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Psalm 103:9-12

I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins

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Psalm 103:9-12 Common English Bible

God won’t always play the judge; God won’t be angry forever. God doesn’t deal with us according to our sin or repay us according to our wrongdoing, because as high as heaven is above the earth, that’s how large God’s faithful love is for those who honor him. As far as east is from west—that’s how far God has removed our sin from us.

I have a secret. When I was 12 years old, I was dunked at my dad’s church. I went to my dad’s church every other weekend and one Sunday the preacher was talking about how much of a sinner I was. Well, I am sure he said how much of a sinner we all were, but I only heard that I was a horrible sinner. The preacher said that we had to be immersed and so I went down to the front of the church when the preacher told us to. I thought that if I did what the preacher said, then I wouldn’t feel so guilty when I lied or when I cheated or when I wasn’t kind. So, I was marched up a staircase, told to strip down to my underwear, put on a white robe that I worried everyone could see through, and I was dunked. The thing is, after that experience I still felt guilty. I still felt like a horrible sinner.

We may believe in forgiveness but do we really accept with our entire being that God has forgiven us? We have these tapes in our head of all of the wrong things that we have done. Those tapes are not from God. I believe that God doesn’t work in guilt. That is not how God operates. That isn’t how the Apostles’ Creed operates. The Creed doesn’t say, “I believe that human beings are sinners,” but “I believe in the forgiveness of sins”.[[1]](#footnote-2) The emphasis in the Creed and in the Christian faith is not on guilt, but on grace. Why do we hang on when God lets go? The emphasis in the Creed and in the Christian faith is not on sin but on forgiveness. Let’s be clear. We do need forgiveness. Every single one of us messes up in our thoughts, words, and deeds. Paul says in Romans 3:23, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We treat others poorly, we are self-absorbed, we fail to do justice and to love kindness.[[2]](#footnote-3) In Galatians Paul paints a picture of the way that we are to live our lives, with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Some of us don’t want to admit wrong. Some of us don’t want to accept grace. Some of us feel guilt but we don’t want to stop doing what we are doing that is making us feel guilty. The only good that I think comes from guilt is that it makes us change. We don’t like the way it makes us feel so we change our behavior so we won’t have that horrible feeling. Some people give up and don’t try to do better, they resign themselves to the fact that they are going to keep messing up.

We sin by things we’ve thought, said, and done but also by failing to think, say or do things we should have done.[[3]](#footnote-4) We fail to be who God wants us to be and we fail to do what God wants us to do. We see sin all around us, lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, anger, envy and pride, and it is destroying us and our world.

Paul views sin as a force or a power at work in us, something that is broken in us that makes us do things we should not do or to fail in doing the things we should.[[4]](#footnote-5) In Romans 7:15-17, Paul says, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Paul says that it is the sin that dwells within him that makes him do these things.

So, on one side we have people who live weighed down by guilt and on the other side we have people who think that they have never done anything wrong and they don’t need forgiveness. We can get really good at self-justification, rationalizing, and explaining. And we are pros at blaming others. We all need some self-awareness to see the reality of sin in our lives and to turn away from it. And we all need to believe and accept that God forgives us and that we can begin again. Either way, we are going to sin, but we don’t have to. There is always a freedom to choose a different path. We can choose not to sin. There is freedom in that, and also pressure. We in the Christian church say that when you sin, God forgives you, but you don’t actually have to sin. There is a good chance that you are going to, but you don’t have to.

Our sin can weigh us down. When we ask God to forgive us our trespasses in the Lord’s Prayer, the Greek word for forgive means to release.[[5]](#footnote-6) It is to open our hand and let go of something that we have been gripping tightly. God, release us from this burden of guilt. We can choose to carry the burden of guilt or we can choose to accept God’s forgiveness and be released from this burden. So, when we trust in God and believe that God has released us from our sins, we also must release that burden[[6]](#footnote-7). When we say I believe in the forgiveness of sins, we are saying that we believe that God is willing to forgive us and wants to release us from our burdens.[[7]](#footnote-8) We are not defined by the worst things that we have done. And we don’t have to be tomorrow who we were yesterday. God wants to forgive us. God is the God of second chances or third chances or millionth chances.[[8]](#footnote-9) We are a new creation in Christ.

I love our scripture for today because I love what it says about God and about God’s heart. God loves us, God removes our sin from us. Now, here is the tricky part. In turn, we have to share that forgiveness with others. We are called to forgive the sins of others. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. We are asking God to forgive us in the same way, and to the same degree, that we extend forgiveness to others.[[9]](#footnote-10) Jesus is pretty forceful about this, “If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don’t forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14-15). We hang on to bitterness and resentment and the person that we end up hurting is our own self. Remember the difference between forgetting and forgiving. Forgiving means letting go of the wrong done to us. But when a friend breaks a confidence, we can forgive them, but we will probably not be so fast to share with them again. Forgiving someone doesn’t mean that you are saying what happened didn’t matter. You are saying, “I choose to release you, and I choose to release me.”[[10]](#footnote-11) You have not forgotten what happened but you have forgiven them.

The whole point of Christianity is reconciliation, forgiveness between God and us, and between one another.[[11]](#footnote-12) Reconciliation isn’t easy and forgiveness is the hardest work. You have to dig stuff up and wrestle with it. You have to listen deeply to understand those hidden causes of what has gone on between you and the other person. Being married has been the hardest thing in my life. Being in a relationship with someone else brings up all of my insecurities from childhood, all of my doubts and fears of being abandoned. I don’t want the other person to leave, so I leave first. Well, that isn’t too smart, because the other person wasn’t going to leave, and now I am all alone.

Forgiveness is a decision. It is a commitment to look at someone through God’s eyes, to stick with them.[[12]](#footnote-13) Forgiveness is about restoring a relationship. Many times in a relationship, we create an image in our minds of who we “know” the other person is. We are comforted by our image. Then, that do something that is outside our image and we think, who IS this person? Well, they are themselves. We have to decide whether to embrace who they really are or hold onto our image with bitterness because they disappointed us by being themselves.

We all need forgiveness. Praise God, God is willing to forgive our sins and we are called in turn to go forgive others. Praise God, God’s power can produce forgiveness when we cannot muster any on our own.[[13]](#footnote-14) God can bring healing and peace. We only need to open our hand, and let that sin, that wound, that grievance we hold onto so tightly, just open our hand and let it fall into the outstretched, crucified hands of Jesus. There is mercy, grace, help and hope.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up.”[[15]](#footnote-16) Amen.

1. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. P. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. P. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. P. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. P. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. P. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. P. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. P. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. P. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. P. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. P. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Howell, James C. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. P. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Howell, James C. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. P. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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14. Howell, James C. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. P. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Quoted in Howell, James C. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. P. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)