

In his book, *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*, the bestselling author Dr. Scott Peck talks about his gradual conversion from Buddhism to Christianity. He writes that he gravitated toward Christianity [when] he came to believe that Christianity expresses “the most correct understanding of the nature of sin.” Christianity, he says “holds that we are all sinners [and that] we cannot *NOT* sin.” He goes on to say, “[But] if you acknowledge your sin with contrition, then the slate is wiped clean. *It is as if it never existed. You can start over again, fresh and clean every time.*” (That sounds like a children’s message I heard just a few Sunday’s back!)

Peck then shares a story of a young Filipino girl who caused a stir in her village saying that she’d been having face-to-face conversations with Jesus. As news of this spread, word eventually reached the bishop in Manila. Since miracles of this sort require verification, the bishop appointed a monsignor to investigate. The girl underwent a series of interviews with the monsignor. At the end of her 3rd interview, the monsignor said, “I don’t know what to make of this. But I think I have a way to see if you’re really talking with Jesus. The next time you talk to Him, please ask Jesus what I confessed to at my last confession. Would you do that?” The girl agreed.

The girl went home and when she returned the following week the monsignor asked her, “So, did you talk to Jesus this past week?” The girl said, “Yes, Father, I did.” “And when you talked to Jesus this past week, did you ask Him what I confessed to at my last confession.” The girl said, “Yes, Father, I did.” The monsignor then asked, “Well? When you asked Jesus what I confessed to, what did He say?” The little girl looked at the monsignor and answered, “Jesus told me to tell you, ‘I’ve forgotten.’”

Peck affirms that according to Christian doctrine, once our sins are confessed, they are forgotten. They no longer exist in the mind or heart of God.

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We come this Sunday, in the home stretch of a series on The Apostle’s Creed. This is the 2nd to last message in a 6-week series. We’ll conclude next Sunday with Easter, looking at what we mean when we affirm the resurrection of the body. Today we’re looking at the affirmation, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” And somehow, all that we affirm in the Creed, leads us to this bold assertion: that our Triune God -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- is somehow seeking to liberate us; to free us, to forgive us our sins.

This understanding of God’s unfathomable mercy runs throughout Scripture. As we heard in Psalm 103:10-13: “God does not 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 the west—that is how far God has removed our sin from us.”

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Now, if you’ve been tracking, I’ve used the word ‘sin’ or ‘sinfulness’ 12 times in this sermon. I’ve used the word ‘forgiveness’ just twice. And this might lead some to conclude that Christianity has an overweening focus on sin. But I’d ask you if the focus of Peck’s story, or the focus of Psalm 103 is actually sin, or is it forgiveness? As you can see, the Apostles Creed does not say, “I believe human beings are all depraved and hopeless sinners.” No, the creed says, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” The emphasis of our Christian faith is not sin and guilt, but grace and forgiveness.

Indeed, if Christianity is about anything, it is about forgiveness. As the Gospel passages I read indicate, Jesus, from beginning of his life, to his death on the cross, to his resurrection, was all about forgiveness. This is why our Christian vocabulary includes so many words related to forgiveness. Words like mercy, compassion, loving-kindness, contrition, repentance, absolution, reconciliation, restoration, and grace. With such a deep and wide vocabulary of forgiveness, I think it must disappoint God terribly that Christians are now more well known for their moralistic judgmentalism than for their love, kindness, and compassion.

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As we consider what it means to believe ‘in the forgiveness of sins,’ I think it’s important to explore 3 things this statement affirms: 1) the reality of sin, 2) the scope of God’s forgiveness, and 3) the forgiveness which is meant to define Jesus followers. Let’s look at these three themes.

First, as Dr. Peck notes, Christianity stresses the idea that we cannot NOT sin; that from the moment of birth we are plunged into a world where sin is as ubiquitous as it is unavoidable. In the NT, the primary Greek word we translate as ‘sin’ is *hamartia*. Hamartia was a term originally used by archers that means ‘to miss the mark.’ As a golfer, I think of it this way. When I tee up for the drive, I look for my target, I take my stance, I envision and intend to hit the ball where I’m aiming. Then I swing. Now, I have

pretty good clubs, and I have a pretty decent swing, but how often do you think the ball lands where I aimed? (Don't answer that!)

The theological word for missing the mark is sin—saying, thinking, or doing things we should not have done, or failing to say, think, or do things we should have. One theologian, Fredrick Buechner says this: sin is whatever you do, or fail to do, that widens the gap between you and God, or between you and others. And just like my golf game, when the gap between where I've aimed and where the ball lands gets wider, the next shot becomes more difficult.

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But here's the good news. According to the Gospel, God's grace and forgiveness is as ubiquitous and unavoidable as sin. For some of you that will be a challenging assertion, but stick with me. Throughout the NT, as 2 Corin. 5:19 makes explicit, we see an affirmation that in Jesus' death, God was reconciling the world to himself. In Jesus and at the cross, the NT affirms that divine forgiveness is accomplished for the whole world. The world's fate is given over to the authority of Jesus. So when Jesus cries out from the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30) he means that reconciliation between God and humanity is a done deal, because God is love.

But, this does not mean that everyone automatically enjoys a right relationship with God. What it means is that a relationship with God is now *our* choice. As Roger Olson writes, "Even if we choose against relationship, our *no* to God does not cancel out God's *yes* to us in Jesus Christ." And our ability to say yes to God is as easy as turning from one direction to another, which is what repentance means: to change the direction of our focus towards God.

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Finally, to say we 'believe in the forgiveness of sins' is not just a 'get out of hell' free card, as if the forgiveness we believe in only about what God does for us. What I'm about to say is likely the most challenging thing I've said in any sermon over the past 14 months, but I prayerfully believe God is leading me to share this. Through his parables and through his teachings Jesus repeatedly called his disciples to practice forgiveness for others, including our enemies. In a rather unnerving statement Jesus says, "If you don't forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your sins." (Matthew 6:15) which matches the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses, *as we forgive* those who trespass against us." It seems that Jesus is telling us that we can

cancel out what God wants to do for us, by ignoring what Jesus clearly tells us we are to do!

In his book, *Radical Forgiveness*, Brian Zahnd recounts how, for two and half years beginning in 1915, 500,000 Armenians were murdered by Ottoman Turks. And hundreds of thousands of Armenians were also raped, brutalized, and deported. During the genocide, a Turkish army officer led a raid on one home where the parents were killed and the daughters' raped. The girls were then 'given' to the soldiers, but the army officer kept the oldest daughter for himself.

The girl eventually escaped and trained to be a nurse. In a twist of fate, she later found herself working in a ward for wounded Turkish army officers. One night by the dim glow of a lantern, she saw among her patients the face of the man who had murdered her parents and who had horribly abused her sisters and herself. Without exceptional nursing, he would die. And that is what the woman gave—exceptional care. As the officer began to recover, a doctor pointed to the nurse and told the officer, "If it weren't for this woman, you would be dead." The officer looked at the nurse and after a long silence asked, "Why didn't you kill me?" The nurse replied, "I am a follower of him who said, "Love your enemies."

This nurse understood that a Christians' call to forgiveness is not optional.

Even as I say that, I hear my own resistance and 'what if' questions. What about terrorists? What about the holocaust? What if someone is threatening my life? What about crazy North Korean dictators? What I can say is this. When I pose questions "what if" questions like these, what I'm often trying to do is dodge situations closer to my own life that are far less extreme. How do I forgive the person who has backstabbed me at work? How do I forgive a friend or relative who has failed me? How do I forgive the person who has wronged me?

As I am practicing the forgiveness Jesus calls me to in these less extreme circumstances, I pray that I may eventually learn how to practice the difficult and costly forgiveness that Jesus demonstrated for me when he went to the cross trusting that God's justice would prevail over the worst evil that could be perpetrated. And that points us in the direction of the resurrection, which will cover next week. Amen.