

Introduction: The Christian life is often in Scripture described in imagery that conveys *difficulty*.

- Think about what Jesus says about the *gate being narrow and the way difficult* for those who would enter into the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 7:13). Jesus also speaks of how for some it is easier for a *camel to go through the eye of a needle* than to enter heaven (Matthew 19:24).
- Paul speaks of how he *beats his body* into submission so that he will not be disqualified (1Corinthians 9:27). Paul also uses the imagery of a *soldier*, an *athlete*, and *farmer* who is laboring in the Kingdom.
- We typically relate these difficulties to sin, and fighting against it so that we can live righteously. But have you ever thought about *the difficulty of forgiveness*? That is what the Bible and Christian experience teaches us about how difficult it is to receive forgiveness from the Lord? This morning that is the subject I want us to think about together (these thoughts stirred in reading C.S. Lewis' "On Forgiveness")
- Forgiveness is so *basic*, that Christianity cannot exist without some real understanding of what it means. It is so important that we find it in one of the earliest doctrine statements of the church, the *Apostles' Creed*: "I believe in...the forgiveness of sins."
- Forgiveness assumes sin, a breaking of God's law, and without this awareness of sin there cannot be an understanding of forgiveness. (This is a real tragedy when the church and preachers ignores the issue of sin).
- I want to suggest that there are difficulties to forgiveness. By difficulty, I mean "Something not easily done, accomplished, comprehended, or solved."

The Concept of Forgiveness

- Without going into great detail, the concept of forgiveness is simple. We owe God absolute, unwavering, joyful, and perfect obedience to His law. This is based on a fundamental thing: He created us (and thus we owe our life to Him).
- There are two things that come out of this obedience: His glory and our good.
- When we do not obey God through what we think, what we say, or what we do, we are sinning against a personal God who has set the boundaries of obedience for the world He has created. The result of this disobedience is the bringing of corruption and fallenness into the world as well as a separation of relationship with God and other people.
- Rather than seeing it for our good, we tend to believe that God is being a killjoy and is trying to ruin our happiness. As one little boy described it, it is like God is running around meddling in peoples' lives to try to spoil any fun they may be having.
- But Lewis describes moral rules as instructions for the human "machine", telling us how best to function. When we ignore or disobey those instructions, it brings a breakdown in the individual, in families, in culture.

God's Difficulty in Forgiveness

- God's mercy and love responds to this rebellion against His goodness in providing for forgiveness of the wrong we have done. This forgiveness, the cancelling of the debt that we owe, comes at the cost of the death of the Son of God. Acts 13:38 Ephesians 1:7
- This was something done that was not easy, but caused the real agony of Christ in His life, suffering, and death. But this isn't what I want us to focus on this morning. Rather, there are two problems with forgiveness particularly related to how we think about it and approach it that I want us to consider.

I. The Difficulty of Our Confessing of Sin

- As I've said, sin is a breaking of God's law. But since the beginning of our sin (Genesis 3) we have had a problem. It is the problem of owning our sin and confessing it. This is important, because of what we are told in 1John 1:9.
- Rather than openly owning our sinfulness to the Lord, we can do three things:
 - 1.) Hide** – We all know what it is like to be aware we have done something wrong, or to be afraid of being confronted with doing something wrong. We hope no one will find out, playing a game of hide and seek. Rather than coming into the open, we try to hide. This is of course foolish in our relationship with God, as there is no place that we can hide (see Psalms 139)
 - 2.) Blameshift** – Parents, upbringing, education (or lack of it), culture, government, other people involved (leaders, boss, in-laws, children). While we won't excuse completely, we are certain that they other person is more guilty or responsible than ourselves.
 - 3.) Justify** – This one is a bit trickier. There is often at first and apparent embracing of one's guilt. But then there is a qualification. "I should not have _____...but/you must understand..."
- It is this last one I want to address more thoroughly. If we are not careful, we will be guilty of doing something other than seeking God's forgiveness. In actuality, we will be seeking for Him to *merely excuse* us.
- In our wanting God (or others) to excuse us, we want them to see that we aren't really responsible, and that we really couldn't help it because of the circumstances. But what we must see is that if there really is an excuse and if we couldn't help it, then we shouldn't need to confess it.
- This is important because God can't forgive what isn't an act of sin against Him. And if we don't confess it for what it is, it doesn't meet the condition of what we find in 1John 1:9. God's faithfulness and righteousness is in response to confession. And this confession says "I have no excuse. I have sinned, I have broken your law, I have transgressed...please forgive me for what is inexcusable."

“The Difficulty of Forgiveness”

- Real forgiveness then looks straight into the face of our sin, with all its ugliness and says “I clear it from your account and from our relationship, and will deal with you as if you had not sinned against me.”
- Sin is inexcusable, but thanks to the mercy of God in Christ it is not unforgivable.
Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it. That, and only that, is forgiveness, and that we can always have from God if we ask for it. (Lewis)
- These things not only apply to our confession before God, but also before other people. What we do with God (in hiding, blame shifting, and excusing), we also do with other people.
- There is another thing we also do. We tend to use a double standard. We realize that everyone is making excuses, ourselves and others. But we often have a tendency that in our own case we readily accept our excuses (however pitiful). But when it comes to others, we are disinclined to receive them.
- The truth is probably the opposite, that the excuses of others’ are probably better than ours, and ours aren’t so good.

Summary: In forgiveness, there is the difficulty of confessing our sin without excuse, before God and others. Yet, it is only in this way that true forgiveness can be given.

II. The Difficulty of the Conditionality of Our Forgiveness

- God conditions His forgiveness of us on our forgiving others. Matthew 6:12, 14-15 18:21-22 Mark 11:25-26 Luke 6:37
- These verses are staggeringly plain and simple. Take them at face value, and be careful of immediately taking your “systematics” to correct them. Notwithstanding really important doctrines, what is Jesus saying?
- The easy thing to do (particularly when we don’t want to forgive) is to use other things we believe to bleed these verses of their power and the responsibility they hold us to.
- Remember, what we are called to forgive are not the excusable things others do. Rather, like our own sin, it is those things that are inexcusable.
To excuse what can really produce good excuses is not Christian charity; it is only fairness. To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you. (Lewis)
- The only way to truly be able to do this is to cultivate an awareness of the magnitude of God’s forgiveness, to live humbly before the cross and realize how greatly and inexcusably we have sinned against the Lord.
- Unforgiving people often have a real problem with confessing their own sins and seeing the greatness of their transgression. If they more live in the atmosphere of the greatness of God’s mercy toward them, they will count it a small thing to forgive others.

Application

- Do you believe in the forgiveness of sins? Do you see the difficulty involved with forgiveness?
- How is it with your confessing your sin to the Lord? This is the primary place that it will be demonstrated.
- There is a subtle, but “spiritual” error that is detrimental to the life of the believer. It is the error of, having confessed our sin, we do not embrace the reality of that forgiveness, but rather wallow in our own guilt. While there is godly sorrow, the blessing of forgiveness should bring about what David speaks of in Psalm 51:12: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation.”
- How is your confessing your sin to others? What is it that keeps us from this? Pride, which only complicates the matter and makes it worse.
- How is your forgiving others? Do you realize the importance of having a forgiving spirit toward fellow sinners, and especially towards brothers and sisters in Christ?
- This is what is needed in many of our marriages. This is what is needed in many families (parents/children). This is what is needed to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace in our church.