

God and Forgiveness



Sabbath Afternoon

MEMORY TEXT: “God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

HE WAS ONE OF THE MOST GRUESOME MURDERERS in American history. Jeffrey Dahmer had sexually abused, then murdered (and cannibalized), 17 young men. His crimes shocked the world. How could anyone, who walked on two legs and had opposable thumbs, sink so low? Dahmer, in his own macabre way, personified the words of Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, who wrote: “Man is more frightening than his skeleton.”

Yet, Jeffrey Dahmer had, in the last months of his life (he was murdered by fellow inmates), repented, been baptized, and openly professed faith in Jesus Christ, who, while we were yet sinners, died for us—a death that would include, one assumes, Jeffrey Dahmer. Because there was no chance of Mr. Dahmer being freed, his profession of faith did not come with the taint of dubious motives: He was not leaving prison, no matter what he believed.

Though God alone knows Mr. Dahmer’s heart, his story brings to light one of the most amazing of all Bible truths: God’s willingness to forgive even the worst of sinners.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: When did God start loving us? Did the Cross create God’s love for humanity? What role does confession have in the plan of salvation? Why is it necessary for sinners to confess before God? Is God’s love and willingness to forgive sin and evil greater than sin and evil themselves?

*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 5.

AN ETERNAL LOVE.

The salvation of the human race does not result from a divine afterthought; our redemption hasn't arisen from some sort of heavenly improvisation made necessary because of the unexpected rise of sin. On the contrary, God's love for sinners existed even before there were sinners, even before the foundation of this world. We are saved by a God whose love for us is rooted in eternity. That concept is difficult for us to grasp for a number of reasons, one of them being that we as finite beings can't even begin to grasp the concept of eternity. Nevertheless, the thought is comforting, that of being loved by an *eternal love*.

Look up these texts and write down in your own words the essence of what each is saying:

1 Cor. 2:7 _____

Eph. 1:3, 4 _____

Rev. 13:8 _____

Perhaps the most crucial point to remember regarding this notion of God loving us from even before we existed is that Jesus' death on the cross did *not* change the way God feels about us. He does not love us because Jesus died; Jesus died for us because God already loved us.

What Christ's death did, instead, was provide a way in which God—because of His preexisting love for sinners—could save them from the inevitable results of their sin, in a manner that does not violate the moral order of the universe. There seems to have been a self-imposed constraint on God; that is, He had to forgive sinners in a way that was in harmony with His own character as a righteous and merciful God. If all He had to do was “forgive,” there would have been no need for the Cross. The Cross solved the problem of how God could be both just and merciful at the same time (see Rom. 3:26).

Imagine living in a universe with one of these options: (1) There is no God or transcendent force at all. (2) There is some sort of deity who nevertheless does not care about us at all. (3) There is a God, and He hates us and likes to see us squirm (to quote Shakespeare, “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods/They kill us for their sport”). (4) There is a God who loves us beyond our imagination. Take some time to go through each option. How does each one change your perspective on what your life means? Why, then, is our understanding of God's attitude toward us so important?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: Romans 5:8.

Teachers Aim:

1. To establish that God is always ready to forgive the repentant sinner.
2. To show that even the most horrific sin is forgivable, if confessed.
3. To illustrate that Jesus wants to give us the assurance of forgiveness.

Lesson Outline:

I. God's Forgiveness Is Based on His Eternal Love for Us (Jer. 31:3).

- A. God planned humanity's salvation before the foundation of the world.
- B. Jesus volunteered to save humanity from the penalty of sin.

II. Confession Is for Our Benefit, Not God's (Lev. 26:40-42).

- A. Confession brings us face to face with our sinfulness.
- B. Confession is necessary for sanctification.
- C. Confession brings healing and restoration to the sinner.

III. The Power of God's Love and Forgiveness Is Immeasurably Greater Than the Terribleness of Sin.

- A. Sin exacts a terrible toll on humanity and nature.
- B. Despite our sin, Jesus is able “to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him” (Heb. 7:25).

Summary: While forgiveness is the key that unlocks the shackles of sin from the sinner, it must be preceded by sincere sorrow and confession. Forgiveness is a divine act. Confession is a person's acknowledgment of his or her sin. Forgiveness is the divine response to humanity's sincere confession.

Commentary.

God and Forgiveness.

There is an intriguing circularity to forgiveness that makes it difficult to grasp: As sinful humans, it is impossible for us to forgive. Our tendency is to seek revenge. We can forgive one another because God has forgiven us, but the Bible tells us we cannot be forgiven until

CONFESSION.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

If God’s attitude toward us is acceptance and forgiveness, why must we confess our sins? Does confession justify us before God? Does confession tell God something about us that He doesn’t know? Does confession appease God’s anger at our deeds, even the worst ones? Does confession change God’s attitude toward us?

If your answer to the last four questions above is “No” in all cases, then write down your reasons for believing that we need to confess our sins to God. Then compare them with what is written afterward:

Confession changes us, not God. We confess because God has announced that, as far as He is concerned, we are no longer His enemies. Confession is a means by which we better understand just how repulsive sin is to God. It helps us understand just what the issues and the consequences with sin are and how much it cost to redeem us from those consequences. Confession is our acknowledgment of our sinfulness and need of a Savior. Confession is a means of strengthening, in our own *lives*, our personal faith in Christ. Confession of sin before God is simply one aspect of what Paul talked about in Philippians 2:12, 13; it is part of the sanctification process.

Confession, then, is not for the purpose of persuading God to forgive us; it is, rather, a heaven-appointed means to enhance our understanding of how painful sin is to God and to ourselves. It also is a means of helping us heal spiritually from the effects of sin. This healing principle can be seen even on a purely worldly level: Who has not experienced, personally, just how good confession of wrongs can be when we confess to a person we have wronged, or even simply when we tell others about the wrong we have done? How much more so when we confess to God?

Think about it: Why would it be foolish to talk about being forgiven our sin if we were not required to even acknowledge what sin needs to be forgiven?

we forgive (Luke 6:37). So, where does the process begin? It begins with God’s love.

In our sinful state, it is impossible to keep God’s law. However, God’s law cannot “be changed to meet man’s necessity, for in God’s arrangement it was never to lose its force nor give up the smallest part of its claims. . . .

“The law of Jehovah, the foundation of His government in heaven and upon earth, was as sacred as God Himself.”—Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption*, pp. 46, 48. The only hope we have is the law’s allowance for Christ to “make an atonement . . . acceptable to God, by giving His life a sacrifice and bearing the wrath of His father.”—Page 48. The plan of salvation is thus a clear demonstration of God’s supreme love for us.

“The initiative in all salvation lies with God. . . . It was God who sent his Son, and he sent him because he loved men. At the back of everything is the love of God.”—William Barclay, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), vol. 1, p. 137.

The forgiveness of sin demanded a sacrifice, an atonement. Christ’s death provided that atonement, even for sins people had not yet committed. “He was paying the debt before we ever asked for forgiveness! . . . He paid the price of forgiveness before the crime was committed.”—T. D. Jakes, *I Choose to Forgive* (Oklahoma: Albury Publishing, 1997), p. 21. Because of this sacrifice, “we have redemption through the blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (Eph. 1:7, NIV). The Bible makes it clear that Jesus’ death atones for our sins (Acts 13:38; Rom. 4:7), and John 3:16 explains that our forgiveness is a gift.

Until we accept that gift, however, it remains the property of the Giver. Forgiveness mandates a role for those who would benefit from it. Accepting the gift of salvation implies we must be aware of our condition. And that is the point where confession enters the picture.

Before we can accept forgiveness, we must acknowledge that we need to be forgiven. “When we confess our sins to our heavenly Father, we are . . . agreeing with His attitude about sin. . . .

“Confession also implies that we are assuming responsibility for our actions.”—Charles Stanley, *The Gift of Forgiveness* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987), p. 94. Once that assumption takes place, we can be restored “to our previous level of fellowship and intimacy with Him—from our perspective.”—Stanley, p. 98. “Our capacity to enjoy forgiveness . . . is based on our willingness to acknowledge and confess that sin.”—Stanley, p. 136.

“As you draw near to [God] with confession and repentance, He will draw near to you with mercy and forgiveness.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 55. We cannot deal with sin if we refuse to recognize it. If we refuse to recognize it, Satan controls us. “All who endeavor to excuse or conceal their sins, and permit them to remain upon the books of heaven, unconfessed and unforgiven, will be over-

“FRIEND, YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN.”

“Some men came carrying a paralytic. . . . When Jesus saw their faith, he said, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven’” (Luke 5:18-20, NIV).

Though none of us would envy the paralytic, he did experience something that (more than likely) none of us ever had: He heard Jesus, with His own mouth, say to him, “ ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven.’ ”

Wow! How many of us would love to be in that position, that of actually hearing Jesus first call us “friend” and then tell us that our sins are forgiven? Talk about assurance of salvation!

Yet, whether we hear the promise directly from Christ’s mouth or whether we accept it from His Word, the final result is the same. The paralytic received the same forgiveness anyone else who is forgiven ever receives; there’s no difference between what happened to him (in terms of being justified by his faith) and what happens to any of us who, by faith, claims the forgiveness that Jesus offers.

Look up these verses: Are they not telling us basically the same thing that Jesus told the paralytic? Rom. 4:7; Eph. 4:32; Col. 1:14; 2:13; 1 John 1:9; 2:12. Why, then, should we have any less assurance of forgiveness than did the paralytic?

Many people intellectually accept the idea that God loves and forgives them; but, for one reason or another, the reality of what it is all about does not make an impact on their experience. They live in fear of eternal damnation, they are plagued by guilt, and they suffer from spiritual loneliness and emotional depression. Even though their minds tell them that He is near, God seems to them to be far away. Their religious experience is characterized by a deep insecurity.

Some of these might respond that they really cannot “believe it” if they do not feel it; others would say there might be emotional blocks that go back as far as their childhood that keep them from experiencing God’s forgiveness. But if we allow Jesus to “draw” us as He did the paralytic, nothing can prevent us from being forgiven.

What keeps people from believing they have been forgiven, despite the fact that the Bible tells them they *have been*? List three possibilities:

How would you answer each one of these?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

come by Satan.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 202.

Once we recognize sin, and accept the forgiveness provided by the Cross, we can work with God at eradicating sin from our lives. “Whoever under the reproof of God will humble the soul with confession and repentance . . . may be sure that there is hope for him. Whoever will in faith accept God’s promises, will find pardon.” —Page 726. Furthermore, we have the assurance that God forgives our sin, according to Jeremiah 31:34: “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” “The one thing essential for us in order that we may receive and impart the forgiving love of God is to know and believe the love that He has to us.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 115. We can rest assured

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Texts for Discovery: Matthew 18:21-35; Luke 5:17-26; Romans 5:6-8.

1. God’s forgiveness is remarkable for the same reason as God’s love: We are totally undeserving of each of them. Both Paul (Rom. 5:8) and John (1 John 4:19) recognize that forgiveness, like love, comes to us as a gift from a God who is an expert in both. Is the forgiveness we grant one another motivated by God’s forgiveness of our sins? Or is it a reflection of God’s forgiveness? Does it make a difference?
2. When Peter asked Jesus about the limits of forgiveness, Jesus told His disciples the story about the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:21-35). Jesus’ story has characters who demonstrate both mercy and justice. What does the story reveal about the limits of forgiveness? And who decides if and when those barriers have been crossed?
3. In the story of the paralytic (Luke 5:17-26), the man who was carried by his friends to Jesus had obvious physical needs. But Jesus’ first words to the man were: “ ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven’ ” (vs. 20, NIV). What does this incident reveal about our need of forgiveness? How did the man’s physical healing serve not only to restore the body but the soul, as well?
4. In reality, forgiveness is often not a final solution. Frustratingly, we often need to ask God to forgive us again for doing repeatedly those things He’s already forgiven us for in the past; just as we are often asked to forgive those who keep wronging us. Is the risk of disappointment and emotional pain an inevitable part of forgiving someone? What practical benefits does forgiveness provide us when we seem unable to break free of some persistent temptation?

FORGIVENESS GREATER THAN SIN.

“Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom. 5:20).

Just as God’s love is a gift, something we cannot earn, so is His forgiveness. In fact, His forgiveness is one of the greatest tangible manifestations of that love. To be totally forgiven even the most heinous of sins (such as Jeffrey Dahmer’s) requires a love that we as humans barely can begin to understand (we can, like beggars, take with humility and appreciation only what’s being graciously offered us).

The New Testament writers view God’s grace as being infinitely greater than sin. No matter how terrible sin is—and we can see how terrible it is simply by opening our eyes and looking around at the world—the New Testament teaches that the power of God’s love and forgiveness is immeasurably greater than all evil and all sin. God’s love for us and His willingness to forgive us our sin and evil (thanks to the Cross) transcends all the evil in a world in which evil is all but in the air we breathe.

In Romans 5 the apostle Paul uses such phrases as “overflowing” and “much more” when he contrasts the grace of God to sin. The entire chapter sets up a series of contrasts between grace and sin.

In order to better understand Paul’s emphasis in Romans 5, list all the verses in which the words “much more” are used in this chapter. Indicate after listing the verse what the “much more” relates to.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Summarize in a few lines the essence of what Paul is saying in Romans 5. Look especially at the first five verses. What is his message here, and how could you use what he’s saying to help someone who is facing some spiritual discouragement: struggling with faith or unsure of salvation or discouraged because of sin in his or her life? Write a small note to that person, based on this chapter, that could help.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

that we have been forgiven (Pss. 32:1; 85:2; 103:3; Col. 3:13; Eph. 1:7; 4:32). “It is the privilege of all who comply with the conditions to know for themselves that pardon is freely extended for every sin.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 52. “He who listened to the cries of His servants of old, will hear the prayer of faith and pardon our transgression.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 203.

WITNESSING

When Moses asked to see the glory of God, the Lord passed before him and proclaimed: “The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exod. 34:6, 7). Notice the words God uses to describe Himself: *merciful, gracious, long-suffering, forgiving*. He also uses the words *goodness* and *truth*. Not only is the Lord a forgiving God, but He is also an honest God. So, we can *believe* that “He is faithful and just to forgive us” (1 John 1:9) just as He promised.

Jesus said, “Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful” (Luke 6:36). As God’s representatives on earth, we are to show a world lost in sin what true forgiveness really is. It is not

enough to tell them. We *must* show them. It should be a part of our daily living. Forgiveness, however, is not something we already possess. Sinful human beings are not capable of forgiving, just as we are not capable of *loving* without the power of God. Forgiveness is a gift from God.

Only when we have experienced God’s forgiveness in our own lives can we truly understand what it means to forgive. When God forgives, He says “I will remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:34). True forgiveness is *not* holding a grudge or being resentful. True forgiveness knows that “vengeance is mine . . . saith The Lord” (Rom. 12:19). True forgiveness is remembering *no more*. As Christians we are to be like God. God is merciful. God is gracious. God is longsuffering. God is *forgiving*.

GOD’S FORGIVENESS ILLUSTRATED.

“Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:21, 22).

Is there some point at which God’s forgiveness can be exhausted? Write your answer (along with some justification for it) on the lines below. Think your reasoning through to its logical conclusion. Also, what biblical examples can you find to support your position?

The rabbis taught that the law required God’s people to forgive someone three times. Peter, sensing that Jesus usually went “beyond” the Mosaic law, suggested doubling the requirement of the law and adding one for good measure. In addition, the number seven symbolized completeness in the Jewish culture. (See Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 243.)

Jesus’ response to Peter must have startled the disciple and the rest of His hearers. It challenged Peter’s assumption about forgiveness as an action that could be added up, like money in the bank. Each time someone forgives, he or she keeps a record until the limit is reached; then that person can retaliate. Talk about living according “to the letter of the law” (this thinking is somewhat parallel to one of the conventions of war: Soldiers are not supposed to shoot paratroopers while they are coming down from the air; once they hit the ground, then the soldiers can shoot them).

What was Jesus saying in this verse? Is there something magical about the number 490 or 77 (the Greek can be read both ways)? Did Jesus really want people to count that high and then stop forgiving? Or, instead, does this story represent how God will never stop forgiving us, as long as we seek that forgiveness? Again, think through the implications of whether, in fact, this is the message Jesus wanted us to learn by answering Peter as he did. In light of Paul’s words that “God is not mocked” (Gal. 6:7), what wrong conclusions could someone possibly draw from this wonderful truth?

LIFE-A PPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: When confronted by Nathan and forced to acknowledge his sin, David immediately fled to God, the Judge, for forgiveness rather than to a family member or trusted friend (2 Samuel 12; Psalm 51). What does this say about the purpose and the process of forgiveness? Where ultimately does true forgiveness exist?

women unwrap forgiveness. They carelessly toss aside the gift-wrap (grace) and then stomp on the box (the Cross). Are there different levels of forgiveness depending on the persons and behaviors; for example: parent-child, parent-ruler, parent-overseer, judge-subject?

Thought Questions:

1. According to 1 John 1:9, forgiveness is a partnership. Can you partner with another person to reestablish an estranged relationship with God? If not, why not?
2. The hurt that creates a crisis is personal, profound, and unjust. These are the hard kinds of hurts to forgive, and yet, in many ways, they are the most important ones to forgive. Why is that so?

2. How can you respond with grace to those who treat you shabbily when you express forgiveness for wrongs they’ve done to you?
3. The first step in recovery programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, requires that the victim admit the addiction. Likewise, forgiveness begins when sinners admit their guilt. What other steps would you include in a forgiveness program? Which step(s) are most difficult for you? How do you surmount the difficulty to move on to success?

Application Questions:

1. Imagine the Giver of forgiveness watching some men and

FURTHER STUDY: Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, “God’s Love for Man,” pp. 9–15; *Christ’s Object Lessons*, “The Measure of Forgiveness,” pp. 243–251.

The heart that has once tasted the love of Christ, cries out continually for a deeper draft. . . . Every revelation of God to the soul increases the capacity to know and to love. The continual cry of the heart is, ‘More of Thee,’ and ever the Spirit’s answer is, ‘Much more.’ Romans 5:9, 10. For our God delights to do ‘exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.’ Ephesians 3:20. To Jesus, who emptied Himself for the salvation of lost humanity, the Holy Spirit was given without measure. So it will be given to every follower of Christ when the whole heart is surrendered for His indwelling.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, pp. 20, 21.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. **“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you” (Matt. 5:43, 44). If God commands me to love my enemies, does He not do the same? If God loves His enemies, does He love His chief enemy, Satan? Would He not have been willing to forgive even the devil if he genuinely had repented? If this is true, then the tragedy of the destruction of the wicked is that they all are sinners who could have been forgiven but have refused to accept the forgiveness God made available. Do you agree with this line of reasoning? Write your reasons either way.**
2. **Why do some people feel it necessary to “earn” a forgiveness that is freely given?**
3. **Why does knowing that there is no way I can destroy God’s love or willingness to forgive make it possible for me to be more honest with God than I can be with even my own spouse, parents, or siblings?**
4. **What do you say to someone who says “If I confess and am forgiven, why don’t I feel forgiven? Why does the burden of guilt still sit heavily upon me?” Or what do you say to the person who says “Look, I confessed my sins, God has forgiven them, and now I don’t want to hear any more about them, or what problems they might have caused. I am forgiven; that’s all that matters”?**