

The blessings of a good conscience

Ephesians 2:1-10

March 22, 2009

There may be some of you here who do not doubt that God is ready to forgive your sins, because, after all, your sins are easily forgivable! If they even should be called "sins" in the first place. Sure you've made some mistakes (who hasn't?), but just that -- silly mistakes, youthful indiscretions, growing pains -- but nothing really bad.

In the wider scope of things as they are, of this world as it is, your "faults" are pretty trivial, harmless, understandable, forgivable. You're basically a good person, a good citizen, a good neighbor, and there is no reason to think that God will not easily overlook your few shortcomings.

But, as for them ... As for the drug dealers, child abusers, gang members, terrorists, prostitutes, scammers -- the ones who have done some really bad things ... Or even the ones who have done some really bad things to you -- cheated you or cheated on you, made your life miserable or took advantage of you, betrayed your trust or gave you no respect ... You cannot imagine how God could ever forgive them.

You're certainly not ready to forgive them and you don't think God should either, at least until they make amends for the hurts they have caused and make some major changes in their lives. Besides, if you were to forgive them, if God were to forgive them, that would just give them free rein to keep on taking advantage of you and everybody else, free rein to keep on hurting you and everybody else.

Maybe that's the way some of you feel. You are deeply disturbed by the sins of those who have hurt you or who threaten you, and though you certainly believe God can and will forgive your petty indiscretions, you are not ready to offer forgiveness to them, nor do you think God should. If that's how you feel ... I have nothing to say to you today.

But there may be some of you here who are deeply disturbed ... by your own sins. You feel acutely the pain of your mistakes -- the hurt you have caused, the opportunities you have missed to do the right thing. You feel deeply the shame of your selfishness and pride that so often get in the way of honest relationship, your dissatisfaction with what you have and your envy of what other people have, the desires that seem to get the best of you despite your best intentions -- lust or anger or jealousy.

You feel deeply the shame of your indifference and your indolence, your preoccupation with your own life and your own concerns and your lack of real compassion for the struggles and troubles of your neighbors. You are ashamed of what you have done, and of what you have left undone.

You do believe that God forgives. You're just not sure God can or should or will forgive you. You do believe in a loving God. But, deep down, you don't really believe that God does love you, maybe because you have such a hard time loving yourself.

If that's how you feel, I do want to talk to you today! I want to commend you for your good conscience, and I want to assure you of God's promise:

*You promise to all who trust you
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace ...*

I want to commend you for your good conscience. A good conscience is a blessing. A good conscience is a blessing because it serves as a kind of check valve, setting off an alarm when your life is off track or out of balance. Guilt and shame and uneasiness are good things when they signal you that something isn't right, when they don't let you rest easy with behaviors that risk harm to you or someone else.

A good conscience exposes the truth, and a good conscience can motivate good choices. Natural desires and first impulses can lead us astray, but a good conscience makes us stop and think first and can guide us to make choices for the sake of the good even when those choices may go against what we think we want in the moment. And a good conscience may prod us to good deeds, helping out for the sake of helping out, even when it's not convenient, even when there's no reward.

A good conscience is a blessing, both to us and to those who share our lives with us, but it may also be a burden. The fact is, as Paul reminds us, "in our natural condition we [are] destined to suffer God's anger," and a good conscience won't let us forget it!

That's a heavy burden to bear, knowing that we deserve God's anger, feeling fully the weight of our inadequacy and guilt and shame. Heavy enough to sap our energy and our desire. Heavy enough to thwart our ability to dream and to love. Heavy enough to kill our joy.

But that is not what God wants for us! A good conscience is a blessing when it is our teacher, but a curse when it is our judge, and God does not want us to be cursed!

God wants to bring us to life:

God's mercy is so abundant, and God's love for us is so great, that while we were spiritually dead in our disobedience God brought us to life with Christ ...

Life is a gift, God's gift, a gift of God's grace, and what God wants most is to offer you that gift.

This is the blessing I really want to talk about, the blessing that comes to us by means of God's grace. It's the real blessing of a good conscience, a conscience that is good in the sense that it is clear -- free from guilt, free from shame, entirely unburdened!

This good conscience is God's gift, not our achievement. We are set free by God's forgiveness, and made alive by God's grace. We are saved ... by grace, not by our own efforts. By grace, not because we have earned it or deserve it. By grace, just because that is who God is, just because that is what God chooses to do! God has made us what we are, and so we are as God makes us: saved, forgiven, free of shame, blameless, perfect, whole, alive ... all by grace.

Do you remember last week, when I asked if living the Christian life is hard or easy? Do you remember I said the answer is "Yes"?

Well, this is the easy part! Forgiveness is God's promise. A new life is God's gift. And it's for you. It's for you, here, now. No matter what. No matter who you are. No matter what you've done. No matter where you are on life's journey. It's for you.

It's easy. Or is it?

Is it easy for God? It is what God chooses. It is what God wants. It is who God is. But is it easy?

Is it easy to forgive, when the hurt is real, when the rejection is bitter, when love is ignored or taken for granted? Is it easy to forgive when the beauty you've made is despoiled and the good gifts you've given are turned to evil purposes? Is it easy to forgive when brothers and sisters, your own children -- and we are all brothers and sisters! we are all God's children! -- is it easy when we turn on each other?

What does it cost God to forgive us? What does it cost God to let the world to go on on its present course just to allow us, all of us, time and opportunity to turn and trust and receive the gifts of forgiveness and grace? What does it cost God to give us ... Jesus?

Is it easy for God?

Is it easy for you? Yes, it is! But there is a cost. It will cost you your pride.

You are saved by God's grace, not by your own efforts, and so you must acknowledge your need to be saved. You must admit your helplessness. You must confess what you were.

You must take off that protective shell, that impressive outer layer, that you show off to the rest of the world, hoping to fool them into thinking you are something you are not, maybe even hoping to fool yourself. You must take it off and be ... yourself, be the self God has made you, be the self God will make you. You must accept the gift. You must accept forgiveness. You must accept grace.

Fullness of grace!

Grace so full, it will astonish you!

Grace so full, it will overwhelm you!

Grace so full, that it will be like trying to drink from a fire hose!

Grace so full, that if you try to take it in all at once it will run over and spill out and drench the people standing around you!

Grace so full, it will last you for a lifetime! Grace so full, it will last you ... forever!

Grace is the bright, hot beams of the sun, breaking clear of the horizon, marking the dawn of a new day.

Grace is the sweet noise of birdsong, signaling the advent of spring.

Grace is sitting around the table, holding hands, being family.

Grace is being alone, but not being alone.

Grace is the tears, the tears of grief and gladness, sad and joyful all at the same time, mourning death, but also remembering life, also anticipating life!

Grace is standing up, unbowed, lifting your head, lifting your head without shame, lifting your face to God, lifting your face to receive the shower of God's approval, the shower of God's blessing, the shower of God's love!

Grace is living ... with God and with your neighbor. Grace is living for God and for your neighbor.

Grace is living ... eagerly, hopefully, joyfully.

Grace is living ...

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