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CHRIST, THE FORGIVER OF SIN

John 8:1-11

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Of all His offices, there is none more valuable to the sinner than that Christ is the forgiver of sins. If Christ is not the **Forgiver** He cannot be the **Savior**. If He is not the forgiver of sins, everything else that He is or might be, is of little worth to sinners. If we think of Him only as an example, and are not deceived, we are left hopeless as we compare our lives with His.

The narrative before us encourages sinners of every name and degree to go at once to Christ. He will in no wise cast them out. There are no more touching stories in the Gospels than those which tell how Jesus dealt with the most degraded sinners. Recall that scene at the well of Sychar when He acted as revealer and forgiver of the sins of a fallen woman. He first revealed to her her sinful state and then revealed Himself to her as the Savior. Remember the woman who washed His feet and wiped them with her hair and anointed them with ointment because she had been forgiven much. Think of His loving response to the dying thief who begged to be remembered when He came into His kingdom. He did not wait to bless him, but said today shalt thou be with me in paradise. Our Lord does not put penitent sinners off when they come to Him for forgiveness. He does not prescribe a protracted period of praying and working before He speaks the word of forgiveness. He is prompt to hear the cry of penitent faith. He is truly a present help in time of need.

In our text we have a woman taken in the very act of sin and dragged before Him by the scribes and Pharisees. These narratives illustrate the prophecy that "a bruised reed shall he not break; the smoking flax shall he not quench." Jesus was always tender and forgiving towards self-confessed and penitent sinners. If you want to see Him in a harsh and critical mood then see Him in the presence of proud self-righteous people. It is always well to remember that God resisteth the proud but giveth grace to the humble.

The scribes and Pharisees were staggered and amazed when Jesus assumed the prerogative of the forgiver of sin. And they were right when they asked, "Who can forgive sins but God only?" And Jesus did not deny the implication. He knew full well that it was blasphemy for a mere man to forgive sins. No stronger proof could be given of His claim to be God than when He said, "Neither do I condemn thee," or "Thy sins be forgiven thee." If Jesus was not God He was a blasphemer of God. If Jesus was not more than man, He was a bad man. No good man will claim the right to forgive sin in the sense that Christ forgave it. Men may forgive sins against them but only God can forgive sins committed against God.

The Character of Forgiveness

1. Christ's forgiveness is a loving forgiveness. It is to be contrasted with much that characterizes human

forgiveness. Men often say that they forgive, but there is often a bitterness in the way they forgive. There is a forgiveness that I will call "hedge-hog" forgiveness, the sort that bristles all over with sharp quills to stick the offender. But Christ's forgiveness was loving forgiveness. When He forgave, the sinner was made to feel better. God pardons like a mother, who kisses the offense into everlasting forgetfulness. A little boy, on being asked what forgiveness of injuries is, said, "It is the scent that flowers give when they are trampled on." If you do not make the one who has sinned against you feel better when he repents, then your forgiveness is not the kind that Christ has. If your forgiveness is not a blessing to the one who has sinned against you, it is not like Christ's forgiveness.

2. Christ's forgiveness is a sincere forgiveness. There is no pretense or hypocrisy about it. Our Lord was always sincere when He spoke the word of forgiveness. Sometimes men say they forgive, just in order to save their face, when there is not forgiveness in the heart. They lie when they say they forgive. When you forgive a person of an offense you feel towards that person just as though he had never wronged you. I have asked forgiveness from certain people who have made me feel much worse than before I asked them. But when Jesus forgave He always made the sinner happy.

A little boy had displeased his sister and came to ask her pardon,

but he was not quite satisfied with her forgiveness when he got it. "Really and truly do you forgive me?" he asked, as he looked very earnestly into her face which still showed a frown. "Yes, yes," she said rather sharply, "didn't I tell you that I forgave you? Why do you not believe me?" "Cause," he answered, sobbing; "cause you aren't smiling." Unsmiling forgiveness is not genuine forgiveness--it is not Christ-like. There was no frowning face when Christ forgave.

3. Christ-like forgiveness seeks the good of the one who has sinned against us. I give a crude but striking illustration. A man was once seen in a boat going down the river with a large dog which he wished to drown. He succeeded in throwing the dog into the water; but the animal tried to get back into the boat. As the man was attempting to beat the dog off from the boat, he fell overboard and would have drowned had not the dog seized him by the coat and brought him to shore.

But the nearest thing to Christ-like forgiveness I have ever heard of is the story of an Armenian woman. After the frightful massacre of Christian Armenians in 1901, an Armenian woman, who had seen her father, uncles, husband, and son murdered by the Turks, was visiting Moslem homes with an open Bible, preaching forgiveness within a week of the murders. But much of our forgiveness is from the lips while bitterness still rankles within the heart.

The Basis of Forgiveness

What is the ground upon which Christ forgives sinners? How could Jesus tell this woman that He did not condemn her? It was not upon the ground of innocency, for His words, "Go and sin no more," implies that she was guilty. Nor was it by setting aside His justice. Under the law this woman ought to have been put to death. How then could Jesus say, "Neither do I condemn thee." As the woman's accusers pressed their case, Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground. We believe this act of Jesus was the symbolic ratification of the law. This was not the first time

that He had written "with his finger." In Exodus 31:18 we read, "And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, written with the finger of God." In writing on the ground, Jesus was symbolically saying, "I am not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it." This was His answer to the woman's accusers, who said, "Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?" His writing on the ground signified that He would uphold the law.

And as the men continued asking Him, He again stooped down and wrote on the ground. The first "tables of stone" were dashed to the ground by Moses, and broken. A second set was written by the finger of God and laid up in the ark, and covered by the mercy seat. In writing on the ground a second time, Jesus was illustrating how he would save those, who were, by the law, condemned to death. He did not mean to set the law aside. As His first writing on the ground signified that the law would be established, the second writing intimated that the blood of an innocent substitute should come between the law and the one it condemned. It was because He Himself was going to die for this woman that He said unto her, "Neither do I condemn thee." He was not winking at her sin; He was not condoning or palliating her sin; He was anticipating the time when it would be upon Him and He would bear it in His own body on the tree.

A man was once being tried for a crime, the punishment of which was death. The witnesses came in one by one and testified to his guilt; but there he stood quite unmoved and calm. The judge and jury were surprised at his indifference; they could not understand how he could take such a serious matter so calmly. He made no effort in his own defense. When the jury retired it did not take them long to return with the verdict of "guilty." And when the judge was passing the sentence of death upon the man he told him how surprised he was that he could be so unmoved at the prospect of death. When the judge had finished, the man put his

hand in his pocket, and pulled out a document--it was a pardon from the king--and he walked out of the dock a free man. Ah, that was how he could be so calm--he had a pardon from the king in his pocket all the time during the trial and he was just as safe as if he had never committed the crime. The king had instructed him to let the trial proceed and to produce the pardon only after he was condemned. The only thing that can make any of us bold in view of the day of judgment is to have a pardon from Him who is King of kings and Lord of lords. And this pardon has been purchased for us by the price of His own blood. In Ephesians 1:7 we read, "*In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.*" Our forgiveness is not merited by us, but purchased by Him.

*"Chief of sinners though I be,
Jesus shed his blood for me;
Died that I might live on high,
Died that I might never die;
As the branch is to the vine,
I am his and He is mine.*

*Chief of sinners though I be,
Christ is all in all to me;
All my wants to Him are known,
All my sorrows are his own;
Safe with him from earthly strife,
He sustains my hidden life."*

The word forgive means to take off or take away, as a burden is lifted or a barrier removed. Sin is taken off us because it was laid upon Jesus Christ. It cost our Savior a sweat of blood to bear our load of guilt, yea, it cost him the agonies of the cross to bear it away. Samson carried away the gates of Gaza, but that was nothing to the load Jesus bore on our behalf. Every pardon is the price of His blood.

The Channel or Means of Forgiveness

This is repentance. The scriptures connects repentance with forgiveness. In Luke 24:47 we read "*that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in the name of Christ.*" And in Acts 5:31 we read that God hath exalted Jesus with His right hand to be a

Prince and a Savior, for to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. We also learn that human forgiveness rests upon repentance. Luke 17:3, *"If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him."* There can be no forgiveness apart from repentance on the part of the offender. Jesus said, *"Except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish."* God now commandeth all men everywhere to repent because he has appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness.

Repentance is an attitude of mind concerning sin and self and salvation. It is not a physical exercise nor a righteous work. It has to do with inward thoughts and desires. It is a change of mind in which sins are perceived and abhorred and forsaken. The man who is sick of self and fond of Christ has repented unto life.

In the story before us the woman took the place of a sinner. She did not deny her guilt; she made no protest before her accusers. They were silenced by Jesus not by the woman. Repentance is not the doing of something meritorious for salvation, but the admission that there is nothing meritorious or deserving about us. Repentance is a divine work of grace in us that causes us to lose confidence in self and to put confidence in Christ.

*"Come ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore,
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, love, and power.
He is able,
He is willing, doubt no more."*

*Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness he requireth
Is to feel your need of him:
This he gives you;
'Tis the Spirit's rising beam."*

The Demands of Forgiveness

"Go and sin no more." This is still His word to those who have been saved by His grace. Ours is not a sinning religion. Every believer is responsible not to sin, but his responsibility is not that of a criminal under law, but of a child under grace. Re-

sponsibility must always be viewed in the light of relationship. This will save us from doctrinal error. The unbeliever is related to God as Lawgiver and Judge, and his responsibility is based upon law. The believer is related to God as Father, and his responsibility is that of a child. Responsibility in the case of the unbeliever issues in death; in the case of the believer it issues in chastisement. The unbeliever is condemned; the believer is chastened that he might not be condemned with the world. I Corinthians 11:32, *"But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world."* Responsibility under law was the principle by which the whole human race was ruined. Responsibility under grace brings to the sinning saint the chastisement of a loving Father to his profit. In Hebrews 12 we read, *"For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards and not sons. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but He for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastisement for the present seemeth to be joyous but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."* This passage is full of timely truth. It tells us how God deals with His sinning children. He chastises every one of them, therefore there are no sinless ones among them. It tells us that He chastises for their profit. His chastisement is not from a burst of temper as is often the case with earthly parents, but from a wise and loving

heart. It tells us that the end or issue of chastisement is the spiritual prosperity of His child. There is a yield of the peaceable fruit of righteousness.

*"How oft, alas, this wretched heart
Has wandered from the Lord!
How oft my roving thoughts depart,
Forgetful of His word!"*

*Yet sovereign Mercy calls, 'Return!
Dear Lord, and may I come?
My vile ingratitude I mourn:
O take the wanderer home."*

*And cast thou, wilt thou, yet forgive,
And bid my crimes remove?
And shall a pardoned rebel live
To speak thy wondrous love?"*

*Thy pardoning love, so free, so sweet,
Blest Savior, I adore;
O keep me at thy sacred feet,
And let me rove no more."*

CORRECTION: In last month's message on Loneliness I stated that "God created Jesus, the son of God, who became a man..." This statement is misleading. God prepared His son a body. He became the son of man, born of a virgin. Because He was a man, God created Him a wife, for it was not good for man to be alone. He will be with His bride in heaven.

-Al Gormley