *"In the military I took lives. Standing in close proximity to someone and taking their life at the same time changes you. It was impossible to imagine God forgiving me for something that I could not forgive myself for doing."*

Many women have had abortions and one woman couldn't come back to church after she had this done. Years later she remembered the exact month and date that the child would have been born. And years later it was still eating her up inside. She wouldn't come to church, – but church was exactly what she needed to be.

Another woman who had similar story, did manage to slip into the pew Sundays. She told me later, *"As I listened gradually I began to sense the Holy Spirit edging his way into my heart and I was slowly healed. It was a gentle process of hope pushin its way into my heaviness and my beginning to believe that I was truly forgiven. And it was such a relief. I didn't have to carry around this heaviness any longer."*

Neither do you.

God has already agreed to reconcile you to himself. He longs for a right relationship with us even more than we do with him. We often fail to trust that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love...and that "as far as the east

is from the west, so far shall he remove his transgressions from us.”

In another of his sermons Tillich said, that **the bottom line of faith is accepting God’s acceptance of you.**

How do we accept his acceptance? We repent. We ask for forgiveness. God I want to get back on the right path again freed from the burdens of my missing the mark....Then we pray help me to know I am forgiven...

What does repent really mean? Well..

Repentance in the Greek is the word “**metanoia**”. It means “to have a change of heart, that results in a change of behavior”.

You can’t toy with God on this one. You can’t play around. This isn’t a half hearted thing you engage in. Oh sorry...Repenting means a heart that is sincere and a will that endeavors to change behavior too...really important for people to understand...

But once you really mean it, and your heart is in it..it isn’t complicated

(Play underneath quietly...just as I am)

So right now lets go to prayer, and receive forgiveness from a gracious God who longs to forgive, and whose already paid the price for this...

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Maybe there’s something you’ve kept hidden, that you have been holding for a long time, that you would like Jesus to hold

for you...you've felt guilty about it for so long...but from this day forth, you don't want to carry this burden anymore...its been eating away at you....this heaviness about something, or even a lack hope for the future....despair can pull us off the path the same way dishonesty can or any other sin...

Just spend a moment, maybe theres nothing, but my hunch is there are a lot of you carrying things you don't need to carry...ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind anything you might not be aware of that has gotten you off track...you know sometimes we carry this stuff around for so long we get used to being weighed down and...we forget what forgiveness and freedom feels like...

If something comes to mind, see yourself handing it to Jesus...and pray with me now..

Lord Jesus I am aware of the GAP between us and that I am prone to wander, to miss the mark. But I also know that because you love me so much you desire more than I do that I be in right relationship with you.

So Lord, I am sorry...I repent with my whole heart; if I have missed the mark with another person I pray you would give me the courage to try to make amends...But I repent wholeheartedly - I hand over my sin to you - and I receive right now your acceptance of me...your forgiveness of me...Just as I am.

And as I accept your forgiveness of me... give me the grace to forgive others. You did it for me. I can do it for them. I pray

this in the name of Jesus Christ who shed his blood for me –
to make my freedom possible...

Amen