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The Forgiveness of Sins

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CHAPTER 13

The Forgiveness of Sins

Remissionem peccatorum

STEVEN D. PAULSON

The Problem with Forgiveness

The forgiveness of sins is rather easily confessed at the comfortable distance of the ancient Apostles' Creed. The problems arise when we attempt to practice forgiving particular sins and particular sinners here and now. Who, then, can forgive sins? Who even wants to?

When absolution is declared by a gospel servant authorized to forgive on earth as God forgives in heaven, the servant is using the keys (Matt. 16:19 and John 20:22-23) to unlock our prison's door and open heaven. Not surprisingly, even people in the church resist what seems to be the indiscriminate outpouring of God's "glorious grace that he freely bestows on us in the Beloved in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us" (Eph. 1:6-7). Who can approve publicizing such grace to the ungodly, who do not deserve or want it?

When Christians confess together their belief in the forgiveness of sin, it is like pinching themselves to make sure that what they heard is not a dream. Absolution seems somehow illicit, frightening, and joyful all at once. Can this be? May God just forgive? Can a word of promise accomplish what is promised? Is it right? Is it binding? Lasting? Legal? Is it even possible for the God who knows all things and counts the hairs on our heads to forget something — especially something as obvious as our sins?

Forgiveness of sins is frightening. Mercy disrupts order. It perverts our
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sense of justice. Doesn't forgiveness require the law, and the law its pound of flesh? If forgiveness is joined to proportional punishment (an eye for an eye, or at least a ritual sacrifice), how can the scales of justice ever be balanced? With forgiveness God appears to act freely — as if there were no divine law. "Freely" really means "unfairly" to those diligently practicing righteousness according to God's standard.

Scripture acknowledges the problem. The story of Jonah is the story of repentance worked by God's absolute demand and irresistible mercy. It not only takes up the troubling issues of mercy outside Israel and mercy for enemies (Nineveh), but of mercy outside the law. The God whose wrath kills and whose mercy brings new life asked Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah thought so. So God "appointed a worm" to be his prophet. Jonah, if you care about the bush, God is saying, should I not care about Nineveh's people and even its animals? Forgiveness poses a special threat to the righteous.

Wisdom writings and the prophets agreed. The problem with God's promise of grace is the same as with God's demand: it is unilateral and so reminds us that God is God and we are not. God reminded Job: "Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?" So Job repented in a way that makes us uncomfortable: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." God's relationship with Job does not change, whether God unfairly takes away his children or unfairly gives Job's new daughters an inheritance with their brothers (Job 40-42).

The forgiveness of sins is completely out of human control. We are utterly dependent on God's decision to forgive or not to forgive. Even the law gives us no place to stand from which we can demand forgiveness. There is no way around this, and so Israel was driven increasingly to its double eschatological conclusion: God's judgment on sin and God's salvation of sinners. On the one hand, "the Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth" (Gen. 6). Furthermore,

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . .
Let justice roll down like waters.

(Amos 5:21, 24)

And again, "there is no one who does good, no, not one" (Ps. 14:3). Paul put the period on the end of that sentence: "Both Jews and Greeks are under the power
of sin,” and “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). All! On the other hand, there is the other eschatological conclusion that is even more breathtaking than God’s judgment on sin: “Your faithfulness comes from me” (Hos. 14:2–8). “The days are surely coming, says the LORd, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. . . . For I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:31–34). Can God forget? Yes, God promises to forget, but a costly memory remains:

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORd has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. . . .
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

(Isa. 53:6, 11)

All! Both absolutes in our relationship with God come crashing into the present when a preacher declares that we are forgiven on account of Christ: No, not one is righteous, and Christ alone, the righteous one, shall make many righteous.

To those who want to be right before God on other grounds, this kind of declaration sounds either like a farce or blasphemy against all that is sacred. God’s forgiveness judges human achievement to be a vain hope for finding peace with God. It cuts the central nerve in the quest to motivate the masses to be moral. It rejects “spirituality” as an elevated life beyond creation and the body. If God forgives, all human hopes for an alternative righteousness are exposed as illusory — and unnecessary.

The God Who Forgives Sin

There are no partial steps toward forgiveness and away from sin. God deals in wholes. Just as sin involves the whole person, so repentance and forgiveness must be whole. To those who know there is no other hope, God’s unthwartable power and boundless determination to forgive is the gospel itself: God forgives sinners! In Christ we know not only who God is, but what this God does. The Father did not spare his only-begotten Son, and he gave sinners his Holy Spirit, withholding nothing. “Take not thy Holy Spirit from me,” we pray. “Done,” says God.

The only way to overcome the fear of forgiveness is actually to be forgiven
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by the very one we offended. We have heard the preacher turn the key: "I absolve you." So we confess: "I believe the forgiveness of sins." We find ourselves always at this point of vacillating between the realities — in ourselves wholly idolatrous, in Christ wholly forgiven. In ourselves we belong to the old order, brought about by the sin of Adam and Eve; in Christ we belong to the new order, brought about by the forgiveness of sins.

Confessing faith in the forgiveness of sins rests on two biblical assumptions: "All have sinned" (Rom. 3:23) and Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Throughout history the church has been inclined to diminish or adjust these assumptions, thereby compromising our confession that we believe "the forgiveness of sins." But God keeps coming to promise forgiveness. This God works in death and resurrection, law and gospel, judgment and forgiveness. First to our dismay, then to our eternal joy, the God who thus pours himself out for the unworthy is righteous.

The First Biblical Assumption: All Have Sinned

Who would not want what the church has to give? Why is forgiveness so difficult to receive when it is free? The law, whether given through Moses or available through experience, makes clear that love demands frequent ("daily") and serial ("not seven times, but seventy times seven") forgiveness. Forgiveness is necessary for life, but there is a perpetual problem with getting it done. A person cannot stay married, or raise children, or have parents, or teach, or buy and sell, or do any of the callings of life without having to forgive and be forgiven. In the crucible of life we must pray the old Jewish prayer that Jesus gave anew: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." We could take this as a simple demand; we could then demand it when wronged, and it would coerce us to forgive when we have wronged others. Revenge would be forgotten. We could finally learn to live in peace if we used this simple rule for life: "As we have forgiven, forgive us."

But mercy is not so comfortable or practical. Applying this life-giving teaching is both difficult and dangerous. Acts of forgiveness are inconsistent. Even when they do happen, the world first praises them, then limits them because forgiveness is dangerous as public policy. At the end of a political term a president or governor may pardon criminals in a "Christmas" spirit; but making a habit of it would disrupt justice. Forgiveness cannot be made into a law or be perpetuated under a law. Sometimes the injustice of forgiving is just too great. When a leader such as Anwar Sadat actually forgives, he is assassinated by people with a righteous cause. More often, forgiveness as God's de-
mand leaves us in real Catch-22s. A spouse who tries to forgive infidelity must both forget and not forget at the same time. Does one forgive a new Jewish settlement on the West Bank, or a suicide bomber at Passover? Do Armenians forgive Turks for genocide? Could God have meant that?

Forgiveness in the presence of evil creates legitimate conundrums. One solution includes proper punishment within the act of forgiveness. Forgiveness + punishment = mercy. But how much punishment is enough? Should forgiveness be given only if there is clear admission of guilt, accompanied by sorrow and shame? But therapeutic culture has determined that a chief problem, often perpetrated by Christians, is the creation of a guilt or shame complex. How do we raise children to have a conscience and yet not be overwhelmed by guilt? Forgiving on demand works, at best, fitfully.

David needed his Nathan, not to receive punishment, but to get out of the mire of partial self-accusations and partial self-defense into a real confession that understood God's kind of forgiveness as his only way out. From an actual sin, such as adultery, Nathan's accusation — "You are the man" — made David into a confessor that all sin is "original," and so he himself was inescapably under sin's rule:

Indeed, I was born guilty,
    a sinner when my mother conceived me.

(Ps. 51:5)

No reparation, no act of free will, no law could help him. The God who demands all must then give all; the God who kills must raise:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
    and put a new and right spirit within me.

(51:10)

But, we may object, if we were born into sin, how can we be blamed? Thus we ultimately lay problems of forgiveness at God's own doorstep, since forgiveness seems to be God's bright idea in the first place. How does God manage to forgive real, active sinners like David? What kind of charade is it for God to "hide his face from my sins"? Doesn't God have a mighty dilemma too great even for divinity, an eternal struggle between two attributes that cannot be canceled or balanced — justice and mercy? The speculations about how God does this balancing act have produced not only our theories of atonement but also our ritual acts of repentance. Can God demand payment for sin and, at the same time, make the payment to himself?
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Graded Repentance

A synthesis seems called for when we consider forgiveness apart from Christ, apart from the gospel, and according to the law. It appears that we need a via media between too much mercy and too little. But how can we get justice and mercy to kiss? When forgiveness becomes a matter of trying to do the right thing according to the law (especially in its “Christian” forms of turning the other cheek and forgiving seventy times seven), the demands of forgiveness are reduced to manageable proportions. We also find ourselves in a position of perpetual uncertainty about when to forgive, when not to, how much is enough, and who can do it. Over everything hangs the specter of our relationship with God determined by the little prayer, “Forgive me as I have forgiven others.” How do we dare pray that when we know so little about what we have done and left undone? So we propose to take small steps toward successful forgiving, doing in parts what we can’t seem to hold together as a whole.

When the church entered the effort to adjudicate between God’s wrath and mercy as the way to exercise the office of the keys, it made trouble for itself by diminishing its two proclaimed absolutes: all have sinned, and Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Schism in the church often began with the “holy” trying to rid themselves of the “unholy” because forgiveness was found to be somewhere between difficult and impossible. The church then split between those who rigorously pressed for justice and those who pursued mercy. The “catholic” solution has been to find a middle road by using the law in moderation. Historically the church has called this middle approach “equity,” as did the Council of Trent.¹ It should not surprise us that the phrase “forgiveness of sins” first appeared in public creeds with Cyprian. His churches found themselves in a crisis of forgiveness after the persecutions in North Africa. The church then attempted to step in as the “user” of the law, judging and adjudicating so that the conundrums of forgiveness could be moderated in a nervous kiss between mercy and justice.

Now it is true that confessing belief in the forgiveness of sins will, by the same token, renounce the series of rigorist heresies that keep springing up in churches (Donatism, Montanism, and Novationism) and will also renounce their opposite (antinomianism). But overcoming heresy and schism remains

¹. “For it is clear that priests could not have exercised this judgment if the case were unknown, nor could they have preserved equity (aequitatem) in imposing penance if the faithful had declared their sins only in general.” Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, ed. Tanner, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), session 14, chap. 5, p. 706.
a struggle in the churches. The rigorists (from the time of James and the “superapostles” in Galatia right through the Didache, the letters of Clement, and the early form of exomologesis [rite of public confession]) always propose that we take God’s law literally: we will be forgiven as much as we forgive. They are too optimistic about their achievement, as if Paul’s “all have sinned” applied only before baptism, not after.

How could they get from parts to the whole? The fateful move to escape the conundrum of forgiveness was made in the North African churches of the third century and subsequently spread abroad. If nothing under the sun could escape both the necessity and impossibility of real, historical forgiveness, then forgiveness must be projected out of actual life into the role of an idea, specifically a goal toward which we ought to move. Forgiveness became a partial accomplishment of human striving cooperating with God’s initial grace while moving toward the goal of whole repentance and forgiveness. Attempting to escape a schism over the issue of forgiveness, the church not only got schism, it also entered into another, deeper problem that finally erupted in the Reformation.

By at least the third century there is a movement from the preaching on forgiveness of sins (on account of what Christ has done) and its eschatological consequences to the attempt to control legalism and antinomianism. The catholic response to legalists was surely correct in one sense: preachers such as Chrysostom declared that God’s mercy is infinite; one chance at repentance was not enough. But theologians argued that forgiveness may not be applied indiscriminately. Some repentance that symbolically reversed the act of treachery against the church should be required. Forgiveness became a sacrament offered under conditions controlled by church law. The secret mechanism of the moderate way was to apply the law to the sacraments as the way to forgive sin. The legal metaphor spread from Christ’s atonement to the practice of compensating for sin by a symbolic, sacrificial exchange. In the words of Tertullian, “God offers release from penalty (poena) at the compensating exchange of penitence (paenitentiam).”


With this reasoning, a casuistry concerning forgiveness appeared for both victim and perpetrator. The religious secret of sacrifice lay in offering a part for the whole (pars pro toto) with the clear implication that “I give that you will give” (do et des). Pastoral involvement with repentance became a judicial decision about “satisfactions.” The preacher/absolver was made into a judge (or “user”) of God’s law, and a process began that would separate baptism and repentance into two or more sacraments. Penance became the “laborious
baptism” described by Nazianzus, and baptism’s “once and for all” was confined to an act of the past whose forgiveness, once given, was used up.

Augustine began distinguishing “original” and “actual” sin by applying the first to baptism and the second to penance: baptism became the forgiveness of all original sin, but then a theory had to explain how Christians unexpectedly, but undeniably, did sin after baptism. Sin’s “tinder” must remain, but not its essence. Still, tinder was enough to create great problems, which raised a whole new set of practical questions. How can churches repeat forgiveness without sponsoring antinomianism? How often and under what conditions? Penance was extended to all during Lent, and to all the sick and dying. Soon forgiveness as penance would have its own liturgy and its own three-step process of contrition, confession, and satisfaction, whose referee was the priest. The separation of baptism and confession was more rigorous in the West; but Eastern creeds usually kept the confession of forgiveness and baptism together, as in the Nicene Creed: “I believe in baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” Nevertheless, the tendency to consider baptism as a “first plank” and repentance as a “second” (Tertullian in the West, Jerome in the East) spread widely.

The initial reaction to sin “after baptism” was rigorous, and for a time theologians argued for a onetime repentance. But sinners are extremely determined and inventive. By the sixth century the Irish monks not only saved Western civilization, but also offered a new possibility for the church in its casuistry on penance. It parcelled out the law into what appear to be manageable portions (in penitentials) for those who are at least trying to become better. Private, specific confession to a holy one, repeated as often as necessary throughout life, became a solution to the problem of sin after baptism.

The Roman Catholic Church’s genius was to set very moderate legal demands on people for their own good. One was that they had to confess their sins before a priest at least once a year (Fourth Lateran Council), which was part of a proper preparation for receiving the Lord’s Supper as forgiveness. Sins were separated into manageable categories such as “venial” and “mortal.” Then theologians rallied to the cause and developed theories to address anxiety about falling into mortal — or unforgivable — sin. Aquinas adapted the theory of character and virtue from Aristotle to conclude that, though it is always theoretically possible to lose grace, it is very difficult. Eventually a whole body of (canon) law grew up around these sacraments. Has a person properly repented? If so, then absolution can properly be uttered, much like placing an

accurate label on a product. Beyond that, in order to help the penitent feel forgiven, penance could be added in moderation.  

The via media between too much and too little mercy is a treacherous road indeed. It has always created more questions than it answered and has demonstrated two repeated tendencies: first, to diminish the law’s demand to forgive as we have been forgiven, and second, to increase uncertainty about how much repentance is enough. The extension of the judgment by a priest and the need to reduce the anxiety of the penitent flowered into more elaborate theories outside the everyday need to forgive others. Indulgences, petition of the saints, purgatory, the sacrifice of the mass, the office of the papacy all became intertwined in the fruitless effort to answer the question: How much repentance is enough? When is forgiveness finally real, on earth as it is in heaven?

What does the church do with sinners? It cannot be too rigorous, or too free. This dilemma launches the project of putting the church’s good Christology into a synthesis with a very bad anthropology: on the one hand, preaching forgiveness apart from the law in Christ alone, and on the other, preaching the law as the form of forgiveness. That produces a confusion between God’s demand and God’s promise, which makes forgiveness into a process of approaching a goal by small steps that God’s grace accepts as “enough.”

**The Promise Does What It Says**

In the end the attempted synthesis forgot two things: sin always involves the whole person, and Jesus Christ alone is the Lamb on whom all sins are laid. Luther disrupted the historic church’s process of repenting and being forgiven by actually doing it. By repenting according to church practice, he found uncertainty and self-righteous pride in himself at the same time. Penance afforded a righteousness according to the (manageable) new law of the church, and so it blocked Christ’s promise of absolute forgiveness in the here

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4. One of the important movements of our time has been the Roman Catholic Church’s attempt to reorganize the sacrament of penance under the rubric of “reconciliation.” The new rite of reconciliation considered some of the dangers and problems of distinguishing mortal and venial sins, though the distinction remained necessary. It made steps to place reconciliation back in the community and in light of God’s word, though law and gospel remain combined in a synthesis of equity. It is for this reason that sin “after baptism” remains the identifiable sticking point between Lutherans and Catholics concerning the doctrine of justification, but this is no small matter.
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and now. Luther's was not a revolt against indulgences or even a mere challenge to the penitential system; he was grasped by the apostolic preaching in terms of both the demands of the law (forgive as you have been forgiven) and God's promise apart from the law in Jesus Christ (you have been forgiven). When the priest absolved someone, he was not acting as judge on a prior movement of the heart as measured by the law; he was interrupting life as usual — with its partial forgiveness and numerous failures — by a direct promise of God. This promise accomplishes what it says: it puts the old sinner to death and raises a new saint. The preached word forgives. Since this is hidden to our eyes, available only to faith, both the sinner and the saint remain whole. Both absolutes are true at the same time: all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; apart from the law, Christ has wrapped himself in all our sins, and there they died when he was nailed to the cross. God has forgiven and forgotten them. The word of God through the earthly preacher's mouth and the earthly things of water, wine, bread do this. When the preacher said, "I absolve you on account of Christ and by his authority," a collision occurred. The announced word is whole, absolute, and without remainder, and its effect is eschatological — a new creation, though hidden in faith itself.

Forgiveness must finally break away from the law into accomplished fact. It cannot remain a series of theological theories meant to reassure sinners and keep them trying to become better at the same time. Who gets forgiven? Actual sinners wholly opposed to God, even in their righteousness. Who can forgive? Whoever has received these words through faith, though God's unthwartable will to go public with forgiveness creates a special office for it — the office of the preacher, or local "forgiveness person." What if the old Adam doesn't die, being such a good swimmer (Barth)? Does it invalidate the promise? No, it necessitates it again as the only end to self-righteousness and despair simultaneously.

For this reason Reformers used a public form of absolution in worship services so that God's words that kill and make alive go out widely. They often debated the ongoing place of private confession. Luther knew how this could be abused, but he also knew what great benefits could come from a specific use of the gospel: "I would not give up confession for all the riches in the world . . . save for the sacrament I know of no greater treasure and comfort than confession." But Luther also demanded that the normal tables be turned: "We must not look to our work but to the treasure, which we hear from the priest's mouth, which makes us go gladly and force the priests and not vice

versa.” Stop being forced by priests to confess; instead, force the priest to confess the promise!

Baptism was the first way this promise entered a person’s life. So all repentance and forgiveness, or the whole of Christian life, was marked as a return to baptism’s promise, a promise that was never used up and never became only an event of the “past.” Confession, whether in a public or private form, returned to its proper place in baptism.

Some who adopted aspects of the Reformation came back to repentance and forgiveness only under the form of the law; thus the old struggle between legalism and antinomianism returned in the likes of Menno Simons. This recreated a problem with baptism, which was no longer the solution to original sin because original sin was essentially denied. Baptism was the external label for the internal, prior movement of the heart, thus giving birth to an antipapal form of the same church problem that preceded the Reformation. The promise of forgiveness had become empty, the Christian a judge, the church a communion of like-minded people directed toward increased holiness measured by the law. Then the need to reassure the anxious created not a second plank of penance but a need for rebaptism. Thus Christ was buried again beneath the steps to holiness.

The Second Absolute: Jesus, the Lamb of God, Takes Away the Sin of the World

Jesus Christ came forgiving: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:14). This split the times into old and new. When Jesus was on trial, the high priest asked him, “‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ Jesus said, ‘I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,’ and “coming with the clouds of heaven”” (14:61-62).

The trouble with Jesus Christ, one might say, started when John the forerunner and preacher pointed his long, bony finger at Christ and said: “Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” It is not just that humans have found this a bewildering proposition — that one person could bear the world’s sin — but that Jesus actually proceeded to act like this was

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really true. To the paralytic Jesus says, “Son, your sins are forgiven,” and mur­muring arose: “It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (2:4-6).

To those suspended between heaven and earth, new and old, clinging to the law’s clear demand as the way to righteousness (“Forgive, if you have any­thing against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses,” 11:25), Jesus was a puzzle, then a threat.

Jesus’ last supper with the Twelve was “in the night in which he was be­trayed”; nevertheless, to those betrayers he gave his new testament as a prom­ise, and Matthew adds the obvious: “for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28).

What was the result of all this forgiving by Christ, his eating with sinners, his eschatological signs of healing and exorcism? It got him killed! Christ’s naked and unqualified forgiveness of sin acted outside divine law, as one who had authority.

In the cross, where the old and new are finally distinguished, the only ques­tion left is, where can I find a gracious God? Can this particular sin, a complete and final act of human “freedom,” be forgiven? The question is not neutral, but interested, involved, full of care. We are dying under God’s wrath, after all. That is why we have found the crux of all Scripture in the Christian confession of belief in the “forgiveness of sins”: God, who forgiven. The Father does this through his Son, Jesus Christ, in whom “God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the mes­sage of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor. 5:19). In Christ there is a new creation.

Alarms should go off, then, when we confess this dangerous belief in the actual forgiveness of sins accomplished in our midst. Belief in the forgiveness of sin signals among us a new kingdom of the Spirit in which the living who have not forgiven as they have been forgiven nevertheless have been made white as snow. That is, Christ’s own betrayers are forgiven by a God who, though knowing all, has accomplished what we could not: God absolutely forgot! God made a forgiveness kingdom in which he does not see or know our sin because it has been covered by Christ alone, not by our ability first to forgive.

Now, forgiveness by God burns like coals to a trampled conscience that holds its guilt before its eyes and sees no way to be washed white as snow. True forgiveness also only fuels the inner fires of the righteous, whose passion for justice does not really want forgiveness but restitution and reward. That is why the law teams up with sin and death to oppose Christ alone as our for­giveness. We prefer balance, order, and righteousness according to God’s nat­ural or eternal law, even if God must die on its behalf. But God, who forgiven, is none other than this very man Jesus Christ, who came forgiving. In Christ the Father did not merely provide an example of how to forgive ene-
The cross was not a deal between God's attributes of mercy and justice for God to get his pound of flesh from beggars who had no means of paying. Christ, who knew no sin, became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming an actual curse for us (Gal. 3:13). Such was the cost, not to ourselves, but to God. That cost will never be forgotten by God, though humans frequently forget. But God doesn't remember our sin anymore, so that sinners can be made alive in the new kingdom.

This was "right." The triune God was, is, and will be right. When God forgave in Christ, it was no longer a demand, a covenant, or a prophecy. It was something that had come to be. Forgiveness was not a speculative idea, it was a historical fact; indeed, forgiveness came in as a person. By that means, rather than as a general goal, forgiveness has become inescapable for those the Father has placed in the hand of his Son.

When we hear John's proclamation, "Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," we are forced to conclude that Christ was not only found among sinners but wanted to be there, by free will — the only will that is really free. If God's will has chosen this, then the law has no choice but to attack him as the only one who freely wills to be a sinner. All others are merely doing what they are bound to do. Thus Jesus' death is not a case of mistaken identity, an accident, or an unnecessary grief the disciples could have averted had they opened themselves to God or transacted some other transcendental business. The cross is necessary for the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. The curse of God has come to duel with the blessing. But it is the blessing that is God's final, irresistible desire, and so Christ's death becomes the death of death, the law to the law, sin to sin — in an eschatological collision in Christ's own person.

Christ did this out of love in the form of mercy for actual, specific sinners. Because he is God by nature, his blessing cannot be conquered, even by his own wrath or law. That blessing is a burning love, even when no distinction can be made between me and my sins — as David, Peter, and Paul all found. The Father did not spare his Son; the Son did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped; the Holy Spirit was not ashamed to proclaim even through the local preacher and give this to us as the inviolable promise that creates new life out of nothing.

Back to Earth

Christ, as distinguished from the law, must be made known. He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John is not that one; he
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only bears witness to Christ, on whom lies the sin of us all absolutely, wholly, once and for all. Thus we can return to our daily lives with two absolutes: sin and Christ. Sinners in ourselves, righteous in Christ, we come back to the situation in which David found himself. We are subject to sin in ourselves, but God sends a preacher. Otherwise, how would we hear? Nathan declared: “Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die” (2 Sam. 12:13). Commonly the preacher is the local “forgiveness person,” who absolves real sinners by a simple promise: “I forgive you all your sins.” And in this exercise of the office of the keys, though we ourselves are remarkably bad at the law’s requirement to forgive, our own prison is opened. Forgiveness is a real end and a new beginning. Applied to us, that means death and resurrection, or the end to the futility of taking little steps toward the big forgiveness. Sinners in ourselves, saints in Christ, we are allowed by this freedom to live in the old world with its partial forgivenesses and petty mercies. This freedom allows us to live in the world that either forgets its sin too easily or can’t seem to let it go. So we trust God absolutely when we pray, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” We take God at his word. Forgiveness then finds its way through us as servants to everyone, while in Christ we remain subject to none — having sin, death, and the power of evil behind us. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is not only “salvation” but life, real life as spouses, parents, children, teachers, students, farmers, politicians — and all the relationships in life where daily forgiveness is desperately needed.