



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**Back to the Basics:**  
**Forgiveness**  
Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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*Jeremiah 31:31-34*

*Psalm 32*

For a while about five years into my ministry, my Mother and I had a running joke. Or let me say 'she had the joke, and I would run with it!'

I would call her, and she would ask if I had a good sermon that Sunday morning:

“Yes, Momma, I think it was.”

“Was it about sin?”

“Well, I touched on it.”

“Were you against it?”

So, let me say up front, I am against sin, and this is where I'm going to touch on sin.

The Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann wrote that “...*The triumph of sin, the main sign of its rule over the world, is division, opposition, separation, hatred. Therefore, the first break through this fortress of sin is forgiveness: the return to unity, solidarity, love.*”

Forgiveness is a basic of faithful living we encounter throughout the Bible. Whether we like to admit it or not, God does not allow us to avoid or escape the notion that humans have sinned and need forgiveness.

Yet the Bible does not merely define our predicament. Instead, we find there that God has refused to leave us outside God's love.

God loves us, with all our sinfulness. God loves us, even though we create hellish situations for ourselves, for others, and for creation.

Whether you are reading in the Prophets, the Psalms, the letters of Paul from the New Testament, or the good news on the lips of Christ, the word about forgiveness is constantly there, a basic.

For Jesus, it is not only a lesson to teach but a life lived as he hangs on the cross. Among his last words were, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”

It is a part and parcel of our very relationship in Christ. How would we have a relationship with Christ if it were not for God’s forgiveness of us?

Let me be clear, this is not a sermon about forgiving others because I don’t think that can happen until we receive, until we rejoice in God’s forgiveness for you, for me.

The passages we have read today in Jeremiah and Psalm 32 challenge us to ponder the magnificent implication God’s passion for forgiveness for you and me.

If anything, this psalm is a beatitude of a forgiven sinner.

Athanasius, a powerful figure in the early years of the Christian church, wrote: “Most scripture speaks to us, while the Psalms speak for us.”

So, our psalmist speaks for us: *“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”*

Eugene Peterson in “The Message” describes forgiveness in this psalm as a “fresh start, your slate’s wiped clean.”

The Psalmist cried out to God because he needed forgiveness. No one pushed him into this pit of misery; he tripped over his own sins.

## Back to the Basics: Forgiveness

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Can you relate to the psalmist this morning?

- Are you struggling with pretending you have it all together when it's really all falling apart?
- Do you feel like you are sinking into a hole from which there is no return?
- Did you get there because of choices you made which hurt those closest to you?

Can you say to God today?

- Help me be honest about what I have done and take responsibility for it.
- Forgive me. Give me another chance.
- Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me.

Like the psalmist, can you hear God say to you:

- I have heard your plea for help.
- I still love you and will give you another chance.
- Take my hand and let me walk with you out of this hole, one step at a time.

Forgiveness is about healing a relationship. It is a gift of God for us to heal our relationship with God, as we are told in Scripture: *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.”* But we have to receive it.

The late Douglas Steere wrote about this perverse dynamic of human pride and control. He said: *There is...a condition for receiving God's gift of forgiveness. [We] must be willing to accept it. Absurd as this may seem, there are few who will believe in and accept the forgiveness of God so completely as to...leave their sin with [God] forever.*

Let's understand a couple of things that forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not forgetting.

There are a couple of passages in the Old Testament like this one in Jeremiah, "*I will forgive their sin and remember their iniquity no more.*" God has the power to forgive and to forget, but none of us do.

It is impossible to say, "I am just going to forget that." Whether it's about others or ourselves, we will always remember.

But the point is not about the past, of hanging on to it, to worry over it, to recreate the situation.

The point is about the future: To not forget means we must not allow, condone, or indulge someone to continually do the thing to us that they have been doing or for us to continue to do what we've been doing.

And the other thing: Forgiveness is never about the offender. It is never about the person who has done something to me. It is never about whether or not the person is deserving. It is always about what goes on in the heart of the person who has been injured.

That is our psalm. God has been injured by our sin and God forgives; and the psalmist exults in the joy of that renewed relationship, the happiness of a forgiven sinner.

Isn't this the Gospel? It is not that I have somehow become this wonderfully righteous person and, of course, God would forgive me.

## Back to the Basics: Forgiveness

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No, the Gospel says, *“While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”* as a part of God’s demonstration of forgiveness.

It is always about what is in the heart of the person, or in this case God, who is forgiving:

- Because God loves us!
- Because our sin will not overcome God’s grace.
- Because God is God, and we are not.
- Because God has loved us in Jesus Christ.
- Because the Holy Spirit loves us to fulfill God’s “everything” new for us.

In the Bible, “forgive” means “release...liberate...set free”. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has released you and me from the prison of hatred, violence, cruelty | and deceit.

Because God remembers our sin no more, we are liberated, delivered from our addiction to guilt and shame, delivered from our petty insistence on keeping score, delivered from our notions of moral hierarchy based on the color of our skin or what side of town we come from, the balance in our bank account, and so much more.

Because we have been forgiven, we are free to love people shunned by others, embrace people who others declare untouchable, and celebrate reconciliation because this is God’s desire for us, for creation, and forever.

Because we are forgiven, change is possible. Renewal is possible. Hope is possible. Love is possible. Acceptance of differences is possible. Justice is possible. Peace is possible.



So if I could call my late Mother today, maybe the conversation would go like this:

“Did you preach a good sermon today?”

“Well, I hope so, Momma.”

“Did you talk about sin?”

“Well, Momma, I touched on it.”

“Were you against it?”

“Yes, Momma, but I was even more for forgiveness because that’s what God has done for you and me.

And doesn’t that make us happy?”

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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