

## **“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us”**

Psalm 51:1-12  
1 John 1:5 – 2:2  
Luke 15: 11-32

### **Part 1 - Introduction**

A quiz. Anyone want to guess how many chapters there are in the Bible?

Multiple choice

- a) 389                      b) 689                      c) 989                      d) 1,189

1,189 - that’s a lot of chapters.

And by my estimation, only about four of them aren’t infected with this devastating concept of ‘sin’.

We start off fine. All is well in the first two chapters in Genesis, but by chapter 3 we’re deep into the picture story of Adam and Eve, the snake and the tree. God giving the humans the choice of whether to live God’s way, or go their own way; their decision to do the latter; and the fall-out from that – the breakdown of their relationships with God, with each other, with creation – and with their own selves, as they feel ‘shame’. In fact they are literally, as well as figuratively, no longer comfortable in their own skins, as they ‘realise they are naked.’

The overriding characteristic of sin is that it results in flawed and broken relationships. And that it is the exact opposite of the nature of God, which is complete self-giving love flowing endlessly between the Creator, the Christ and the Spirit – which then overflows into all that God has made.

So sin is a big deal. And the way we respond to it, and seek to restore broken relationships, is key to our living and growing and flourishing both as individuals, in our closest relationships with God and with our selves, and as communities – families, locally, nationally and globally, as well as with creation as a whole.

So let’s start by thinking about the first of those – restoring our individual relationship with God, and then – because it’s very closely related – with ourself.

[Say Psalm 51 together, then listen to 1 John 1:5 – 2:2]

### **Part 2 - Forgive us our sins....**

So – I wonder how we felt when we read the psalm?

Just to remind ourselves of its back story. It’s attributed to the great Old Testament King, David, the “man after God’s own heart” – after he had been confronted by Nathan the prophet with the truth of what he had done in sleeping with a married woman, trying to

cover his tracks when she fell pregnant, and then arranging for her husband to be put on the front line of a battle and abandoned to die.

Nathan's words bring David's actions into the light of God, and David is distraught. He's been so caught up in his own desires, his own plans, his own need to appear beyond reproach, that he has completely lost sight of what he has been doing. Maybe we ourselves recognise that. Where it takes someone else to say "look at yourself! What do you think you're playing at?" before we see where we're going wrong.

David sees not only the damage he has done to the woman and her husband, but also – and perhaps more immediately – the damage he has done to his relationship with God - the effect of his sin on that close relationship, built up over many years of trust and faithfulness. He acknowledges his guilt, turns away from it and seeks forgiveness.

Maybe you too have used this psalm in that way. I know I have.

But not all our error is so obvious. Some of our failings just become so habitual that we stop even recognising them as failings – forgetting to say "thank you" to each other and to God, for example. Taking other people – or God – for granted.

Or maybe it's not something we're directly responsible for – more a something that's embedded in our society or culture which we alone are powerless to root out – the unequal distribution of the world's wealth and resources for example. But nonetheless, something which is damaging or destroying our relationship with others and the planet, as they suffer from our way of life.

Or we look around and see 'everyone else' doing something which we know isn't quite right – but we do it anyway. Like going 35 mph in a 30 zone because "the car in front is doing it - so, hey – why not?"

The NT reading takes all this prevarication on our part and blows it out of the water. It reminds us that no matter how much we try to fool ourselves that "we're ok really" – actually we're not. If we think we can hide stuff from God then we're fooling ourselves, because God knows anyway. And it continues to affect our "fellowship with one another" as it says in v7. When we bring it into the light, or allow the Spirit of God to bring it into focus – then we are in a position to turn away from it, to get rid of it, to be forgiven, to be cleansed. To accept the forgiveness which is mysteriously and magnificently available to us through the death of Jesus.

To turn away from the past and make a fresh start.

Which is, after all, the purpose of forgiveness. To set us free – both the one who's sinned / got things wrong, and the one who has suffered in consequence.

So, just before we move on to the gospel – a word about setting us free, when we're the one who has got things wrong.

God doesn't take away the consequences of our sin. If you read on in the story of David you will see that the consequence of his sin was heart-breaking.

But nor does God want us to be shackled to our sins forever. Someone once told me that when God forgives sins God “throws them in the deepest part of the sea, and put up a sign which says ‘no fishing’”. I don’t think that means we shouldn’t learn from our failures, but I do think it means we shouldn’t allow ourselves to be defined by them. We don’t need to be crippled by shame. In her book, “This Here Flesh”, the author Cole Arthur Riley writes movingly about that story in Genesis 3. “In the garden, when shame had replaced their dignity, God became a seamstress.” She describes how God takes animal skins “to make something that would allow humans to stand in the presence of their maker and one another again.... God went to great lengths to help them stand unashamed.”

God wants the sinner to be set free just as much as the one who has been hurt.

### **Part 3 – “...as we forgive those who sin against us.”**

“There was a man who had two sons...” What a wonderful opening to a story. What a wonderful story.

I’m sure we have all heard it many times, and I hope that you have often read it through the eyes of the younger son, allowing yourself to feel the forgiveness, the joy and the welcome of the father as you come back home. That you have experienced in your own heart the acceptance and love of the Eternal God.

If you haven’t, please do so. And if you feel that you can’t, then please have a word with one of the ministry team, or someone else you trust, as this story is truly for everyone who wants it.

But for today, I want to look at the older son. It seems that he didn’t find it so easy to welcome his younger brother back. It seems that over the years since little bro waltzed off he has been holding tighter and tighter to his resentment - until now he has pretty much reached the point where he can’t let go of it.

And because their father has welcomed him back, the father is now, in his eyes, complicit in his brother’s failures. The older brother doesn’t want forgiveness and reconciliation. He wants judgement and retribution. And if I’m honest, as an older sibling, I can kind of see where he is coming from.

But I know in my heart of hearts that that isn’t the way God sees this story. Let’s leave aside for a moment the issue of the sold property (Jewish property law then was pretty complex, and didn’t operate in the same way as ours does now) – what this story is about is the restoration – or otherwise - of relationships.

The father wants a loving relationship with his older son, just as much as with his younger one. And when the older one won’t come to him, the father once again acts in a scandalous fashion, by going out to meet him. He even pleads with him. But the older son is immovable, the relationships remain fractured, and the story is left hanging.

The relationship with his father cannot be restored whilst he remains out of relationship with his brother.

“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

It’s not an arm-twisting to get us to forgive – it’s a statement of fact. Our unforgiveness of others acts as a barrier between us and God.

So what do we do? As individuals with broken relationships, and as a human race which sees daily the results of division and enmity.

As followers of Jesus, I think we have to follow his example. His whole life was focussed on restoring the relationship between God and all that God has made. As the worship song “Broken for me, broken for you” reminds us...  
“Jesus was broken, that we might be whole.”

So yes, we have to recognise that there is sin in the world. Jesus triumphed over evil on the cross – its ultimate defeat is assured, but it is still fighting a rear-guard action. We will only live in a world free from sin when heaven and earth are re-united – the last two chapters in the Bible, in case you were wondering where to find the second pair of sin-free chapters.

Our choice is whether we allow sin to continue to break relationships and to bring more hurt and devastation and death.

Or do we choose to forgive, and enable the restoration of relationship. To set ourselves and those who have ‘sinned against us’ free to try once more to live in love and peace, enabling each other to grow and flourish as God wants?

And do we do all in our power – prayer and influence - to support and encourage all of good will who seek to do the same? For surely the terrible results of sin, broken relationships and unforgiveness unfold on our TV screens on a daily basis, as each horror compounds those which have gone before?

So as we pray “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us,” let’s make that a prayer that we will become people of forgiveness. People who are quick to recognise and turn away from sin. People who are quick to seek forgiveness and to be set free from our sins. People who are quick to forgive others and restore relationships. And people who do all in our power to enable others to do the same.