

Forgiveness - J C Ryle

FORGIVENESS

J. C. Ryle

"Your sins are forgiven!" 1 John 2:12+

There is a clause near the end of the Apostle's Creed, which, I fear, is often repeated without thought or consideration. I refer to the clause which contains these words, "I believe in the Forgiveness of sins." Thousands, I am afraid, never reflect what those words mean. I propose to examine the subject of them in the following paper, and I invite the attention of all who care for their souls, and want to be saved. Do we believe in the "Resurrection of our bodies"? Then let us see to it that we know something by experience of the "Forgiveness of our sins."

I. Let me show, first of all, our need of forgiveness.

All people need forgiveness, because all people are sinners. He that does not know this, knows nothing in religion. It is the very A B C's of Christianity, that a man should know his right place in the sight of God, and understand his deserts.

We are all great sinners. "There is none righteous, no, not one." "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3:10, 23.) Sinners we were born, and sinners we have been all our lives. We take to sin naturally from the very first. No child ever needs schooling and education to teach it to do wrong. No devil, or bad companion, ever leads us into such wickedness as our own hearts. And "the wages of sin is death." (Rom. 6:23.) We must either be forgiven, or lost eternally.

We are all guilty sinners in the sight of God. We have broken His holy law. We have transgressed His precepts. We have not done His will. There is not a commandment in all the ten which does not condemn us. If we have not broken it in deed we have in word; if we have not broken it in word, we have in thought and imagination—and that continually. Tried by the standard of the fifth chapter of Matthew, there is not one of us that would be acquitted. All the world is "guilty before God." And "as it is appointed unto people once to die, and after this comes the judgment." We must either be forgiven, or perish everlastingly. (Rom. 3:19; Heb. 9:27.)

When I walk through the crowded streets of London, I see hundreds and thousands of whom I know nothing beyond their outward appearance. I see some bent on pleasure, and some on business—some who look rich, and some who look poor—some rolling in their carriages, some hurrying along on foot. Each has his own object in view. Each has his own aims and ends, all alike hidden from me. But one thing I know for a certainty, as I look upon them—they are all sinners. There is not a soul among them all but "deserves God's wrath and condemnation." There breathes not the man or woman in that crowd but must die forgiven, or else rise again to be condemned forever at the last day.

When I look through the length and breadth of Great Britain I must make the same report. From the Queen on the throne to the pauper in the workhouse—we are all sinners. We Englishmen have got a name among the empires of the earth. We send our ships into every sea, and our merchandise into every town in the world. We have bridged the Atlantic with our steamers. We have made night in our cities like day, with gas lighting. We have changed England into one great county by railways. We can exchange thought between London and Edinburgh in a few seconds by the electric telegraph. But with all our arts and sciences—with all our machinery and inventions—with all our armies and navies—with all our lawyers and statesmen, we have not altered the nature of our people. We are still in the eye of God an island full of sinners.

When I turn to the map of the world I must say the same thing. It matters not what quarter I examine—I find men's hearts are everywhere the same, and everywhere wicked. Sin is the family disease of all the children of Adam. Never has there been a corner of the earth discovered where sin and the devil do not reign. Wide as the difference is between the nations of the earth, they leave always been found to have one great mark in common. Europe and Asia, Africa and America, Iceland and India, Paris and Peking—all alike have the mark of sin. The eye of the Lord looks down on this globe of ours, as it rolls round the sun, and sees it covered with corruption and wickedness! What He sees in the moon and stars, in Jupiter and Saturn, I cannot tell—but on the earth I know He sees sin. (Psalm 14:2, 3.)

I have no doubt such language as this sounds extravagant to some. You think I am going much too far. But mark well what I am about to say next, and then consider whether I have not used the words of soberness and truth.

What then, I ask, is the life of the best Christian among us all? What is it but one great career of shortcomings? What is it but a daily acting out the words of our Prayer-book, "leaving undone things we ought to do, and doing things that we ought not to do"? Our faith,

how feeble! Our love, how cold! Our works, how few! Our zeal, how small! Our patience, how short-breathed! Our humility, how thread-bare! Our self-denial, how dwarfish! Our knowledge, how dim! Our spirituality, how shallow! Our prayers, how formal! Our desires for more grace, how faint! Never did the wisest of people speak more wisely than when he said, "There is not a just man upon earth, that does good, and sins not." (Eccl 7:20.) "In many things," says the apostle James, "we offend all." (James 3:2.) And what is the best action that is ever done by the very best of Christians? What is it after all but an imperfect work, when tried on its own merits? It is, as Luther says, no better than "a splendid sin." It is always more or less defective. It is either wrong in its motive or incomplete in its performance—not done from perfect principles, or not executed in a perfect way. The eyes of people may see no fault in it—but weighed in the balances of God it would be found lacking, and viewed in the light of heaven it would prove full of flaws. It is like the drop of water which seems clear to the naked eye—but, placed under a microscope, is discovered to be full of impurity. David's account is literally true, "There is none who does good, no, not one." (Psalm 14:3.)

And then what is the Lord God, whose eyes are on all our ways, and before whom we have one day to give account? "Holy, holy, holy," is the remarkable expression applied to Him by those who are nearest to Him. (Isaiah 6:3; Rev. 4:8.) It sounds as if no one word could express the intensity of His holiness. One of His prophets says, "He is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on iniquity." (Hab 1:13.) We think the angels exalted beings, and far above ourselves; but we are told in Scripture, "He charged His angels with folly." (Job 4:18.) We admire the moon and stars as glorious and splendid bodies; but we read, "Behold even the stars are not pure in His sight." (Job 25:5.) We talk of the heavens as the noblest and purest part of creation; but even of them it is written, "The heavens are not clean in His sight." (Job 15:15.) What then is anyone of us but a miserable sinner in the sight of such a God as this?

*We are all great sinners,
and we all need a great forgiveness.*

Surely we ought all to cease from proud thoughts about ourselves. We ought to lay our hands upon our mouths, and say with Abraham, "I am dust and ashes;" and with Job, "I am vile;" and with Isaiah, "We are all as an unclean thing;" and with John, "If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (Gen. 18:27; Job 40:4; Isaiah 64:6; 1 John 1:8.) Where is the man or woman in the whole catalogue of the Book of Life, that will ever be able to say more than this, "I obtained mercy"? What is the glorious company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, the noble army of martyrs—what are they all but pardoned sinners? Surely there is but one conclusion to be arrived at—We are all great sinners, and we all need a great forgiveness.

See now what just cause I have to say that to know our need of forgiveness is the first thing in true religion. Sin is a burden, and must be taken off. Sin is a defilement, and must be cleansed away. Sin is a mighty debt, and must be paid. Sin is a mountain standing between us and heaven, and must be removed. Happy is that mother's child among us that feels all this! The first step towards heaven is to see clearly that we deserve hell. There are but two alternatives before us—we must either be forgiven, or be miserable forever.

See too how little many people know of the main design of Christianity, though they live in a Christian land. They fancy they are to go to church to learn their duty, and be moral. They forget that the heathen philosophers could have told them as much as this. They forget that such people as Plato and Seneca gave instructions which ought to put to shame the church-going liar, the drunkard, and the thief. They have yet to learn that the leading mark of Christianity is the remedy it provides for sin. This is the glory and excellence of the Gospel. It meets man as he really is. It takes him as it finds him. It goes down to the level to which sin has brought him, and offers to raise him up. It tells him of a remedy equal to his disease—a great remedy for a great disease—a great forgiveness for great sinners.

I ask every reader to consider these things well, if he never considered them before. It is no light matter whether you know your soul's necessities or not—it is a matter of life and death. Try, I beseech you, to become acquainted with your own heart. Sit down and think quietly what you are in the sight of God. Bring together the thoughts, and words, and actions of any day in your life, and measure them by the measure of God's Word. Judge yourself honestly, that you may not be condemned at the last day. Oh, that you might find out what you really are! Oh, that you might learn to pray Job's prayer, "Make me to know my transgression and my sin." (Job 13:23.) Oh, that you might see this great truth—that until you are forgiven, all your church-going has done nothing for you at all!

II. Let me point out, in the second place—the way of forgiveness.

I ask particular attention to this point, for none can be more important. Granting for a moment that you want pardon and forgiveness, what ought you to do? Where will you go? Which way will you turn? Everything hinges on the answer you give to this question.

Will you turn to ministers and put your trust in them? They cannot give you pardon—they can only tell you where it is to be found. They can set before you the bread of life; but you yourself must eat it. They can show you the path of peace; but you yourself must walk in it. The Jewish priest had no power to cleanse the leper—but only to declare him cleansed. The Christian minister has no power to forgive sins—he can only declare and pronounce who they are that are forgiven.

Will you turn to sacraments and ordinances, and trust in them? They cannot supply you with forgiveness, however diligently you may use them. By sacraments "faith is confirmed and grace increased," in all who rightly use them. (See Article 27.) But they cannot justify the sinner. They cannot put away transgression. You may go to the Lord's table every Sunday in your life—but unless you look far beyond the sign to the thing signified, you will after all die in your sins. You may attend a daily service regularly—but if you think to establish a righteousness of your own by it, in the slightest degree, you are only getting further away from God every day.

Will you trust in your own works and endeavors, your virtues and your good deeds, your prayers and your alms? They will never buy for you an entrance into heaven. They will never pay your debt to God. They are all imperfect in themselves, and only increase your guilt. There is no merit or worthiness in them at the very best. The Lord Jesus Christ says expressly, "When you have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants." (Luke 17:10.)

Will you trust in your own repentance and amendment? You are very sorry for the past. You hope to do better for time to come. You hope God will be merciful. Alas, if you lean on this, you have nothing beneath you but a broken reed! The judge does not pardon the thief because he is sorry for what he did. Today's sorrow will not wipe off the score of yesterday's sins. It is not an ocean of tears that could ever cleanse an uneasy conscience and give it peace.

Where then must a man go for pardon? Where is forgiveness to be found? There is a way both sure and plain, and into that way I desire to guide every inquirer's feet.

That way is simply to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior. It is to cast your soul, with all its sins, unreservedly on Christ—to cease completely from any dependence on your own works or doings, either in whole or in part—and to rest on no other work but Christ's work, no other righteousness but Christ's righteousness, no other merit but Christ's merit, as your ground of hope. Take this course and you are a pardoned soul. "To Christ," says Peter, "give all the prophets witness, that through His name whoever believes in Him shall receive remission of sins." (Acts 10:43.) "Through this Man," says Paul at Antioch, "is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins, and by Him all who believe are justified from all things." (Acts 13:38.) "In Him," writes Paul to the Colossians, "we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins." (Col. 1:14.)

The Lord Jesus Christ, in great love and compassion, has made a full and complete satisfaction for sin, by suffering death in our place upon the cross. There He offered Himself as a sacrifice for us, and allowed the wrath of God, which we deserved, to fall on His own head. For our sins, as our Substitute, He gave Himself, suffered, and died—the just for the unjust, the innocent for the guilty—that He might deliver us from the curse of a broken law, and provide a complete pardon for all who are willing to receive it. And by so doing, as Isaiah says—He has borne our sins; as John the Baptist says—He has taken away sin; as Paul says—He has purged our sins, and put away sin; and as Daniel says—He has made an end of sin, and finished transgression. (Isaiah 53:11; John 1:29; Heb. 1:3; Heb. 9:26; Dan. 9:24)

And now the Lord Jesus Christ is sealed and appointed by God the Father to be a Prince and a Savior, to give remission of sins to all who will have it. The keys of death and hell are put in His hand. The government of the gate of heaven is laid on His shoulder. He Himself is the door, and by Him all that enter in shall be saved. (Acts 5:31; Rev. 1:18; John 10:9.)

Christ, in one word, has purchased a full forgiveness, if we are only willing to receive it. He has done all, paid all, suffered all that was needful to reconcile us to God. He has provided a garment of righteousness to clothe us. He has opened a fountain of living waters to cleanse us. He has removed every barrier between us and God the Father, taken every obstacle out of the way, and made a road by which the vilest may return. All things are now ready, and the sinner has only to believe and be saved, to eat and be satisfied, to ask and receive; to wash and be clean.

And faith, simple faith, is the only thing required, in order that you and I may be forgiven. That we will come by faith to Jesus as sinners with our sins—trust in Him—rest on Him—lean on Him—confide in Him—commit our souls to Him—and forsaking all other hope, cleave only to Him—this is all and everything that God asks for. Let a man only do this, and he shall be saved. His iniquities shall be found completely pardoned, and his transgressions entirely taken away. Every man and woman that so trusts is wholly forgiven, and reckoned perfectly righteous. His sins are clean gone, and his soul is justified in God's sight, however bad and guilty he may have been!

Faith is the only thing required, not knowledge. A man may be a poor unlearned sinner, and know little of books. But if he sees enough to find the foot of the cross, and trust in Jesus for pardon, I will engage, from the authority of the Bible, that he shall not miss heaven. To know Christ is the corner-stone of all saving knowledge.

Faith, I say, and not conversion. A man may have been walking in the broad way up to the very hour he first hears the Gospel. But if in that hearing he is awakened to feel his danger, and wants to be saved, let him come to Christ at once, and wait for nothing. That very coming is the beginning of conversion.

Faith, I repeat, and not holiness. A man may feel all full of sin, and unworthy to be saved. But let him not tarry outside the ark until he

is better. Let him come to Christ without delay, just as he is. Afterwards he shall be holy.

I call upon every reader of these pages to let nothing move him from this strong ground—that faith in Christ is the only thing needed for our justification. Stand firm here, if you value your soul's peace. I see many walking in darkness and having no light, from confused notions as to what faith is. They hear that saving faith will work by love and produce holiness, and not finding all this at once in themselves, they think they have no faith at all. They forget that these things are the fruits of faith, and not faith itself, and that to doubt whether we have faith, because we do not see them at once, is like doubting whether a tree is alive, because it does not bear fruit the very day we plant it in the ground. I charge you to settle it firmly in your mind, that in the matter of your forgiveness and justification there is but one thing required, and that is, simple faith in Christ.

I know well that the natural heart dislikes this doctrine. It runs counter to man's notions of religion. It leaves him no room to boast. Man's idea is to come to Christ with a price in his hand—his regularity—his morality, his repentance—his goodness—and so, as it were, to buy his pardon and justification. The Spirit's teaching is quite different—it is first of all, to believe. Whoever believes shall not perish. (John 3:16)

Some say such doctrine cannot be right, because it makes the way to heaven too easy. I fear that many such people, if the truth were spoken, find it too hard. I believe in reality it is easier to give a fortune in building a cathedral, or to go to the stake and be burned, than thoroughly to receive "justification by faith without the deeds of the law," and to enter heaven as a sinner saved by grace.

Some say this doctrine is foolishness and enthusiasm. I answer, This is just what was said of it 1800 years ago, and it is a vain cavil now, as it was then. So far from the charge being true, a thousand facts can prove this doctrine to be from God. No doctrine certainly has produced such mighty effects in the world, as the simple proclamation of free forgiveness through faith in Christ. This is the glorious doctrine which was the strength of the Apostles when they went forth to the Gentiles to preach a new religion. They began, a few poor fishermen, in a despised corner of the earth. They turned the world upside down. They changed the face of the Roman empire. They emptied the heathen temples of their worshipers, and made the whole system of idolatry crumble away. And what was the weapon by which they did it all? It was free forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ.

This is the doctrine which brought light into Europe 300 years ago, at the time of the blessed Reformation, and enabled one solitary monk, Martin Luther, to shake the whole Church of Rome. Through his preaching and writing the scales fell from men's eyes, and the chains of their souls were loosed. And what was the lever that gave him his power? It was free forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ.

This is the doctrine which revived our own Church in the middle of last century, when Whitefield, and the Wesleys, and Berridge, and Venn broke up the wretched "spirit of slumber" which had come over the land, and roused people to think. They began a mighty work, with little seeming likelihood of success. They began, few in number, with small encouragement from the rich and great. But they prospered. And why? Because they preached free forgiveness through faith in Christ.

This is the doctrine which is the true strength of any Church on earth at this day. It is not education, or endowments, or liturgies, or learning, that will keep a Church alive. Let free forgiveness through Christ be faithfully proclaimed in her pulpits, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her. Let it be buried, or kept back, and her candlestick will soon be taken away. When the Saracens invaded the lands where Jerome, and Athanasius, and Cyprian, and Augustine once wrote and preached, they found bishops and liturgies, I make no question. But I fear they found no preaching of free forgiveness of sins, and so they swept the Churches of those lands clean away. They were a body without a vital principle, and therefore they fell. Let us never forget the brightest days of a Church are those when "Christ crucified" is most exalted. The dens and caves of the earth, where the early Christians met to hear of the love of Jesus, were more full of glory and beauty in God's sight than ever was Peter's at Rome. The basest barn at this day, where the true way of pardon is offered to sinners, is a far more honorable place than the Cathedral of Cologne or Milan. A Church is only useful so far as she exalts free forgiveness through Christ.

This is the doctrine which, of all others, is the mightiest engine for pulling down the kingdom of Satan. The Greenlanders were unmoved so long as the Moravians told them of the creation and the fall of man; but when they heard of redeeming love, their frozen hearts melted like snow in spring. Preach salvation by the sacraments, exalt the Church above Christ, and keep back the doctrine of the Atonement, and the devil cares little—his goods are at peace. But preach a full Christ, and a free pardon by faith in Him, and then Satan will have great wrath, for he knows he has but a short time. John Berridge said he went on preaching morality and nothing else, until he found there was not a moral man in his parish. But when he changed his plan, and began to preach the love of Christ to sinners, and a free salvation by faith, then there was a stirring of the dry bones, and a mighty turning to God.

This is the only doctrine which will ever bring peace to an uneasy conscience, and rest to a troubled soul. A man may get on pretty well without it so long as he is asleep about his spiritual condition. But once let him awake from his slumber, and nothing will ever calm him but the blood of Atonement, and the peace which comes by faith in Christ. How anyone can undertake to be a minister of

religion without a firm grasp of this doctrine, I never can understand. For myself, I can only say, I should think my office a most painful one if I had not the message of free forgiveness to convey. It would be miserable work indeed to visit the sick and dying, if I could not say, "Behold the Lamb of God—believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved." The right hand of a Christian minister is the doctrine of free forgiveness through faith in Christ. Give us this doctrine, and we have power—we will never despair of doing good to men's souls. Take away this doctrine, and we are weak as water. We may read the prayers and go through a round of forms—but we are like Samson with his hair shorn—our strength is gone. Souls will not be benefitted by us, and good will not be done.

I commend the things I have been saying to the notice of every reader. I am not ashamed of free pardon through faith in Christ, whatever some may say against the doctrine. I am not ashamed of it, for its fruits speak for themselves. It has done things that no other doctrine can do. It has effected moral changes which laws and punishments have failed to work—which magistrates and policemen have labored after in vain—which education and secular knowledge have proved utterly powerless to produce. Just as the fiercest lunatics in the asylum became suddenly gentle when kindly treated, even so the worst and most hardened sinners have often become as little children, when told of Jesus loving them and willing to forgive. I can well understand Paul ending his Epistle to the erring Galatians with that solemn burst of feeling, "God forbid that I should glory, but in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Gal. 6:14.) The crown has indeed fallen from a Christian's head when he leaves the doctrine of justification by faith.

You should ask yourself whether you have really received the truth which I have been dwelling on, and know it by experience. Jesus, and faith in Him, is the only way to the Father. He who thinks to climb into Paradise by some other road, will find himself fearfully mistaken. Other foundation can no man lay for an immortal soul than that of which I have been feebly speaking. He who ventures himself here is safe. He who is off this rock has got no standing ground at all.

You should seriously consider what kind of a ministry you are in the habit of attending, supposing you have a choice. You have reason indeed to be careful. It is not all the same where you go, whatever people may say. There are many places of worship, I fear, where you might look long for Christ crucified, and never find Him. He is buried under outward ceremonies—thrust behind the baptismal font—lost sight of under the shadow of the Church. "They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him." (John 20:13.) Take heed where you settle yourself. Try all by this single test, "Is Jesus and free forgiveness proclaimed here?" There may be comfortable pews—there may be good singing—there may be learned sermons. But if Christ's Gospel is not the sun and center of the whole place, do not pitch your tent there. Say rather with Isaac. "Here, is the wood and the fire—but where is the lamb?" (Gen. 22:7.) Be very sure this is not the place for your soul.

III. Let me, in the third place, encourage all who wish to be forgiven.

I dare be sure this paper will be read by someone who feels he is not yet a forgiven soul. My heart's desire and prayer is that such a one may seek his pardon at once. And I would gladly help him forward, by showing him the kind of forgiveness offered to him, and the glorious privileges within his reach.

Listen to me, then, while I try to exhibit to you the treasures of Gospel forgiveness. I cannot describe its fullness as I ought. Its riches are indeed unsearchable. (Eph. 3:8.) But if you will turn away from it, you shall not be able to say in the day of judgment, you did not at all know what it was.

Consider, then, for one thing, that the forgiveness set before you is a GREAT and BROAD forgiveness.

Hear what the Prince of Peace Himself declares, "All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and all blasphemies." (Mark 3:28.) "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall become white as snow—though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (Isaiah 1:18.) Yes—though your trespasses be more in number than the hairs of your head, the stars in heaven, the leaves of the forest, the blades of grass, the grains of sand on the sea shore—still they can all be pardoned! As the waters of Noah's flood covered over and hid the tops of the highest hills, so can the blood of Jesus cover over and hide your mightiest sins. "His blood cleanses from all sin." (1 John 1:7.) Though to you they seem written with the point of a diamond, they can all be effaced from the book of God's remembrance by that precious blood. Paul names a long list of abominations which the Corinthians had committed, and then says, "Such were some of you—but you are washed." (1 Cor. 6:11.)

Furthermore, it is a FULL and COMPLETE forgiveness.

It is not like David's pardon to Absalom, a permission to return home—but not a full restoration to favor. (2 Sam. 14:24.) It is not, as some fancy, a mere letting off, and letting alone. It is a pardon so complete that he who has it is reckoned as righteous as if he had never sinned at all! His iniquities are blotted out. They are removed from him as far as the east from the west. (Psalm 103:12.) There remains no condemnation for him. The Father sees him joined to Christ, and is well pleased. The Son beholds him clothed with His own righteousness, and says, "You are all fair, there is no spot in you." (Cant. 4:7.) Blessed be God that it is so! I verily believe if the best of us all had only one blot left for himself to wipe out, he would miss eternal life. If the holiest child of Adam were in heaven all but his little finger, and to get in depended on himself, I am sure he would never enter the kingdom. If Noah, Daniel, and Job, had

had but one day's sins to wash away, they would never have been saved. Praised be God, that in the matter of our pardon there is nothing left for man to do! Jesus does all, and man has only to hold out an empty hand and to receive.

Furthermore, it is a FREE and UNCONDITIONAL forgiveness.

It is not burdened with an "if," like Solomon's pardon to Adonijah, "If he will show himself a worthy man." (1 Kings 1:52.) Nor yet are you obliged to carry a price in your hand, or to bring an upright character with you to prove yourself deserving of mercy. Jesus requires but one character, and that is that you should feel yourself a sinful, bad man. He invites you to "buy wine and milk without money and without price," and declares, "Whoever will, let him take the water of life freely." (Isaiah 55:1; Rev 22:17.) Like David in the cave of Adullam, He receives everyone that feels in distress and a debtor, and rejects none. (1 Sam. 22:2.) Are you a sinner? Do you need a Savior? Then come to Jesus just as you are, and your soul shall live.

Again, it is an OFFERED forgiveness.

I have read of earthly Kings who knew not how to show mercy. The King of kings is not like them. He calls on people to come to Him, and be pardoned. "Unto you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of men." (Prov. 8:4.) "Ho! everyone who thirsts, come to the waters." (Isaiah 55:1.) "If any man thirsts, let him come unto Me and drink." (John 7:37.) "Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28.) It ought to be a great comfort to you and me to hear of any pardon at all; but to hear Jesus Himself inviting us, to see Jesus Himself holding out His hand to us—the Savior seeking the sinner before the sinner seeks the Savior—this is encouragement, this is strong consolation indeed!

Again, it is a WILLING forgiveness.

I have heard of pardons granted in reply to long entreaty, and wrung out by much importunity. King Edward the Third of England would not spare the citizens of Calais until they came to him with halters round their necks, and his own Queen interceded for them on her knees. But Jesus is "good and ready to forgive." (Psalm 86:5.) He "delights in mercy." (Micah 7:18.) Judgment is "His strange work." He is not willing that any should perish. (Isai. 28:21, 2 Pet. 3:9.) He would gladly have all men saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim. 2:4.) He wept over unbelieving Jerusalem. "As I live," He says, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Turn! Turn from your evil ways; why will you die?" (Ezek. 33:11.) You and I may well come boldly to the throne of grace. He who sits there is far more willing and ready to give mercy than we are to receive it. (Heb. 4:16.)

Besides this, it is a TRIED forgiveness.

Thousands and tens of thousands have sought for pardon at the mercy-seat of Christ, and not one has ever returned to say that he sought in vain. Sinners of every name and nation—sinners of every sort and description—have knocked at the door of the fold, and none have ever been refused admission. Zaccheus the extortioner, Magdalen the harlot, Saul the persecutor, Peter the denier of his Lord, the Jews who crucified the Prince of Life, the idolatrous Athenians, the adulterous Corinthians, the ignorant Africans, the bloodthirsty New Zealanders, all have ventured their souls on Christ's promises of pardon—and none have ever found them to fail. If the way which the Gospel sets before us were a new and untraveled way—we might well feel faint-hearted. But it is not so. It is an old path. It is a path worn by the feet of many pilgrims, and a path in which the footsteps are all one way. The treasury of Christ's mercies has never been found empty. The well of living waters has never proved dry.

Besides this, it is a PRESENT forgiveness.

All who believe in Jesus are at once justified from all things. (Acts 13:39.) The very day the younger son returned to his father's house he was clothed with the best robe, had the ring put on his hand, and the shoes on his feet. (Luke 15.) The very day Zaccheus received Jesus he heard those comfortable words, "This day is salvation come to this house." (Luke 19:9.) The very day that David said, "I have sinned against the Lord," he was told by Nathan, "The Lord also has put away your sin." (2 Sam. 12:13.) The very day you first flee to Christ, your sins are all removed. Your pardon is not a thing far away, to be obtained only after many years. It is near at hand. It is close to you, within your reach, all ready to be bestowed. Believe, and that very moment it is your own. "He who believes is not condemned." (John 3:18.) It is not said, "He shall not be," or "will not be," but "is not." From the time of his believing, condemnation is gone. "He who believes has everlasting life." (John 3:36.) It is not said, "He shall have," or "will have," it is "has." It is his own as surely as if he was in heaven, though not so evidently so to his own eyes. You must not think forgiveness will be nearer to a believer in the day of judgment than it was in the hour he first believed. His complete salvation from the power of sin is every year nearer and nearer to him; but as to his forgiveness and justification, and deliverance from the guilt of sin, it is a finished work from the very minute he first commits himself to Christ.

Last, and best of all, it is an EVERLASTING forgiveness.

It is not like Shimei's pardon—a pardon that may some time be revoked and taken away. (1 Kings 2:9.) Once justified, you are justified forever. Once written down in the book of life, your name shall never be blotted out. The sins of God's children are said to

be cast into the depths of the sea—to be sought for and not found—to be remembered no more—to be cast behind God's back. (Mic. 7:19; Jer. 50:20; 31:34; Isa. 38:17.) Some people fancy they may be justified one year and condemned another—children of adoption at one time, and strangers by and by—heirs of the kingdom in the beginning of their days, and yet servants of the devil in their end. I cannot find this in the Bible—as the New Zealander told the Romish priest, "I do not see it in the Book." It seems to me to overturn the good news of the Gospel altogether, and to tear up its comforts by the roots. I believe the salvation Jesus offers is an everlasting salvation, and a pardon once sealed with His blood shall never be reversed.

I have set before you the nature of the forgiveness offered to you. I have told you but a little of it, for my words are weaker than my will. The half of it remains untold. The greatness of it is far more than any report of mine. But I think I have said enough to show you it is worth the seeking, and I can wish you nothing better than that you may strive to make it your own.

Do you call it nothing to look forward to death without fear, and to judgment without doubtings, and to eternity without a sinking heart? Do you call it nothing to feel the world slipping from your grasp, and to see the grave getting ready for you, and the valley of the shadow of death opening before your eyes, and yet to be not afraid? Do you call it nothing to be able to think of the great day of account, the throne, the books, the Judge, the assembled worlds, the revealing of secrets, the final sentence, and yet to feel, "I am safe"? This is the portion, and this the privilege of a forgiven soul.

Such an one is on a rock. When the rain of God's wrath descends, and the floods come, and the winds blow, his feet shall not slide, his habitation shall be sure.

Such an one is in an ark. When the last fiery deluge is sweeping over all things on the surface of the earth, it shall not come near him. He shall be caught up, and borne securely above it all.

Such an one is in a hiding place. When God arises to judge, and people are calling to rocks and mountains to fall upon them and cover them, the Everlasting Arms shall be thrown around him, and the storm shall pass over his head. He shall "abide under the shadow of the Almighty." (Psalm 91:1.)

Such an one is in a city of refuge. The accuser of the brethren can lay no charge against him. The law cannot condemn him. There is a wall between him and the avenger of blood. The enemies of his soul cannot hurt him. He is in a secure sanctuary.

Such an one is rich. He has treasure in heaven which cannot be affected by worldly changes, compared to which Peru and California are nothing at all. He need not envy the richest merchants and bankers. He has a portion that will endure when bank-notes and dollars are worthless things. He can say, like the Spanish ambassador, when shown the treasury at Venice, "My Master's treasury has no bottom." He has Christ.

Such an one is insured. He is ready for anything that may happen. Nothing can harm him. Banks may break, and Governments may be overturned. Famine and pestilence may rage around him. Sickness and sorrow may visit his own fireside. But still he is ready for all—ready for health—ready for disease—ready for tears—ready for joy—ready for poverty—ready for plenty—ready for life, ready for death. He has Christ. He is a pardoned soul. "Blessed" indeed "is he whose transgression is forgiven, and whose sin is covered." (Ps. 32:1.)

How will anyone escape if he neglects so great salvation? Why should you not lay hold on it at once, and say, Pardon me, even me also, O my Savior! What would you have, if the way I have set before you does not satisfy you? Come while the door is open. Ask, and you shall receive.

IV. Let me, in the last place, supply the readers of this paper with some marks of having found forgiveness.

I dare not leave out this point. Too many people presume they are forgiven, who have no evidence to show. Not a few cannot think it possible they are forgiven, who are plainly in the way to heaven, though they may not see it themselves. I would gladly raise hope in some, and self-inquiry in others; and to do this, let me set down in order the leading marks of a forgiven soul.

(a) Forgiven souls HATE SIN.

They can enter most fully into the words of our Communion Service, "The remembrance of sin is grievous unto them, and the burden of it is intolerable." It is the serpent which bit them—how should they not shrink from it with horror? It is the poison which brought them to the brink of eternal death—how should they not loathe it with a godly disgust? It is the Egyptian enemy which kept them in hard bondage—how should not the very memory of it be bitter to their hearts? It is the disease of which they carry the marks and scars about them, and from which they have scarcely recovered—well may they dread it, flee from it, and long to be delivered altogether from its power! Remember how the woman in Simon's house wept over the feet of Jesus. (Luke 7:38.) Remember how the Ephesians publicly burned their wicked books. (Acts 19:19.) Remember how Paul mourned over his youthful transgressions, "I am not fit to be called an Apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God." (1 Cor. 15:9.) If you and sin are friends, you and God are not yet reconciled. You are not fit for heaven; for one main part of heaven's excellence is the absence of all sin.

(b) Forgiven souls LOVE CHRIST.

This is that one thing they can say, if they dare say nothing else—they do love Christ. His person, His offices, His work, His name, His cross, His blood, His words, His example, His ordinances—all, all are precious to forgiven souls. The ministry which exalts Him most, is that which they enjoy most. The books which are most full of Him, are most pleasant to their minds. The people on earth they feel most drawn to, are those in whom they see something of Christ. His name is as ointment poured forth, and comes with a peculiar sweetness to their ears. (Cant. 1:3.) They would tell you they cannot help feeling as they do. He is their Redeemer, their Shepherd, their Physician, their King, their strong Deliverer, their gracious Guide, their hope, their joy, their All. Were it not for Him they would be of all people most miserable. They would as soon consent that you should take the sun out of the sky, as Christ out of their religion. Those people who talk of "the Lord," and "the Almighty," and "the Deity," and so forth—but have not a word to say about Christ, are in anything but a right state of mind. What says the Scripture? "He who honors not the Son, honors not the Father who has sent Him." (John 5:23.) "If any man loves not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema." (1 Cor. 16:22.)

(c) Forgiven souls are HUMBLE.

*We have nothing we can call our own—but sin and weakness.
Surely there is no garment that befits us so well, as humility.*

They cannot forget that they owe all they have and hope for to free grace, and this keeps them lowly. They are brands plucked from the fire—debtors who could not pay for themselves—captives who must have remained in prison forever—but for undeserved mercy—wandering sheep who were ready to perish when the Shepherd found them! What right then have they to be proud? I do not deny that there are proud saints. But this I do say—they are of all God's creatures the most inconsistent, and of all God's children the most likely to stumble and pierce themselves with many sorrows. Forgiveness more often produces the spirit of Jacob, "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and all the truth which You have showed unto Your servant" (Gen. 32:10); and of Hezekiah, "I shall go softly all my years" (Isaiah 38:15); and of the Apostle Paul, "I am less than the least of all saints—chief of sinners." (Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 1:15.) We have nothing we can call our own—but sin and weakness. Surely there is no garment that befits us so well, as humility.

(d) Forgiven souls are HOLY.

*Pardon of sin and love of sin are like oil and water—
they will never go together.
All who are washed in the blood of Christ,
are also sanctified by the Spirit of Christ.*

Their chief desire is to please Him who has saved them, to do His will, to glorify Him in body and in Spirit, which are His. "What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits?" (Ps. 116:12), is a leading principle in a pardoned heart. It was the remembrance of Jesus showing mercy that made Paul in labors so abundant, and in doing good so unwearied. It was a sense of pardon that made Zaccheus say, "The half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have taken anything from any man falsely, I will restore him four-fold." (Luke 19:8.) If anyone points out to me believers who are in a carnal, slothful state of soul, I reply in the words of Peter, "They have forgotten they were purged from their old sins." (2 Pet. 1:9.) But if you show me a man deliberately living an unholy and licentious life, and yet boasting that his sins are forgiven, I answer, "He is under a ruinous delusion, and is not forgiven at all." I would not believe he is forgiven if an angel from heaven affirmed it, and I charge you not to believe it too. Pardon of sin and love of sin are like oil and water—they will never go together. All who are washed in the blood of Christ, are also sanctified by the Spirit of Christ.

(e) Forgiven souls are FORGIVING.

They do as they have been done by. They look over the offences of their brethren. They endeavor to "walk in love, as Christ loved them, and gave Himself for them." (Eph. 5:2.) They remember how God for Christ's sake forgave them, and endeavor to do the same towards their fellow-creatures. Has He forgiven them pounds, and shall they not forgive a few pence? Doubtless in this, as in everything else, they come short—but this is their desire and their aim. A spiteful, quarrelsome Christian is a scandal to his profession. It is very hard to believe that such a one has ever sat at the foot of the cross, and has ever considered how he is praying against himself every time he uses the Lord's Prayer. Is he not saying as it were, "Father, do not forgive me my trespasses at all"? But it is still harder to understand what such a one would do in heaven, if he got there. All ideas of heaven in which forgiveness has not a place, are castles in the air and vain fancies. Forgiveness is the way by which every saved soul enters heaven. Forgiveness is the only title by which he remains in heaven. Forgiveness is the eternal subject of song with all the redeemed who inhabit heaven. Surely an unforgiving soul in heaven would find his heart completely out of tune. Surely we know nothing of Christ's love to us but the name of it, if we do not love our brethren.

I lay these things before every reader of this paper. I know well there are great diversities in the degree of men's attainments in

grace, and that saving faith in Christ is consistent with many imperfections. But still I do believe the five marks I have just been naming will generally be found more or less in all forgiven souls.

I cannot conceal from you, these marks should raise in many minds great searchings of heart. I must be plain. I fear there are thousands of people called Christians, who know nothing of these marks. They are baptized. They attend the services of their Church. They would not on any account be reckoned infidels. But as to true repentance and saving faith, union with Christ and sanctification of the Spirit, they are "names and words" of which they know nothing at all.

Now if this paper is read by such people, it will probably either alarm them, or make them very angry. If it makes them angry I shall be sorry. If it alarms them I shall be glad. I want to alarm them. I want to awaken them from their present state. I want them to take in the great fact, that they are not yet forgiven, that they have not peace with God—and are on the high road to destruction.

I must say this, for I see no alternative. It seems neither Christian faithfulness, nor Christian charity, to keep it back. I see certain marks of pardoned souls laid down in Scripture. I see an utter lack of these marks in many men and women around me. How then can I avoid the conclusion that they are not yet "forgiven"? And how shall I do the work of a faithful watchman if I do not write it down plainly in so many words? Where is the use of crying Peace! Peace! when there is no peace? Where is the honesty of acting the part of a lying physician, and telling people there is no danger, when in reality they are fast drawing near to eternal death? Surely the blood of souls would be required at my hands if I wrote to you anything less than the truth. "If the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" (1 Cor. 14:8.)

Examine yourself, then, before this subject is forgotten. Consider of what sort your religion is. Try it by the five marks I have just set before you. I have endeavored to make them as broad and general as I can, for fear of causing any heart to be sad that God has not made sad. If you know anything of them, though it be but a little, I am thankful, and entreat you to go forward. But if you know nothing of them in your own experience, let me say, in all affection, I stand in doubt of you. I tremble for your soul!

1. And now, before I conclude, let me put a PLAIN QUESTION to everyone who reads this paper. It shall be short and clear—but it is all important, "Are you forgiven?"

I have told you all I can about forgiveness. Your need of forgiveness—the way of forgiveness, the encouragements to seek forgiveness—the marks of having found it—all have been placed before you. Bring the whole subject to bear upon your own heart, and ask yourself, "Am I forgiven? Either I am, or I am not. Which of the two is it?"

You believe perhaps, there is forgiveness of sins. You believe that Christ died for sinners, and that He offers a pardon to the most ungodly. But are you forgiven yourself? Have you yourself laid hold on Christ by faith, and found peace through His blood? What profit is there to you in forgiveness, except you get the benefit of it? What does it profit the shipwrecked sailor that the life-boat is alongside, if he does not jump in and escape? What does it avail the sick man that the doctor offers him a medicine, if he only looks at it, and does not swallow it down? Except you lay hold for your own soul, you will be as surely lost as if there was no forgiveness at all.

If ever your sins are to be forgiven, it must be now—now in this life, if ever in the life to come—now in this world, if they are to be found blotted out when Jesus comes again the second time. There must be actual business between you and Christ. Your sins must be laid on Him by faith—His righteousness must be laid on you. His blood must be applied to your conscience, or else your sins will meet you in the day of judgment, and sink you into hell. Oh, how can you trifle when such things are at stake? How can you be content to leave it uncertain whether you are forgiven? Surely that a man can make his will, insure his life, give directions about his funeral, and yet leave his soul's affairs in uncertainty—is an amazing thing indeed.

2. Let me next give a SOLEMN WARNING to everyone who reads this paper, and knows in his conscience he is not forgiven.

Your soul is in awful danger. You may die this year. And if you die as you are, you are lost forever! If you die without pardon, without pardon you will rise again at the last day. There is a sword over your head which hangs by a single hair! There is but a step between you and death. Oh, I wonder that you can sleep quietly in your bed!

You are not yet forgiven. Then what have you got by your religion? You go to church. You have a Bible, you have a Prayer-book, and perhaps a Hymn-book. You hear sermons. You join in services. It may be you go to the Lord's table. But what have you really got after all? Any hope? Any peace? Any joy? Any comfort? Nothing! Literally nothing! You have got nothing but mere external religion—if you are not a pardoned soul.

You are not yet forgiven. But you trust God will be merciful. Yet why should He be merciful if you will not seek Him in His own appointed way? Merciful He doubtless is, wonderfully merciful to all who come to Him in the name of Jesus. But if you choose to despise His directions, and make a road to heaven of your own—you will find to your cost there is no mercy for you!

You are not yet forgiven. But you hope you will be some day. This is like thrusting off the hand of conscience, and seizing it by the throat to stop its voice. Why are you more likely to seek forgiveness at a future time? Why should you not seek it now? Now is the time for gathering the bread of life. The day of the Lord is fast drawing near, and then no man can work. (Exod. 16:26.) The Seventh trumpet will soon sound. The kingdoms of this world will soon become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ. (Rev. 11:15.) Woe to the house which is found without the scarlet line, and without the mark of blood upon the door! (Josh. 2:18; Exod. 12:13.)

Well, you may not feel your need of forgiveness now. But a time may come when you will want it. The Lord in mercy grant that it may not then be too late.

3. Let me next give an EARNEST INVITATION to all who read this paper and desire forgiveness.

I know not who you are, or what you have been in time past. But I say boldly, Come to Christ by faith, and you shall have a pardon. High or low, rich or poor, young men and maidens, old people and children—you cannot be worse than Manasseh and Paul before conversion—than David and Peter after conversion—come all of you to Christ, and you shall be freely forgiven!

Do not think for a moment that you have some great thing to do before you come to Christ. Such a notion is of the earth, earthy; the Gospel bids you come just as you are. Man's idea is to make his peace with God by repentance, and then come to Christ at last. The Gospel way is to receive peace from Christ first of all, and begin with Him. Man's idea is to amend, and turn over a new leaf—and so work his way up to reconciliation and friendship with God. The Gospel way is first to be friends with God through Christ, and then to work. Man's idea is to toil up the hill, and find life at the top. The Gospel way is first to live by faith in Christ, and then to do His will.

And judge you, everyone, judge you, which is true Christianity? Which is the good news? Which is the glad tidings? First the fruits of the Spirit and then peace with God? Or first peace with God and then the fruits of the Spirit? First sanctification and then pardon? Or first pardon and then sanctification? First service and then life? Or first life and then service? Your own hearts can well supply the answer.

Come then, willing to receive, and not thinking how much you can bring. Come, willing to take what Christ offers, and not fancying you can give anything in return. Come with your sins, and no other qualification but a hearty desire for pardon, and, as sure as the Bible is true, you shall be saved.

You may tell me you are not worthy, you are not good enough, you are not elect. I answer, You are a sinner, and you want to be saved, and what more do you need? You are one of those whom Jesus came to save. Come to Him and you shall have life. Take with you words, and He will hear you graciously. Tell Him all your soul's necessities, and I know from the Bible He will give heed. Tell Him you have heard He receives sinners, and that you are such. Tell Him you have heard He has the keys of life in his hand, and entreat Him to let you in. Tell Him you come in dependence on His own promises, and ask Him to fulfill His word, and "do as He has said." (2 Sam. 7:25.) Do this in simplicity and sincerity, and, my soul for yours—you shall not ask in vain. Do this and you shall find Him faithful and just to forgive your sins, and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9.)

4. Last of all, let me give a word of EXHORTATION to all forgiven souls.

You are forgiven. Then know the full extent of your privileges, and learn to rejoice in the Lord. You and I are great sinners—but then we have a great Savior. You and I have sinned sins that are past man's knowledge—but then we have "the love of Christ, which passes knowledge," to rest upon. (Eph. 3:19.) You and I feel our hearts to be a bubbling fountain of evil—but then we have another fountain of greater power in Christ's blood, to which we may daily resort. You and I have mighty enemies to contend with—but then the "Captain of our salvation" is mightier still, and is ever with us. Why should our hearts be troubled? Why should we be disquieted and cast down? O men and women of little faith that we are! Why do we doubt?

Let us strive every year to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2Pe 3:18). It is sad to be content with a little piety. It is honorable to covet the best gifts. We ought not to be satisfied with the same kind of hearing, and reading, and praying, which satisfied us in years gone by. We ought to labor every year to throw more heart and reality into everything we do in our religion. To love Christ more intensely—to abhor sin more thoroughly—to cleave to what is good more closely—to watch even our least ways more narrowly—to declare very plainly that we seek a heavenly country—to put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and be clothed with Him in every place and company—to see more—to feel more—to know more—to do more—these ought to be our aims and desires every year we begin. Truly there is room for improvement in us all.

*We ought never to forget that every man, woman and child around us—
will soon be either in heaven or hell.*

Let us try to do good to the souls of others, more than we have done hitherto. Alas, it is poor work indeed to be swallowed up in our own spiritual concerns, and taken up with our own spiritual ailments, and never to think of others! We forget that there is such a

thing as religious selfishness. Let us count it a sorrowful thing to go to heaven alone, and let us seek to draw companions with us. We ought never to forget that every man, woman and child around us—will soon be either in heaven or hell. Let us say to others, as Moses did to Hobab, "Come with us, and we will do you good." (Num. 10:29.) Oh, it is indeed a true saying, "He who waters shall be watered himself." (Prov. 11:25.) The idle, do-little, selfish Christian has little idea what he is missing.

But above all, let us learn to live the life of faith in Jesus more than we have hitherto. Ever to be found by the fountain side—ever to be eating Christ's body by faith, and drinking Christ's blood by faith—ever to have before our minds Christ's dying for our sins—Christ's rising again for our justification—Christ interceding for us at God's right hand—Christ soon coming again to gather us to Himself—this is the mark which we should have continually before our eyes. We may fall short—but let us aim high. Let us walk in the full light of the Sun of righteousness, and then our graces will grow. Let us not be like trees on a cold north wall—weak, half-starved, and unfruitful. Let us rather strive to be like the sunflower—and follow the great Fountain of Light wherever He goes, and see Him with open face. Oh, for an eye more quick to discern His dealings! Oh, for an ear more ready to hear His voice!

Finally, let us say to everything in the world that interferes between ourselves and Jesus Christ, "Stand aside!" Let us dread allowing ourselves in the least evil habits, lest insensibly they rise up like a mist and hide Him from our eyes. "In His light alone shall we see light" and feel warmth; and separate from Him we shall find the world a dark and cold wilderness. (Psalm 36:9.) We should call to mind the request of the Athenian philosopher, when the mightiest Monarch on earth asked him what he desired most. "I have," said he, "but one request to make—that you would move from between me and the sun." Let this be the spirit in which you and I are found continually. Let us think lightly of the world's gifts. Let us sit calmly under its cares. Let us care for nothing if we may only ever see the King's face, if we may only ever abide in Christ.

*If our sins are forgiven,
our best things are yet to come.*

If our sins are forgiven, our best things are yet to come. Yet a little time, and we shall "see face to face, and know as we have been known." We shall "see the King in His beauty," and "go out no more." (1 Cor. 13:12; Isa. 33:17; Rev. 3:12.) "Blessed then is he whose transgression is forgiven, and whose sins are covered." (Psalm 32:1.)