

## FORGIVENESS

-- The Rev. D. B. Knox  
Broadcast 2CH 25 November 1962.

Forgiveness is one of the deepest experiences of life. To know that one has been truly forgiven rolls away a great weight from our consciences. This is true when forgiveness is extended to us by one of our fellows and it is especially true when we realise that God fully forgives those sins by which we have wronged Him. Christianity is characterised by forgiveness, and when we speak of a Christian spirit we mostly mean a forgiving spirit. Outside of Christianity the forgiving spirit is often mistaken for weakness and pusillanimity.

Right from the earliest pages of the Bible, God has declared that He is a forgiving God. Thus in Exodus 34, when God declared His character to Moses, He said that He was "The Lord, a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin". Also the prophet Isaiah, speaking in God's name, said that if people would truly repent, God would blot out their sins, saying "Come now, and let us reason together, said the Lord, though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow, though they be as red as crimson they shall be as wool".

God's forgiveness is so complete that He describes it as forgetfulness. When He forgives, He never brings our sins to mind again. The Bible uses different pictures to describe the completeness of God's forgiveness. It says God puts our sins behind His back, or He blots them out as a thick cloud, or He casts them into the depths of the sea, or as in Psalm 103, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us". The point of all these descriptions is that our sins are completely obliterated from God's sight through forgiveness.

Our Lord Jesus Christ underlined the free forgiveness of God. At the same time He emphasised that if we are to enjoy God's forgiveness we must have a spirit of forgiving others ourselves; and He set us the example, by praying for those who were crucifying Him, saying, "Father, forgive them".

God's forgiveness is free, but it is not groundless; for it rests upon the fact that the Son of God became man that He might take on Himself the penalty we deserve, but which would crush us to powder. As St. Peter says "He bore our sins in His body on the tree", and as Isaiah puts it "The Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all". If we bear the penalty it will sink us down to Hell. But by becoming man Jesus took our curse so as to set us free from it. Forgiveness is free to us, although it was costly to God. Now through Jesus Christ full forgiveness is offered to sinners. The whole Bible unites in affirming that God freely forgives those who turn to Him with repentance for their sins and in faith in His promise to forgive them for Jesus Christ's sake.

If we enquire, How may we obtain God's forgiveness, the answer is that forgiveness is for the asking, if we ask in sincerity, repentance and faith. This is reflected in the Lord's Prayer where Jesus taught us to ask daily for forgiveness using the words "Heavenly Father, forgive us our trespasses". So then when we realise that God forgives, and that we need forgiveness, the way to obtain it is to ask for it. Nothing more. St. Paul says in Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus", and St. John could not make more clear the fact that God forgives all who ask in Jesus' name, when he wrote in I John 1:9 "If we acknowledge our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness", and again, "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin".

One of the criticisms Protestants bring against the Roman Catholic Church is that the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance obscures God's act of giving of free, immediate and complete forgiveness to all who come to Him in Christ's name in repentance. The Roman Catholic doctrine may



be illustrated from the Catechism of the Council of Trent which states "A person ... is bound to confess his sins to a priest, since there is no other salvation for one whose conscience is burdened with sins". Again under the title "The Sacrament of Penance", the Catechism states "It is so much the special province of Penance to remit sins that it is impossible to obtain or even to hope for remission of sins by any other means". We immediately ask why, if the sacrament is so necessary, is there no reference to it in the Bible, for example, in the teaching of our Lord or of the Apostles. The Bible knows nothing of the sacrament of Penance, but rather teaches, over and over again, that God forgives freely all who come to Him by prayer in Christ's name. However, the Roman Catholic Church still continues to teach that the sacrament of Penance is the only way of forgiveness. Thus Don Francesco Lacueva, who was a Canon in the Roman Catholic Church in Spain, and was for 14 years Professor of Theology there but who has been converted by the witness of a Protestant pastor, writes in this week's copy of the magazine called "Christianity To-day" that Roman Catholics in Spain as elsewhere are taught "that the forgiveness of sins is unobtainable save through full and complete confession of each sin to a priest, who uses authority vested in him, known as that of 'the keys', to free the penitent from sin". He adds "How far removed all this is from the glorious simplicity of the truth in the Gospel". Scripture explains salvation as a loving call from a forgiving God who demands only a personal response of faith from man, in humble and complete surrender, without any need of the mediation of a priest or an ecclesiastical organisation". And he adds "Roman dogma stands revealed as accretions to the Word of God over the centuries, piling up into unweildy, grotesque superstructures". This, as I say, is a quotation from Don Francisco Lacueva, the converted Roman Catholic Canon and Professor.

Indeed the sacrament of Penance is an example of just such an accretion to the Word of God and as it is taught by the Roman Catholic Church it certainly seems a topsy turvy super structure full of contradictions. First there is the distinction made in the sacrament between contrition and attrition. Contrition is the term used to describe that sorrow for sin which arises when we realise that we have sinned against our Heavenly Father. Thus David experienced contrition when he confessed to the prophet Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord". On David's repentance and confession, the prophet was able to assure David straight away of God's forgiveness, saying, "The Lord hath put away thy sin". The same contrition is expressed in Psalm 51 when the psalmist writes "Against thee only have I sinned and done this wickedness in thy sight". Roman Catholic theologians acknowledge that in Old Testament times such contrition or sorrow for sin procured God's forgiveness. However, in order to find a place for the Sacrament of Penance, they are constrained to say that now that Christ has come, God does not forgive so freely as in Old Covenant days, but that now forgiveness can only be obtained through the sacrament of Penance. Such a position is of course, absurd, and were it true it would mean that the Old Covenant is superior to the New Testament.

Roman Catholic theologians seek to avoid this conclusion by saying that the sacrament of Penance procures the forgiveness of sins in the absence of contrition or godly sorrow for sin. A distinction is made between contrition, that is sorrow for one's sins committed against a holy and loving God, and what is called 'attrition' which is a regret for having sinned, though it need have no reference to grieving God, but which may simply be no more than fright at impending consequences. (The matter is discussed by Ott in his book "Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma" p.430). This attrition is said to be sufficient for attaining full forgiveness from God, but only if the sinner comes to the sacrament of Penance even though there is not the slightest sorrow, either before coming or after coming, for having sinned against God. How deceived the sinner is if he is trusting to such a way of forgiveness or on such terms. For the Bible makes clear that God looks for true sorrow for sins. But the Roman Catholic Church, in order to justify the sacrament of Penance, is compelled to lower the concept of forgiveness by teaching that forgiveness may be obtained through the sacrament by those who have not full contrition.

There is another contradiction in the teaching about the sacrament of penance. Roman Catholic Church teaches that the words of the priest "I absolve thee", actually forgive the sins. As the Catechism of Trent puts it "the absolution announced in the words of the priest expresses