

# Sermon Text for January 18, 2015

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## *Exodus 32:30-35, Ephesians 1:7*

Throughout this series we have handled some very deep and sophisticated theological issues. We have talked about what it means to believe, our doctrine of hell, Christian unity, issues that as Christians we ought to know. Today we address a topic that we are all familiar with and we probably know most of the details involved. We are looking at the forgiveness of sins. All of us can say without a doubt that we believe in the forgiveness of sins. Absolutely, no question. We can probably verbalize a theology associated with our belief in forgiveness that as Hebrews 9 states Christ came to forgive sins.

No problem today, we are in familiar territory, but the only problem is that the Apostles' Creed doesn't specify the forgiveness of our sins by Jesus Christ on the cross, but rather just a general forgiveness of sins. So what do we believe about forgiveness of sins? When we look at Scripture carefully, which we are going to do today, we find a very difficult truth, not a theological one to understand but rather a very practical one which is very hard to put into practice. The concept that we find in Scripture is that our forgiveness of others dictates how God will forgive us.

We discover that the extent to which we are able to forgive others will have a tremendous impact upon God's forgiveness of us. Now I know that this sounds very unreformed, and not very Protestant, but my study of Scripture this week allowed me to see this direct correlation between our ability to forgive, and God's gracious forgiveness of our sins. Let's walk gingerly as we read this very short Scripture in Ephesians.

My first appreciation for God's powerful presence in my life was a result of coming to the understanding that God had forgiven me of my sins. I was in a church in the mountains of Pennsylvania on a snow retreat, a senior in high school, happy with my life. God said to me: I forgive you. I heard it and those words changed my life forever. They were words of forgiveness from someone who knew me intimately.

It isn't something that we are used to in our culture. It may seem the opposite is true. If we are shopping and we accidentally bump into someone and we say sorry, or excuse me, the automatic response is, don't worry about it, or no problem. A complete stranger is willing to forgive us. I think we are more used to stepping on the proverbial

toes of a spouse, a co-worker, maybe even a church member and we find that action held over our heads until an appropriate time comes up to remind us of our past misdeeds.

It has been nearly 7 years since my predecessors, the Clarks, left First Presbyterian Church. 7 years, and after that time people were hurt and hurt bad in this church. People said unkind things to each other. Those feelings and those hurts have not disappeared. What would you feel like if one of the Clarks came to preach here next week? Some of you would celebrate, and some of you would not show up, and others of you, probably the majority, would say what's the big deal? We have not been able to forgive, to just let go, and to move on. You know it is when we realize that we have been completely and totally forgiven in Jesus' name that we are able to have true joy, and then pass that joy on to others. But sometimes we struggle mightily to do that.

Psalm 32 speaks of that joy as the psalmist states: "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." Now in the Old Testament there was a yearly, sacrificial process that took place in order for people to have their sins forgiven. It was not a personal matter between them and God but rather the temple, the priests, and the congregation were all involved in order to ensure forgiveness.

A crucial part of this forgiveness was the blood of the innocent lamb that was sprinkled on the congregation, on the altar and offered up to God. This blood from this lamb was considered able to purify the people of the sins that they had committed and were willing to ask for forgiveness.

The forgiveness of sins in the OT took place by an animal taking the place, or taking the blame, being the scape goat for the guilty people and it was the lamb that received the punishment for their sins.

In our Exodus passage, Moses tries to do the same thing for the people of Israel. They had just made a golden calf, God is angry, and Moses approaches God and states: God these people have sinned, no doubt about it, but please forgive their sin. And if you can't forgive their sin, then take me out of the book of life, instead of them. Moses tries to sacrifice his own life for the life of the people. No greater love hath one than to give his life for another.

But God says no, they are responsible for their own actions. Their sins will catch up with them, you just carry on. God knew that Moses was not the Messiah, that the time would come when his own Son would die for the people and their sins, not just the Israelites, but all of humanity.

In the New Testament we read in Hebrews 9:22 that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins because the blood, which was considered the life-force of the animal, was a purifying agent. When Jesus Christ came upon this earth the scene was set for all of humanity, all of sinful humanity, to receive the greatest gift of grace that one could give. You see a true gift is one that is not earned and we know that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

But as Ephesians states: In him we have redemption through his blood, that is the forgiveness of our sins according to the riches of his grace. I John 1:9 tells us that if we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So yes, we do believe in the central Gospel message as Ephesians lays it out for us and as we profess every Sunday in the Apostles' Creed that we do believe in the forgiveness of sins. If you have never heard this message before, if you've never heard God whisper to you: I forgive you, hear and believe the good news of the Gospel, Jesus Christ by his blood has forgiven and redeemed us. Accept that fact today and make it fill your heart with joy as the psalmist states.

Next week our elders and deacons will be headed off to a retreat where they are to envision where God is leading us. I am convinced that if we as a congregation are not able to come to terms with the sins of our past then our growth is going to be stunted. Every Sunday we not only profess the Apostles' Creed together but we also pray together a prayer that Jesus himself taught us. There is a direct reference to forgiveness in that prayer that can be troubling. We have no problem with Jesus forgiving us, but when it comes to us forgiving others, well we all try, but we don't always succeed.

Listen to the words of the Lord's prayer: forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. The literal Greek states forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. What that tells me is that if we aren't able to perfectly forgive someone it isn't Oh well, but it is rather uh-oh. If our forgiveness is automatic in Christ because of his purifying blood on the cross then Jesus is telling me our forgiveness needs to be automatic.

We have said, maybe I'm not a good Christian because I can't really forgive Levi. Can you imagine God stating, you know there is that one thing that Bob did that really gets under my skin. Maybe I'll hang onto that one. When Jesus Christ had his blood shed on the cross as the sacrificial lamb not a single sin of ours was held onto. But just in case

that there is any doubt to the importance and the connection between our forgiveness and our ability to forgive, Jesus clears that up the Lord's prayer and says in the verses that follow in Matthew: If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your sins.

This same concept is carried out later in Matthew to show that since God's forgiveness is from everlasting to everlasting, when his disciples ask okay, but if another member of the church sins against me, how many times do I have to forgive them? Jesus answers, every time.

True forgiveness means the one doing the forgiving bears the cross. It doesn't mean, oh yes, I'll forgive, but let's let them suffer for a while. True forgiveness may mean letting the one who needs to forgive bear the shame, and the suffering. Whenever we talk about forgiveness we need to be aware of the reality in which we find ourselves. Forgiveness does not condone or permit abuse and violence. It does not encourage injustice. You bring what has happened out to the light and you say I realize the sin, I recognize the injustice, now go and sin no more.

When I talk about forgiveness I do not intend in the least bit to mean that you put up with violence and injustice or repression. Absolutely not. You speak up and try to change the political climate for the sake of Jesus Christ and his children. The forgiveness comes in that relationship after you have taken steps to secure the safety of your people and the daily bread of your people. The healing and forgiveness comes later when we learn not to hate and be able to find joy away from the danger.

This is the model that we have in our Savior Jesus Christ and what he commands us to live in. He doesn't recommend it, he commands us to do it. In fact, our very salvation depends upon it. May God bless us as we live forgiven lives always forgiving others. Amen.