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Title: The joy of forgiveness is for those who follow God's pathway to pardon.

Text: LD 51 (View)

Topic: Forgiveness

Read: Psalm 32:1-2; Matthew 6:5-15

Text: Lord's Day 51

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When it comes to the joy of forgiveness, there are two things that threaten to rob us of that joy. First of all, when we have sinned – and especially when that sin was very great or our sin caused a lot of hurt to the people we love, then it is extremely hard to feel forgiven. The second thing that threatens to rob us of the joy of forgiveness is that we find it so hard to forgive others!

For many of us (or may I suggest that to some extent all of us), that is the way things tend to be. We can feel extremely miserable about our own sin and the wrongdoings of our own past, and perhaps you have even said something like, "Even if God can forgive me, and even if others say they forgive me, I could never forgive myself for what I have done." And we also feel extremely miserable about the sin of others. We wonder, "Is he really sorry for what he did?" "Does she really understand how much I have been hurt by all of this?" "The damage has been done and I'm struggling to put my life back together. How then can I even think about forgiving him for what he has done?"

But in the Lord's Prayer, our Lord Jesus Christ encourages you to put these two things, your forgiveness and the forgiveness you extend to others, He encourages you to put them together when you pray,

"And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."

There is then a strong connection between your forgiveness and the forgiveness you offer to others. And the connection between these two things is the reason why forgiveness is possible: the grace that God has shown to us in Jesus Christ. The grace of God that is worked in you so that you may be forgiven and the grace of God that is worked through you so that you are able to forgive others. And that is the good news concerning the forgiveness of sins that I may preach to you today. I preach to you the Good News concerning our prayer for the forgiveness of sins under the following heading:

The joy of forgiveness is for those who follow God's pathway to pardon.

1. The joy of being forgiven.
2. The joy of being forgiving.

1. The joy of being forgiven.

When we sin, we cause a lot of hurt, a lot of offence. We hurt ourselves, to start with. God's laws are good and Deuteronomy 5:33 says, "You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you." And indeed it will be well with you when you do what is right; but when you do not walk in the ways of the Lord, but in the way of sin, it will not be well with you: you will suffer the consequences of your sin, also in this life.

But not only do we hurt ourselves, we hurt a lot of people along the way. Your husband, your wife, your parents, your brothers or sisters, your friends. And sometimes even strangers.

But even more to the point, when we sin, we grieve the LORD God. God created you in His image. He created you to be righteous and holy like He is. He made you to be perfect and to perfectly reflect His goodness and perfection. He made you to give glory and praise to Him. But when you sin, you don't do that. When you sin, you are offending the One who made you.

An example of sin and the consequences of it can be found in the Bible, with the story of King David. King David was the one who, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote Psalm 32. And like another one of the Psalms of David, Psalm 51, it is believed that David wrote this Psalm after he was confronted about his sin with Bathsheba. Many of you know the story of what king David did: Once, when David's men had all gone out to war, David stayed back in Jerusalem. One day, as he looked over his neighborhood, he saw a woman named Bathsheba bathing. Now Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah, one of David's army officers, who was out fighting his battles. But David wanted Bathsheba for himself, so he called for her to come to his palace and when she came, he committed adultery with her. Some time later, however, Bathsheba let king David know that she was pregnant, and that it was his child whom she was carrying. David then tried to find his own way to cover up his sin, but he failed. And then he found another solution to the problem: he saw to it that Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, would be killed in battle. And Uriah (along with a number of other good men) died. David then took Bathsheba as his wife and then went on with life as if nothing had happened.

So that is what David did. He sinned by committing adultery and then sending an innocent man to his death. It was a terrible thing to do and David's sin affected many people: himself, Bathsheba, his army, the nation of Israel. A lot of good people hurt because of what he had done. But worse, David had sinned against God by committing this evil both in the sight of God and in the sight of many people. And so it says in 2 Samuel 11:27,

"But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD."

But for a long time, David was not ready to confess his sin. He denied it. He tried to cover up and looked for ways to keep his sin from seeing the light of day. In Psalm 32:2 David wrote,

“Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”

But right now his heart was filled with iniquity, with sinfulness, and there was a lot of deceit in his life. But by the grace of God, his sin just would not fade away.

And for a year, his sin was always there, niggling him and eating away at him. He could not sleep well. He could not concentrate. He was physically getting sick, under a lot of stress, and God's hand was heavy upon him. Already before the prophet Nathan came to see him, God was pointing the finger at David, saying "You are the man!"

Can you relate to how David was feeling? For there are times when God works in the same way with us. When we fail to confess our sins, God fills us with feelings of guilt, of shame, of stress. We struggle. We wrestle. We fight. We deny. We cover up. We minimize our wrong. We blame others. We lie. We run away. But try as we might, the guilt of our sin goes with us every way we turn. We just wish that we ourselves and everyone else would just "forgive and forget", let the past be the past and get on with the future. But something just will not allow us to let go. Something is there and it is eating us up and it is as if God is pointing the finger at you and saying, "You are the man! You did it! You have sinned!"

That does not feel good. Truth be told, it feels downright unpleasant. And so we groan and cry out, burdened with the guilt of sin. And how we want to be rid of the guilt, the stain, the shame, the burden of our sin! And then perhaps some well meaning person, knowing at least some of what happened, tells you to let the past be the past, to get over it, to forgive yourself. But how can you forgive yourself of such sin? Can you make yourself forget? Can you deny that you did it, deny that it really hurt anyone as much as they say it did and as much as you know it did? What can you do to forgive yourself of the sin that you have committed? The simple answer is that you can not! The joy of forgiveness does not come through forgiving yourself because you can not forgive your own sin.

So what then? If you can not simply forgive yourself, what can you do? Can you try to pay for what you did? Hide from those you love, hide from the world, and then try to make amends for what happened? At times your conscience can be eased in that way, but it does not really take away the sin. And it can not, because every sin we commit is in the first place a sin against God. And you can not hide from God, nor can you pay the price for the sin you have committed against Him. To the contrary, as we know from experience and confess in our Catechism, "daily we increase our debt."

So how then can you be freed from the burden and the shame and guilt of your sin? There is one answer, and one alone. And that is to turn to the One against whom you have ultimately sinned, to get down on your knees and pray, "Our Father in heaven, forgive us our debts. For the sake of Christ's blood, do not impute to us, wretched sinners, any of our transgressions, nor the evil which still clings to us, but rather take away our sins!"

God's pathway to pardon begins with the sob of confession. God does not forgive us just because we feel sorry we messed up. God does not forgive us because we've forgiven ourselves. God does not forgive us because he's tired of tension and just wants things to get back to normal. But our gracious God forgives us when we come to Him in prayer, when we admit to Him that we are sinners, confess our sins to Him and ask Him to forgive them.

And that is what king David did in Psalm 32:5,

"I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.'"

David the adulterer, David the murderer, confessed his sin, all his sin, to God. He did not try to hide anything from God. And it was only then, when he followed God's pathway to pardon, that the weight of guilt was lifted from David's shoulders and he began to experience the blessing of true forgiveness.

And God will do the same for you. Not because your sin was not too bad. Not because you somehow deserve it. Not because you no longer struggle. In fact, He is ready to forgive you even if your sin is too bad, when you know you do not deserve to be forgiven, if you still do struggle. God will do the same for you and forgive the iniquity of your sin not because of you, but because the grace that He has shown to you in Jesus Christ. When we stop trying to cover up our unrighteousness and confess our guilt to God, then God will cover it up with the blood of Jesus Christ.

For this is what our Lord Jesus Christ had come to do! That is why He died for you on the cross. It is because your sin is so great, because you can not remove it yourself, because of the great burden of your guilt and shame, that Jesus Christ came and died for you on the cross. When our Lord Jesus Christ hung on the cross He took your sin upon Himself so that in Him you are freed from it. And in Christ your sins are completely forgiven. As it says in Psalm 103:12,

"As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."

That is what our Lord Jesus Christ came to do. And that is why when we pray to God "And forgive us our debts" that is, "take away our sins and the evil that still clings to us" that we can be sure that our sins are completely forgiven in Him. 1 John 1:9 says,

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

He is faithful and just to forgive us! Jesus Christ came to make the full payment for all our sin and so when we ask God to forgive our sins through Christ, He will do it! You see, to be forgiven has nothing to do with how good you are or how much you deserve it. When you come to God in Jesus Christ and pray that He will forgive your debts, your sins, then you can be sure that He will hear your prayer, that your sin is forgiven because of God's grace in Jesus Christ!

Are there still consequences for sin? Yes, there may be. You may need to face those consequences, and you may need to live with them every day of your life. But you may face them knowing that your sin has been forgiven!

Will you still have doubts? Will you be ashamed of what you did and sometimes even wonder if that sin really is gone? Yes, you may do. Satan loves to do that. But now you need not run away from God. Now, when forgiveness seems too good to be true, you may run to Him and plead with Him, not because you are good and just and faithful, but because He is good and just and faithful. When those doubts roll over you, do not run away from God, but run to Him. Trust God. Believe His promise to you that the body of our Lord Jesus was broken and His blood poured out for the complete forgiveness of all our sins!

2. The joy of being forgiving.

When our Lord Jesus Christ taught us how to pray, when He taught us to pray to our Father in heaven “And forgive us our debts” He added, “as we have forgiven our debtors.” And of all that Christ taught us to pray, this is what He referred back to in Matthew 6:14,15.

“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. “

That is hard. We so often find that it is one thing to want to receive forgiveness, but it is another thing to grant it.

The reason why we struggle so much over the call to forgive one another is because it is so hard and so un-natural. Our natural, human, response is to refuse to forgive, to get some satisfaction in making them pay, to be bitter and full of malice and ill-feeling towards those who hurt us so badly. And when the person who sinned against us is a brother or sister in Christ, sometimes that makes it even harder. How then can we find it in ourselves to be kind, tender-hearted and forgiving?

In theory, of course, most of us want to forgive. Although some people will openly say that they want to hold on to a grudge to the point that the root of bitterness poisons their lives, as Christians we know this is wrong and so we say we want to forgive, but then struggle to work out how to forgive in whatever situation is before us. And we do have to understand what Christ is not teaching us when He commands us to pray that God will forgive our debts “as we have forgiven our debtors.” For example, our Lord Jesus Christ is not teaching us to shove things under the carpet, so to speak, to pretend they did not happen. No, as Christians we have to deal with things as they come up. Further, Christ is not saying that the person who sinned does not have to repent. Rather, repentance and forgiveness are to go together. In Luke 17:3 our Lord Jesus Christ told His disciples,

“Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.”

Furthermore, when you forgive someone this does not mean that you necessarily forget. It is true that when you forgive someone, you do let go and so over time the painful memories will normally subside. But forgiveness is not forgetting; rather it is a choosing to release a person of his debt of saying to him, "I forgive you of the wrong you committed against me. I will not allow this matter to stand between us or to hinder our personal relationship."

But what the Bible does teach us is that the joy of forgiveness, also of forgiving others, comes from a change inside of us. It is because we are forgiven of our sin, washed in Christ's blood and renewed in the Holy Spirit, that we have a changed heart and are therefore eager to forgive those who sinned against us.

And that then is how we are to live in the joy of forgiveness. When someone sins against you and feels too hard to forgive, then take your eyes and your thoughts off the sin that was committed against you and look first of all to what God in Christ has done for you. Bring to mind the love of God, that He chose you, that He saved you. Bring to mind how God, who is rich in mercy, even when we were dead in our sins, gave us new life in Christ so that He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. A kindness towards us, us who had sinned so terribly against Him, a kindness that motivated Him to make a way for our sins to be forgiven. And then believe that

God has forgiven all of your sins through Jesus Christ. There is full and complete forgiveness available to you for every sin and every offence that you have caused. And then as you understand this and rejoice in so great a forgiveness, then should you not be kind and tender-hearted, and eager to forgive your brothers and sisters in Christ? Look to Jesus, to the One who endured so much at the hands of sinful man, and yet in the middle of that suffering prayed, "Father forgive them!" Look to Jesus and walk in love, even as Christ has loved us and gave Himself for us.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we have all experienced the pain of being sinned against. Some of you, even today, are deeply hurt and scarred by the willful or careless sins of others. May the Lord graciously bind up your wounds and grant you healing. But may I encourage you to also ask God to use that sin and pain to build you up into Christ. Pray that He might use this pain and this sin to turn your face away from the hurt and towards Jesus. "Yes, Lord, may the pain and the deep hurt that others in their sinfulness have caused me, not make me bitter and full of wrath, anger, and malice. But through Your Spirit, cause me to look to Jesus Christ and to see with new eyes the forgiveness that you have granted to me, a sinner! Yes, Lord, teach me to pray "Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors". And then with the power of Your Holy Spirit, fill me with that same grace that You have shown to me so that I too might receive the grace to forgive those who sinned against me."

Amen.