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Forgiveness

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LEADER'S GUIDE

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FOCUS ON FORGIVENESS

What is forgiveness? What does it mean, and what does it do? It is foundational and central to our Christian faith and life, both before God and in relation to our neighbor. It's also one of the few theological terms that gets used routinely in everyday life. It even surfaces in pop culture, no doubt because it is simply impossible to navigate life in the world without some means of dealing with offenses, getting over hurts and insults, and bearing the burdens of daily aggravations. Relationships depend on some manner of forgiveness or else they fall apart. Yet it may be that forgiveness has such a common place in our discourse that we take it for granted without really considering what it is and does. Defining the term is challenging because it seems self-evident, even though we also recognize how difficult it is to practice forgiveness or to live without it.

In looking at forgiveness as it is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and taught by the Lutheran Confessions, we learn forgiveness from the Lord who loves us and forgives us. He is the author of forgiveness. It is in love and mercy that He deals with us poor sinners at His own expense, not counting our trespasses against us, but reconciling us to Himself in Christ Jesus. He repairs the brokenness in our relationship with Him and with each other, and He brings us into His own divine life in faith and love. He obtains this for-

giveness by the sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross and by His resurrection from the dead. He bestows this forgiveness upon us in His Church on earth by the ministry of His Gospel. So do we also learn from Him to forgive one another as He daily and richly forgives us for Jesus' sake.

It is clear, in considering this Gospel of Christ Jesus, that such genuine forgiveness of sins offers a significant contrast to the world's concept and use of the term.

The leader may initiate reflection and conversation as to the ways forgiveness is used, understood and practiced in pop culture, the news media and social networks, in the workplace and in everyday relationships (among Christians and non-Christians).

In the forgiveness of the Gospel, we are not dealing with something done for the sake of self, nor with bargains, conditions, excuses, flattery or manipulative maneuvers, but with the atonement, redemption and reconciliation that Christ our Lord has accomplished for us and all the world by His divine grace without any merit or worthiness on the part of the sinners whom He saves. What He alone has achieved for us and gives to us by His Word of the Gospel, we receive solely by repentant faith in Christ Jesus

THE REVELATION OF FORGIVENESS IN THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

The basic terminology of forgiveness (*slh* and *ns'* in Hebrew, *aphiemi* and *aphesis* in Greek) is used significantly, but not frequently, in the Holy Scriptures. Classical usage of the Greek terms identifies the remission of financial debt or release from some legal obligation. This background informs a theological understanding and usage of the same terms for the removal of sin: to cover the debt of faith, love and obedience owed the Lord and to set free from the bondage of death. But the terms must be interpreted by the way they are used by the Lord in speaking to His people, and other terms must also be considered, which convey His forgiveness in a variety of ways.

Psalm 85:1–7 and Col. 2:13–14 are particularly rich in describing the forgiveness of sins. According to these two passages, what does forgiveness entail, both positively and negatively?

Forgiveness includes the setting aside of anger, the covering of sins, the canceling of debts, a release from captivity

and rescue from hostile enemies, a restoration of peace and harmony with God and the granting of His life and salvation.

Consider the following passages as well, and identify some of the other terms and images that are used in the Holy Scriptures to explain and extol the Lord's forgiveness of sins:

Is. 43:25; 44:21–23; 55:6–7; Jer. 31:34; 33:4–9; Ps. 25:7; 41:4; 51:1–13; 78:38; 79:8–9

See also Ezek. 36:22–35 (37:23); Zech. 3:3–5

Using a variety of Hebrew terms, the passages describe the Lord's forgiveness of sins as healing, as mercy, as purification or cleansing, as covering or atonement, as removing or transferring sin from one to another and as not remembering past sins.

In the Septuagint (LXX), *aphesis* (forgiveness) is used for the release and liberty of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25). This is noteworthy in view of our Lord's preaching at the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:16–21). He there identifies

Himself and His Word as the fulfillment of the Jubilee, “the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:19; see also Is. 61:1–3 and Jer. 34:8–17). He releases the people from bondage and restores them to the place the Lord appointed for them.

This point can be compared to Luther’s familiar explanation of the second article of the creed.

As time permits, consider and discuss Augsburg Confession XX.15–34.¹ The Gospel of Christ is the Jubilee that releases terrified consciences from the bondage of sin and death and brings the Christian into Sabbath rest with God and newness of life in Christ.

How might Luke 15 be understood as a paradigm for the Lord’s forgiveness of His people?

The Lord seeks out the lost, rescues them from the consequences of their sin and welcomes them to Himself. He does not hold their past transgressions against them, but rejoices in their reconciliation. He calls and gathers them by His Word to live in fellowship with Himself.

In order to understand forgiveness, it is necessary to know that it originates with the Lord, not by any necessity or compulsion, but out of the divine goodness of His being. It is His nature always to have mercy on account of the Father’s eternal love for His Son, and the Son for His Father in the Holy Spirit. The Lord creates all things for the sake of this love, and so does He also forgive His fallen creatures for the sake of His own divine and holy love (1 John 4:7–10).

A pivotal word of the Lord identifying His essential character as a compassionate and forgiving God is given to Moses at Mt. Sinai, following the apostasy of Israel with the golden calf. Study Ex. 34:5–9.

You might also compare Num. 14:17–21; Daniel 9:7–19; and Neh. 9:16–23.

After the people sinned with the golden calf, God threatened that He would not go up with them, lest He destroy them, because they were such an obstinate people (Ex. 33:3). Moses, however, on the basis of the Lord’s self-revelation — according to His Word and promise and for His own name’s sake — pleaded with God to go up with the people, lest they perish. Precisely because they are such an obstinate people, they cannot survive without the Lord’s forgiveness.

As Moses, Daniel and the Levites prayed and interceded for Israel on the basis of God’s mercy, so then do His people confess His name and praise Him for the mercy and forgiveness He has shown. For example, see Micah 7:18–19

and Ps. 103:2–13.

The same Lord God reveals Himself in mercy in the incarnation, cross and resurrection of the Father’s beloved Son. Take note of Rom. 1:16–17; 3:21–26; Titus 3:4–7; and 1 Peter 1:17–21.

Consider, too, the prayer of Psalm 130.

The forgiveness of God is not simply what He does, but a gracious self-revelation of who and what He is, and a manifestation of His own righteousness by which He justifies the ungodly.

Forgiveness originates with God and flows from His mercy and love. But it is not accomplished by a simple act of His will. He repairs the ruptured relationship between Himself and man from the inside-out. He enters into the brokenness in order to establish reconciliation, faith and love. There is a putting to death of sin with its underlying causes (unbelief) and its consequences (death and damnation). There is the sacrifice of God Himself, whereby He opens up the way of repentance and faith for His people. There is the absolute trust of the Son in His Father and the glorification of the Son by the Father, that the world might be reconciled to God in Christ Jesus.

In preparation for the coming of the Christ, the Lord catechized His people through sacrifices of atonement as the means of His forgiveness (Lev. 16:2–22, 29–34; Is. 53:4–6, 10–12). As the blood of bulls, goats and lambs was shed for the sons of Israel, so has the blood of Christ, the Son of God, been shed upon the cross for the atonement and redemption of the whole world. He has taken upon Himself the sins of all people and borne them away in His own sacrificial death (John 1:29; 1 Peter 2:21–24; 1 John 2:1–2, 12; Heb. 9:11–22).

There is no forgiveness of sins apart from the shedding of the blood of Christ.

The fact that His cross has obtained the forgiveness of sins is confirmed and manifested in His resurrection from the dead in which the Father vindicates and glorifies His Son on our behalf. Therefore, His cross and resurrection are proclaimed together as the Gospel of our salvation (Acts 5:30–31; 10:38–43; 13:29–39; 1 Cor. 15:3–5, 13–20; Rom. 4:25).

The preaching of the cross and resurrection is the preaching of repentance and forgiveness.

In the Old Testament, the Lord instituted various rites and ceremonies of sacrifice as the means of grace and forgiveness for His people (Lev. 4:1–7). He also caused His name and His glory to dwell in the temple as the locus of His forgiveness (1 Kings 8:27–53; Is. 6:5–7).

1 Tappert, T. G., ed. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 45–45.

The priestly ministry of the Old Testament pointed forward to the coming of the Christ, who is our merciful and great High Priest in all things pertaining to God (Heb. 2:17). He has also provided new ways and means of grace and forgiveness in the ministry of His Gospel by which He now distributes and bestows the fruits and benefits of His cross and resurrection. Examine the following passages with a view toward the centrality of forgiveness in the pastoral ministry: Luke 1:76–79; 24:46–47; 2 Cor. 5:18–21; Matt. 18:12–20; 26:27–28.

For further study, look at Luke 3:3–6; Mark 1:4; 1 Peter 3:21; Acts 22:16; Matt. 9:1–8; 28:18–20; Acts 26:15–18; John 20:19–23; Matt. 16:17–19; Matt. 20:20–28; Heb. 10:8–25.

The special authority that Christ has obtained by His cross and resurrection, which He gives to His Church on earth in the ministry of the Gospel, is the authority to forgive sins. It is with that authority that pastors are called and sent to preach repentance in His name unto faith in His forgiveness of sins. It is the foundation of the Church and the center of her life in Christ, the gift of Holy Baptism to which she daily returns and the first benefit of the Holy Supper, from which all of the other benefits of life and salvation in Christ derive.

As the forgiveness of sins is freely distributed by grace alone, for Jesus' sake, so is it freely received in repentance and faith. It is not that God's forgiveness is contingent upon a human response but that His reconciliation of the world in Christ Jesus can only be embraced by faith. He does not compel us with brute force, but He woos us to Himself in love through the Gospel that we might be turned away from our sin and death to fear, love and trust in Him as our God.

Identify the way that repentant faith receives the forgiveness of sins in the following passages: Ps. 32:1–7; Rom. 4:1–9; Mark 1:14–15; Acts 2:37–40; Luke 18:9–14; 1 John 1:5–10.

As time permits, discuss the difficult case of the “unpardonable sin” (Matt. 12:31–32; Mark 3:28–30). A persistent refusal to repent hardens the heart against the Holy Spirit and thereby refuses and rejects the forgiveness of sins that He offers in the Gospel of Christ.

Forgiveness is not just the setting aside of anger and bitterness. Nor is it simply a release from legal obligation and punishment. It also entails reconciliation and the restoration of fellowship. As God has reconciled the world to Himself in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:18–19), so are His Christians reconciled to one another through faith in His forgiveness of sins. How do the Holy Scriptures describe the new relationship of peace that we now have with God and each other?

Matt. 5:23–24, 38–48; Luke 17:3–4; Col. 3:12–13; 2 Cor. 2:5–11; James 5:14–16

For further study, look at Mark 11:24–26; Matt. 6:9–15; 18:21–35; Eph. 4:32; Rom. 5:8–11; 1 John 5:15–17.

As we stand before God in need of His forgiveness and seeking it from Him in the ministry of the Gospel, so then do we forgive our neighbor and seek to be reconciled to him. We also pray for our neighbor and, in a spirit of gentleness and peace, make every effort to restore the fallen. In such love for one another, we demonstrate our gratitude to the Lord who forgives us. See, too, Luke 7:40–50 and Apology IV.152–154 and XII.57–58.²

² Ibid., 127–128, 189–190.

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS IN THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

In the Lutheran Confessions, the forgiveness of sins is a prominent way of defining the Gospel, and it is often equated with justification, redemption and reconciliation with God. In this case, the full and proper sense of forgiveness is gathered from the contexts in which it is used.

In considering “the righteousness of faith before God,” the Formula of Concord confesses that, “According to the usage of Scripture, the word ‘justify’ means in this article ‘absolve,’ that is, pronounce free from sin” (FC Epitome III.7).³ What does this mean for us?

As central and foundational as the doctrine of justification is, it is noteworthy that our Lutheran Confessions identify justification with the forgiveness of sins. We are set right with God, therefore, not by our own merits or righteousness, but by the Lord’s gracious absolution.

Note the same identification of our righteousness before God and His forgiveness of our sins in the Augsburg Confession: “We believe that Christ suffered for us and that for His sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us” (AC IV.2 [German]).⁴

It is by His suffering and death that He made satisfaction for our sins. God credits our faith in Christ as righteousness when we believe that we are forgiven and received into favor on account of Christ. See also the Formula of Concord Epitome III.3–4 and V.5 and Solid Declaration III.15 and V.20–2.2.⁵

Between the sacrifice of Christ and the faith that relies upon His sacrifice for righteousness, the Lutheran Confessions stress the ministry of the Gospel by which the forgiveness of the cross is distributed throughout the world and bestowed upon the Church.

Further we believe that in this Christian church we have the forgiveness of sins, which is granted through the holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire Gospel. Toward forgiveness is directed everything that is to be preached concerning the sacraments and, in short, the entire Gospel and all the duties of Christianity. Forgiveness is needed constantly, for although God’s grace has been won by Christ, and holiness has been wrought by the Holy Spirit through God’s Word in the unity of the Christian church, yet because we are encumbered with our flesh we are never without sin.

Therefore everything in the Christian church is so ordered that we may daily obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and through signs appointed to comfort and revive our consciences as long as we live. Although we have sin, the Holy Spirit sees to it that it does not harm us because we are in the Christian church, where there is full forgiveness of sin. God forgives us, and we forgive, bear with, and aid one another. ...

All this, then, is the office and work of the Holy Spirit, to begin and daily to increase holiness on earth through these two means, the Christian church and the forgiveness of sins. Then, when we pass from this life, he will instantly perfect our holiness and will eternally preserve us in it by means of the last two parts of this article. (Large Catechism)⁶

What does Luther identify as the Church’s purpose?

According to Dr. Luther, everything in the life of the Church is so arranged for the forgiving of sins through the various ways and means of the Gospel that God has graciously provided. See also Smalcald Articles III.V–VIII, Large Catechism II.37–38, Large Catechism V.31–32, Augsburg Confession XXV.1–4, Apology XII.39–43 and 99–105, Apology XIII.4–5 and FC Solid Declaration II.50–54.⁷

In contrast to all manner of legalism and the righteousness of works, the Lutheran Confessions emphasize that we receive the forgiveness of sins and are justified through faith in the Gospel:

“Faith is the only means and instrument whereby we accept Christ and in Christ obtain the ‘righteousness which avails before God.’” However, “This faith is not a mere knowledge of the stories about Christ, but the kind of gift of God by which in the Word of the Gospel we recognize Christ aright as our Redeemer and trust in Him, so that solely because of His obedience, by grace, we have forgiveness of sins, are regarded as holy and righteous by God the Father, and shall be saved eternally” (Formula of Concord Epitome III.5, 6)⁸ ; Tappert, p. 473).

Faith neither earns the forgiveness of our sins nor adds to our righteousness before God, but it simply receives and relies upon the gift of forgiveness that is distributed from the cross and resurrection of Christ in His ministry of the Gospel. These three things belong together in our salvation by the grace of God in Christ. The forgiveness obtained by Christ on the cross is given through the Gospel and received by faith. So do we rest in the Word and work of Christ.

³ Ibid., 127–128, 189–190.

⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁵ Ibid., 473, 478, 541, 561–562.

⁶ Ibid., 417–418.

⁷ Ibid., 310–313, 415, 450, 61–62, 187, 197, 211–212, 530–531.

⁸ Ibid., 473.

Further discussion of repentant faith in the forgiveness of sins may be found in the following: Augsburg Confession XII.1–6, Apology IV.40–51, Apology IV.75–86, Apology XII.35–36, Smalcald Articles III.III.4–8 and FC Solid Declaration V.5–9.⁹

Because the faith by which we are justified is a lively trust in the Lord's forgiveness of our sins, it also brings forth a new life in Christ: *"Good works follow such faith, renewal, and forgiveness. Whatever is still sinful or imperfect in these works will not be reckoned as sin or defect for the sake of the same Christ. The whole man, in respect both of his person and of his works, shall be accounted and shall be righteous and holy through the pure grace and mercy which have been poured out upon us so abundantly in Christ"* (Smalcald Articles III.XIII.2).¹⁰

In the confidence of faith, we live in love for God and for our neighbor without fear of failure and without the self-interest of legalism. Whatever is lacking or amiss in our efforts and good works is forgiven and filled up by Christ. Because we are freely forgiven for the sake of Christ, we also freely forgive and readily do good to those who sin against us (Large Catechism III.85–98).¹¹ By contrast, a refusal to do good or to forgive our neighbor is a denial and rejection of the faith and of the forgiveness that we need. See also Apology IV.270–276¹² and Luther's challenging comments in Smalcald Articles III.III.42–45.¹³

THE TEACHING AND PREACHING OF FORGIVENESS

At the time of the Reformation, people were seeking forgiveness in meritorious works, human traditions, the intercession of the saints, relics, indulgences and the sacrifice of the Mass (see Smalcald Articles II.II.1–8, 18–24 and Apology XV.4–5).¹⁴

Where and how do people seek forgiveness in our day? How do they perceive and practice it?

In the world's estimation, forgiveness may be understood in one or more of the following ways: (1) Excusing, rationalizing or explaining wrongdoing as okay or acceptable under the circumstances, (2) A certain number of chances, passes or strikes that are let go or permitted without consequences, (3) Conditional toleration of wrongdoing in exchange for an apology or for some amends or restitution, (4) Accepting and bearing with a wrong in order to avoid conflict or to preserve a relationship by ignoring the grievance or (5) Perhaps as a benevolent act of charity, in order to be the bigger person, to look good or to assuage one's conscience.

Misunderstandings of forgiveness may create an expectation that Christians will simply wink at sin, excuse it or ignore it. However, the Gospel-forgiveness of Christ takes sin seriously. For this reason, the preaching of repentance precedes and accompanies the preaching of forgiveness.

Repentance is not a condition or contingency on the Lord's forgiveness of sins, but a receiving of His forgiveness in the humility and confidence of faith. His forgiveness is offered solely on the basis of the cross and resurrection of Christ (Eph. 1:5–8; Col. 1:13–14).

When forgiveness is viewed as a negotiation or rationalization or as cutting slack, there will be a line in the sand at some point beyond which even Christians will be tempted to think or say, "I just cannot find it in my heart to forgive so-and-so." When it is understood that forgiveness is never earned or deserved on the part of any sinner, but that it flows freely and fully from the heart of God the Father in our Lord Jesus Christ, then it is extended objectively and unconditionally.

The exercise of mutual repentance and forgiveness among Christians, as well as the Christian forgiveness of others, rests upon this forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus. As the Lord our God gives Himself to and for us in mercy to rescue us from sin and to reconcile us to Himself, so do we learn from Him to give ourselves to and for our neighbor, even to those who sin against us, in Jesus' name and for His sake. Consider the examples of our Lord Himself (Luke 23:34) and of His servant, St. Stephen (Acts 7:60), who prayed for the forgiveness of those who killed him.

⁹ Ibid., 432–433.8 Ibid., p. 145.

¹⁰ Ibid., 432–433.

¹¹ Ibid., 432–433.

¹² Ibid., 147–148.

¹³ Ibid., 309–310.

¹⁴ Ibid., 293–296, 215.

Because we are set free from the bondage of sin and death by the forgiveness of the Lord, we are also free to forgive those who trespass against us; their sins, too, are unable to enslave us. We give freely of ourselves, and we show ourselves to be gracious, because the Lord has been gracious and merciful to us in the giving of Christ Jesus, even unto death upon the cross.

As time permits, it would be well to consider Melancthon's treatment of the statement, "Love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8) in Apology IV.238–243.¹⁵

The objective certainty of our forgiveness and of our righteousness before the Lord our God is permanently established in the cross and resurrection of Christ Jesus. It

is just as surely given to us and made our own through the ministry of the Gospel. In particular, how do Holy Baptism and the Holy Communion convey the forgiveness and righteousness of Christ to His Christians?

As we are baptized into His death, so are we also raised with Him in His resurrection through His free and full forgiveness of all our sins (Large Catechism IV.83–86).¹⁶

Christ established the new covenant of forgiveness by the atoning sacrifice of His cross. He establishes and seals that covenant unto us by giving us His Body and His Blood to eat and drink for the forgiveness of all our sins (Large Catechism V.20–30.)¹⁷

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AND DISCUSS

Discuss the familiar saying, "To err is human; to forgive is divine" with respect to the Christian life (Luke 6:27–38). As our life depends upon God's forgiveness of our sins, so do we share in His divine life and participate in His giving of life to others by forgiving their sins against us.

What about forgiveness in cases of abuse? What will that look like?

How do we understand the free and full forgiveness of sins alongside the continued suffering of temporal consequences? What about punishment for crimes? Consider the case of King David, especially 2 Sam. 12:13–14 and 24:10–25, in light of Apology XII.161.¹⁸

The Lutheran Confessions identify forgiveness as the particular work and office of the Gospel and as the organizing principle and purpose of the Church (see Smalcald Articles III.IV; Large Catechism II.55).¹⁹

- › What implications does that suggest for the way that we approach, think about and carry out the ministry of the Gospel?
- › What is our definitive office and work as pastors?
- › How will that shape our preaching, our practice of confession and absolution, our pastoral care and catechesis of the Church and our daily and weekly schedule?

SUMMARY

From His great fatherly heart of love, with divine compassion and steadfast love, the Lord has redeemed us from the bondage and consequences of our sins. He does not count them against us, but takes them upon Himself and bears them in the body of the incarnate Son, Christ Jesus. His death has broken the hold of death upon us, and His resurrection has become our righteousness. Therefore, we are no longer estranged from God and at enmity with Him, but we are reconciled to the Father in His beloved and well-pleas-

ing Son. By the ministry of this Gospel, He calls us into this reconciliation through His preaching of forgiveness. As we thereby have peace and rest with Him through faith in His Gospel and life and salvation forever in Christ Jesus, so are we at peace with one another in His Church. Insofar as it depends on us, we live in peace with all our neighbors through the exercise of His forgiveness for those who trespass against us.

¹⁵ Ibid., 140–141.

¹⁶ Ibid., 238–243.

¹⁷ Tappert: (pgs. 449–450).

¹⁸ Tappert: (pg. 208).¹⁹ Ibid., 238–243.

¹⁹ Tappert: (pgs. 310; 418).