

Sermon #977: 1 John 1:8-2:2
8-19-12 (Trinity 11), Bethany-Princeton MN

HOW THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS HAPPENS

Prayer: Lord God, heavenly Father, we beseech You so to guide and direct us by Your Holy Spirit, that we may not forget our sins and be filled with pride, but continue in daily repentance and renewal, seeking comfort only in the blessed knowledge that You will be merciful to us, forgive us our sins, and grant us eternal life; through Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Prayer on the Trinity 11 Gospel by Veit Dietrich, friend and co-worker of Martin Luther*)

The Text, 1 John 1:8-2:2. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. ¹ My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

“If we know how the forgiveness of sins happens ...” This is a quotation from the Apology, the Defense of, the Augsburg Confession, one of our Lutheran Confessions. It’s in Article 4, about the doctrine of justification. The Apology was written as a response to accusations made by Roman Catholics. In a way, “If we know how the forgiveness of sins happens” is speaking down to the Roman Catholic opponents, claiming that they *don’t know* how the forgiveness of sins happens and need to be instructed. How sad, if the same thing had to be told to us modern-day Lutherans. Don’t we know how the forgiveness of sins happens?

You would think so. It happens in church every time we’re here, in fact right at the beginning of the service. It happens in our families. It happens all the time. Forgiveness comes much more easily than it used to. At the time of Luther’s reformation you had to buy forgiveness. Now you don’t. We even joke

about it: *It's easier to get forgiveness than it is to get permission.* But it's funny, when something comes easily it can have the opposite effect that was intended – it often is neglected, it becomes unappreciated and underused.

So it can be with the forgiveness of sins, even among us who supposedly know it so well. For many people, the forgiveness of sins is just there. They know they are not perfect, but of course God forgives. They assume His forgiveness. But there is no conversation that takes place. Or you don't want to have that conversation at all, you ignore your sins and hope they will be like compost and just decompose on their own and you don't have to think about them again. It is not that you don't want the forgiveness, but you don't want to go through the ordeal of confessing those sins. Or even when you come to church and you say the confession of sins that's printed in the hymnal, your heart isn't always in it. Maybe you aren't even thinking of the sins you've committed. There is no dramatic moment for you, wondering, "Will God forgive me?" We too are guilty of assuming His forgiveness, and the absolution is almost anticlimactic.

But here in 1 John it's obvious that the forgiveness of sins does not just sit there. How does St. John start each of these sentences? "**If we say,**" then "**If we confess,**" and again "**If we say ...**" There is no assuming God's forgiveness. You ask for it. If you are really asking, in all sincerity, then there should be a dramatic moment for you. How will He answer? That's what we are here to find out.

There is a reason that you come to church to confess your sins. There is a reason that you come privately to the pastor to confess your sins. It is not that you *can't* pray silently about it with God at home, keeping it inside. But something St. John says here highlights what is inside you. He says it twice. First: "**If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.**" Then: "**If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.**" It is about the truth being in you. It is about His Word being in you.

If you are going to speak to God about your sins, it is important that you tell the truth. You might think you do that. But just think about how you talk to others about something that happened to you. When you tell these stories, you are the most sensible person, you always make the best decisions, and everyone else in your path did dumb things. Obviously, you leave out the things you don't want them to know. You put yourself in the best possible light and hide the less appealing details. If you do this with people, who are much less demanding, how are you with God? Left to ourselves, **"the truth is not in us."**

This is why we need to come to church, or privately to the pastor, to confess our sins. We need to hear the Word, specifically God's Law, telling us our sin. We need to hear the truth about ourselves from an objective source. It is only then that we can tell the truth about ourselves. That's the first step in how forgiveness happens: that you tell the truth about yourself. You can only do this in the light of God's Word. When you walk in the light you see faults that were hidden in the darkness. So if **"the truth is in us,"** if **"His Word is in us,"** then it will lead us to **"say that we have sinned,"** it will lead us to **"confess our sins."** That's all confession of sin is: telling the truth about yourself, about your sins. God loves to hear you tell the truth about yourself! Then God loves to tell you the truth about Himself. This is the Gospel.

Once again, this is something that you can't know by sitting at home thinking your own thoughts about God. Too many people merely *hope* that God will forgive them. If you ask them if God will let them into His heaven, or if He has forgiven all their sins, they answer, "I hope so." But in His Word we have far better answers than that, and they are from His own mouth!

What is the truth that God wants to tell us about Himself? This time the Truth is a Person: Jesus Christ, who said, **"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life"** (**Jn 14:6**). Accordingly, St. John introduces Him at this point in the discussion

about our sins: **“If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”** He is the only righteous one, the only one who never sinned and did everything perfectly, and St. John says He is our **“Advocate,”** the one who is face to face with God the Father and pleads for us, pleads for Him to declare us innocent. How do you think the Father answers Jesus?

He answers: Yes! And why? The next verse says: **“He Himself is the propitiation for our sins.”** The word “propitiation” means “atoning sacrifice,” that He paid with His blood for the remission of your sins. In today’s gospel, the tax collector in the parable actually used this word. When he says, **“Have mercy on me,”** what he literally says is: “Be propitiated to me,” or “provide an atoning sacrifice for me!” What do you think? Did the tax collector go home wondering if he was forgiven for his sins of dishonesty, greed, cheating and stealing? We don’t know, but we do know Jesus said he **“went home justified,”** declared righteous and completely innocent, forgiven, and we know why: only for Jesus’ sake.

In fact, this is the purpose of the gospels, of all the sermons, all the teaching of God’s Word that takes place in the service and in church generally: God is telling this truth about Himself, He is telling you the Truth with a capital “T,” the Truth that is Jesus Himself, the Great I Am. He is not just telling you the Truth. He is filling you with the Truth, so that the Truth will be in you: not just the truth about your sins, but the greater truth, the truth of the Gospel, Jesus Himself who completely cancels out all your sin and replaces it with Himself and His grace.

This is how the forgiveness happens. **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** It isn’t that He forgives you because you’re so sorry. God’s forgiveness is not conditional with the condition being that you do something first. He does not forgive you “if.” His forgiveness is unconditional. His forgiveness of you is for Jesus’ sake. He forgives you not due to what’s in your heart but due to some-

thing that happened outside of you, due to what Jesus Himself did for you, it's due to what's in His heart, not yours. But the way for you to partake of this forgiveness and receive this great blessing is by actually telling Him the truth about yourself so that He will once again tell you the truth about Himself, the only real Truth, which is His forgiving love incarnate, Jesus Christ the Righteous.

This is personal, but it is not only between you and God. Notice in these verses how often the apostle John says "we" and "us" and "our." We do this not only privately, but publicly. You don't only confess your sin to God in church, but this is where it really begins. Then you bring this forgiveness home, and wherever you are during the week, and you live inside this forgiveness. This is where optimism, confidence, and joy come from: from a clear conscience.

And it is the source for your living out this forgiveness with others. Children, here at church you learn from God's forgiveness how to say I'm sorry, how to forgive, and how to get along in peace. Young people and unmarried people in relationships, what you learn of God's forgiveness here is what you must learn to put into practice as you are going together before marriage. Married people, here you learn how to forgive in your home the way God forgives you. It's just living inside this forgiveness, learning to tell the truth about yourself and hear the truth that is the forgiveness of sins from the lips of those you love best.

As the church on earth is to be nothing less than the pillar of truth, let this fill your homes. One day you will find yourself in the heavenly home – thanks to the forgiveness of sins – and there you'll find only truth and no more sin. That is true beauty. It is such truth that makes your life here beautiful too. Amen!