

Forgiven? Really?

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Mark 5:1-20

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I sat through a counseling session a few weeks ago. A person came to talk with me, trying to find God's forgiveness for something they had done. So I listened as they confessed their sin. Okay, so it's not like I'm the Pope or anything (cause if I was, I'd declare the game over), but sometimes a person just needs someone else to assure them that they can find forgiveness from God. So we prayed together asking for God's forgiveness. Afterward, I read to them from 1 John 1:9 (**If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**¹), and I let them know that God is true to His word. However, even though God has forgiven them, will this person ever find forgiveness in the community? Will this person ever be able to walk into the stores or restaurants without people reminding them of what they had done? Will they feel forgiven even within their church?

Last week we talked about the need for Jesus to be our Savior. And the implication is that we become saved when we admit that we need saved and then reach out to the hand of Christ. Well, the reality is that this saving is more dramatic for some than for others. Some of us who are saved barely change at all. A young person who grows up within the church and at the age of 10 gives their life to Christ typically will not have as dramatic a change as the 35 year old drug addict who one day turns to Christ as Savior. The truth is, some of us have a troubled past that we bring to the Cross, while others do not. And I suppose my real question is whether we are known by what we have become or by what we used to be.

I'm reminded of the story about a man possessed by many demons who lived in Gerasene. In Mark's Gospel, we learn about a fellow who lived in the tombs outside of the ten cities in that region. Jesus lands on the shore and promptly sends the demons packing into a herd of pigs. Now this man, who had been cleansed, has had his life changed so much that even the rest of the townspeople are amazed

¹*New American Standard Bible : 1995 update.* 1995 (1 Jn 1:9). LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

at the difference. Jesus even sends this man back into the ten cities of that region to proclaim what He had done for him (And he went away and began to proclaim in Decapolis what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed. ² Mark 5:20). But in spite of all that had changed in this man's life and all that he did for Jesus, he has since then been known as the Gerasene Demoniac; who he used to be.

What has me troubled is that a Christian believer comes into my office convicted by the Holy Spirit, confesses their sin, repents of that sin, and asks forgiveness for that sin, and yet questions whether this community will ever let them forget the time they did something wrong; to treat them as forgiven. And if a Christian can feel this way, what does it say about the non-believer; the person who has not been saved by the grace of Jesus?

Is it any wonder that most churches have trouble attracting non-believers? Is it any wonder the people of this world feel uncomfortable around Christians, especially in a small town? We know too much about one another's lives. And if a person has the misfortune of committing some sin that all can see, chances are that the whole community will remember that sin long after Jesus has washed it away.

Why does this bother me? Why am I so concerned that we not fall into this trap? It's because we Christians proclaim the grace and mercy of Jesus. We claim that in Jesus a person can find a Savior and One who forgives their sins. We point out that while they were yet sinners, Christ died for them. We claim that He can wash away their sin. But if we spend the rest of our days identifying someone by what they used to be or by what they had done, we are, in effect, telling that person that deep down we don't believe one word of what we say. Isn't this what we are basically saying? When we continue to see someone as they used to be, we are, in effect, refusing to see them as forgiven; as if the blood of Christ does not wash away a person's sin.

I suppose that's the big question here, isn't it. Does the blood of Jesus cover our sin or not? And we Christians seem to be divided on the answer. Some of us

²*New American Standard Bible : 1995 update.* 1995 (Mk 5:20). LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

believe that a confessed sin from a broken heart is forgiven and forgotten. However, there are some who don't want to believe the blood of Jesus covers the sins a person may commit.

I have met many Christians who believe that although someone may have turned to Christ after a life of crime, they will still be held accountable in heaven. I can't tell you how many times a person has quoted me Roman 14:12 (**So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.**³), insisting that our whole life will be played back for all to see on some giant television screen in Heaven. And all that we've done and all that we've said will be judged. Oh, a person might get in, but they'll be forced to set in the back. And instead of a glorious mansion, they'll be stuck in a shack on some hill far away.

Well, the question still stands, will a person, who committed some terrible crime, be forgiven or not? Because what I hear described doesn't sound like forgiveness, only delayed punishment.

Okay, let's deal with this question. Does the blood of Jesus cover our sin or not? I think most of us would say yes, but our attitude toward a sinner says no. There are far too many Christians who are not willing to identify someone apart from some great sin they have committed. We won't let it go. We make them carry it around for the rest of their lives. Well then, what exactly did God mean in Isaiah 43:25 (**"I—yes, I alone—will blot out your sins for my own sake and will never think of them again."**⁴), or Jeremiah 31:34 (**"And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins."**⁵). Did He mean He would forgive for the time being, but just wait until we get to heaven? Or does He really forgive and forget? And before you answer that question, may I remind you that if God does not forgive and forget for one person, neither will He do it for you.

³*New American Standard Bible : 1995 update.* 1995 (Ro 14:12). LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

⁴Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation.* Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

⁵Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation.* Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.