

THE WAY OF FORGIVENESS

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"The Protestant Faith"

When our conscience becomes burdened with the remembrance of something wrong that we have done, there is no peace till the sense of guilt has been lifted by forgiveness. This is a universal experience by no means confined to Christianity. Sometimes in pagan religions very costly sacrifices are made and great austerities are undergone by those who feel conscious that their god is displeased with them. These sacrifices and austerities are undertaken in the hope of expiating the wrong, and obtaining their god's good will once more.

However, one of the most important and precious truths the Scripture reveals is that God does not have to be persuaded to be willing to forgive. Right at the beginning of the Bible in Exodus 34 God made Himself known as a God full of compassion, gracious, slow to anger, plenteous in mercy and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. This character of God which the Bible reveals is in contrast to what our human heart naturally imagines - we picture God to be like ourselves, we have to be persuaded to forgive: so we imagine that God too is naturally reluctant to forgive, and that He has to be persuaded to be propitious by the intensity of our prayer or sacrifice. The Bible teaching, however, is clear, that forgiveness is freely bestowed by God on all who ask in sincerity. Isaiah put it in poetical language, "Ho! everyone that thirsteth, come you to the waters and you who have no money, come buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." We see, then, that God's forgiveness is free, given most willingly.

It is not as though God is unrighteous in forgiving, for His free forgiveness of our disobedience is based on the perfect obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ when He made a full sacrifice and complete satisfaction for our sins at Calvary. It was God Himself who provided at His own cost this way of free forgiveness. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes on Him should not perish but have eternal life": This free and instantaneous forgiveness through the death of Christ to all who ask in faith was dramatically illustrated in the story of the jailer of Philippi who had been stirred to a sense of guilt by the earth-

quake. He called to Paul and his companion who were his prisoners "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" and received the immediate reply: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved and thy house."

It is the trusting look to God in Christ that brings forgiveness. This is as it should be, for such a look honours God in His character of a forgiving and merciful Father and in His provision a Saviour. To look elsewhere than to God and His promises, is nothing less than idolatry, for it is putting one's trust in that which is other than God. Yet the fact is, of course, that idolatry is so natural to men that a great number of people, in all the Christian churches, are in fact looking elsewhere than to the promise of God to obtain the needed forgiveness. Some look to their own efforts such as turning over a new leaf; some to their religious activities, whether it is Church going, praying, or teaching Sunday School; some look to the intensity of their faith; some look to the Sacraments, which Christ instituted to assist our faith but not to be the object of our faith. In this respect the Roman Catholic Catechism of the Council of Trent is very illuminating. It teaches explicitly that we are to look for forgiveness to the Sacraments of Baptism and Penance. It states "All, unless they are regenerated by God through the grace of Baptism are born to eternal misery and destruction". It states further, "Infant children have no other means of salvation except Baptism" and Archbishop Sheehan, a former Roman Catholic Coadjutor Bishop of Sydney, has written in his book "Apologetics and Catholic Doctrine", "The Sacrament of Baptism (received in fact, in desire,) is absolutely necessary for salvation".

Similarly it is taught by the Roman Catholic Church that their Sacrament of Penance is the only way of forgiveness for sins committed after baptism. The Catechism of Trent states that everyone is "bound to confess his sins to a priest, since there is no other salvation for one whose conscience is burdened with sin." Again, under the heading "The Necessity of the Sacrament of Penance" the Catechism states "It is so much the special providence of penance to remit sins that it is impossible to obtain or even to hope for remission of sins by any other means." The teaching of

the Bible, however, does not bear out these statements of the Roman Catholic Catechism. The Bible speaks only of faith in God. So much so that St. Paul can write to the Corinthians "I thank God I baptised none of you save Crispus" (etc) "For God sent me not to baptise but to preach the gospel". We have in the Bible a clear example of a man saved by simple faith apart from baptism, namely the repentant thief. Christ assured this man of his salvation as soon as he had confessed penitence and expressed faith in Christ. It is merely a verbal quibble to say that he implicitly desired baptism, of which he had no knowledge. The Roman Catholic doctrine of the absolute necessity of baptism for salvation is plainly contradicted in his case. The matter becomes more obvious when it is recalled that the children of Bethlehem who were slain by King Herod at the time of our Lord's birth have always been regarded by the Church as enjoying the bliss of Heaven. It is straining reason to say that these children, many of them unconscious babes, dying a violent death, implicitly desired baptism, while other children dying an equally violent death, equally unbaptised, are shut out of the bliss of Heaven, and confined in limbo infantum, because they lack baptism. Yet this is what the Roman Catholic Church teaches.

With regard to the Roman Catholic teaching that the sacrament of penance is absolutely necessary to the forgiveness of sins for those who sin after baptism, it need only be mentioned that there is no trace of any teaching about the sacrament of penance in the Scripture, which may surprise Roman Catholics in view of the fact that the Catechism of the Council of Trent establishes the absolute necessity of penance by quoting from the Bible Luke 13:3 "Unless you do penance you should all likewise perish", and adding "These words were said by our Lord in reference to grievous and mortal sins". But this supposed necessity for the sacrament of penance is based on a clear mistranslation of the Bible, as reference to Monsignor Ronald Knox' translation will show. There we read that our Lord did not say, "unless you do penance", but "Unless you repent you shall all likewise perish", which is, of course, exactly what Protestants believe; namely that it is

repentance towards God, not the undergoing of the sacrament of penance, that brings forgiveness. Repentance, the change of mind towards God, the turning to Him, the looking to Him for forgiveness; this it is that brings God's forgiveness, according to the Bible teaching, because this turning to God honours God in His most characteristic attribute, namely that He is indeed a God full of mercy and forgiveness, promising and providing pardon to all who ask in repentance.

To direct the burdened sinner to look elsewhere for forgiveness than to God as He has made known to us in the promises in His Word is a most serious matter. It obscures the glory of God, and encourages penitents to rest in the performance of a rite and ordinance, rather than to rest in God. The Christian sacraments were instituted by Christ to strengthen our faith in God by focussing our faith on God's promises and provision in Christ. They were not instituted to be the object of our faith on which we were to rely. We look through them to God, and when we look through them to God, then they glorify God; but if our faith turns from God and looks at the sacraments and rests in them, we are greatly deceived and they become a snare to us.

Christ's call to the burdened sinner is clear: "Come unto me all you who travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest". "He that comes to me shall not hunger, and he that believes on me shall never thirst", and "Him that comes to me I will in no wise cast out."

May we hear and believe this word of Christ and act on it by coming to Him with our sins, for His forgiveness.

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