

Finding Grace: believing in God's forgiveness

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Now that we've established our need for forgiveness and also its foundation found in God alone, I'm going to try and apply what we've learned to the critical topics of *finding* and *giving* grace. Today, we are really going to zero in on finding grace today; I want every single one of you to know and believe that *your* sins can be forgiven. Not just that God forgives sins, but that he will forgive *your* sins. Then next week we are going to talk about giving grace or offering forgiveness to others who have hurt us.

It's not lost on me that many struggle believing that God could forgive them; I'm sure some of you here this morning think that very thing. "God will never forgive me for what I've done." To start addressing that let's turn together to 1 Tim. 1 (READ vs. 12-17).

To fully appreciate what God wants us to see we have to get familiar with the author of this passage, who is the Apostle Paul. That was not always his name; he had a name change and before that he was called Saul. And the man named Saul was not a friend to God or God's people even though he thought he was. After Jesus was resurrected from the dead and the church began to grow, the religious establishment started to strike back (much like the Empire in Episode V). And their strategy was one of force. They intimidated and threatened these new followers of Jesus with violence. And Saul was one of their hitman; he was Jules or Vincent from the 90s cult classic *Pulp Fiction*. He did the dirty work making sure the church wouldn't grow and threaten the influence of the establishment. Acts 8:3 says, "But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison." He's not a good guy.

But something happened; something miraculous and gracious. God showed up in Paul's life. As we read in Acts 9, Saul had an encounter with Jesus. And that encounter changed more than Saul's name; it changed his life. In a moment of miracle-working power, Saul was changed by God from an enemy to a son; he was converted from a rebel to a friend of God. Yes, he changed his name to Paul, but that change was superficial compared to how everything else changed. Instead of hunting Christians, he served and taught Christians. Instead of sacrificing to see the church torn down, he sacrificed to see it built up. Instead of getting violent with others, he would get violent with his own temptations to sin so that he could always be a servant to others in the name of Jesus.

And what we read in 1 Tim. 1 is Paul as an older man; he's served the work of God for decades and he'll die in a few short years. He's reflecting on his life; he's remembering how far God has brought him. And he can't get over the change; decades later he's still overwhelmed that God would forgive and save someone like him.

Do you see how he remembers his former life? In vs. 13 he says, “I was a blasphemer (which means, he mocked God), persecutor (meaning, he hurt people because they believed in Jesus), and insolent opponent” (which means he arrogantly and purposefully opposed the work of God.)

Could you imagine forgiving and welcoming in a former opponent? And not just any opponent; an opponent that did everything in her power to tear down what you love and prize. That’s how Paul describes himself in relation to God before his change, before his conversion. He was an opponent, and adversary, of God’s. And still, God forgave and gave life to Paul.

Paul never forgot who he was. It’s been decades since he’s been that man, but he still remembers what he was like. Friends, there is a kind of remembering of our former selves that’s not bad for us to do. There is a kind of remembering that is unhelpful. And that remembering is of the kind that keeps you locked in a prison of guilt and shame. The unhelpful kind of remembering leads only to discouragement and despair. That’s not Paul, is it? I’m sure you see this: even though Paul is very aware of his past sins, he’s not sad or depressed, is he? In fact, he’s joyful! He’s happy! He finishes this section by singing a praise song: “To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever!” He can’t contain his joy even though he remembers his past sins. How does that even work? Here’s the key: his memory of his sins only serves to remind him of the grace God has given; and that makes him happy. Let’s look at in vs. 15 (READ).

Good news, right, FBC? Jesus saves sinners. It’s a glorious statement; it’s deserving full acceptance (which is like saying, “Believe it with all your heart because it’s true”). But notice how he applies this to himself, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” Some Bibles says, “of whom I am chief”... the chief of sinners. I like to say it this way: and I’m the worst one of all. So, Paul looks at himself and his sins and says, “These are the worst.”

Now, you might think Paul is just being modest; he’s being deprecating. He’s not *really* the worst. Well, look, there’s no need to start a contest of who committed the worst sins, but don’t minimize what Paul was guilty of. He violently and ruthlessly injured and harmed people because they followed Jesus. It’s ugly enough to look at the glories of Jesus Christ and see them as filthy; it’s another kind of ugly to then injure, harm, and destroy people who believe that themselves. I think Paul really meant it when he said, “I’m the worst” because there really is something grotesque about what he did. Like I said, it’s not a contest, but destroying the lives of people for following Jesus is not a minor matter.

Maybe you can relate. Maybe you say to yourself, “I am the worst.” You remember how you hurt people. You recall the embarrassing, shameful thoughts you had (and maybe still have even though you know they are wrong). Maybe the damage you created in your family haunts you and you can’t believe there’s forgiveness for you. Or maybe it’s just this inner sense of guilt

that has never gone away. Regardless, you say to yourself, “I’m the worst; I could never be forgiven.”

Paul said, “I’m the worst,” but he didn’t say, “I can’t be forgiven.” What he said was, “I am the worst and he saved me!” And Paul even tells us why God saves the worst. Look at vs. 15, “But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.” Can I just summarize what Paul said in a very personal way to help those of you struggling to believe God will forgive you? Paul is saying God saved me to help you believe he will save you. He forgave me so you all would know that God can and wants to forgive you.” Do you see that? The reason I am saved, Paul says, is so that Jesus’ grace might be broadcast far and wide as an example for others. What example? That he can save you, too.

My good friends, I said it the first week, I then emphasized it more last Sunday and now I’m saying it again: no one is beyond the reach of God’s saving and forgiving grace. Grace found Paul. He was a terrorizer and abuser. He despised the name of Jesus and oversaw the unjust murder of a man named Stephen. And he found forgiveness. What have you done, said, or thought? Really, get that in your mind right now. God will forgive. That’s why Jesus died on the cross. That’s why he came. Believe in the overflowing grace of Jesus.

If you’re thinking, “Really, Brian? God has grace for someone like me? What kind of God is he?” That’s a great question (ask questions that get at the nature of God; that’s when you know you have good questions... when you wonder, ‘Well, what is God like?’). Let me show you what kind of God we have; turn with me to Psalm 130 (READ vs. 3-4).

Notice this interesting contrast between vs. 3 and 4. In vs. 3, the psalmist is remembering or recognizing his sins. And the sins are so great, so ugly, he says, “Who could stand before God? Who could possibly be accepted by the Lord because of these sins?” The answer, of course, is no one! But in vs. 4 he says, “But with you there is forgiveness.” There is forgiveness, friends, with the Lord! Why? “That you may be feared.” So consider what vs. 4 is saying: God’s forgiveness of our sins is so utterly amazing, so incomprehensible, so supernatural, that it should make us awestruck and fearful. Upon our forgiveness, we should tremble, saying, “Who is this God that he would forgive even these sins; even me?” Who is this God? It’s Jesus and he loves you.

When I was about 12 years old, I lived only about a mile away from my cousin, Brent. We hung out a ton when we were growing up; he’s like a brother. Brent is a year older than me. That means he was always a little stronger, faster, and taller than me until I caught up in HS. That meant he could usually beat me in our sporting competitions. One summer morning as I was riding my bike to Brent’s house for another game a basketball I thought I’d offer up a prayer for some of the more important things in life: “God, help me win this upcoming game of basketball.” I was really sincere. I offered my prayer with a genuine heart (as selfish as it may have been) and I believed God was hearing me. And wanted to help.

It was a hard-fought match. We battled back and forth like Magic and Bird (that's like LeBron and Durant for all you kids out there). When the game was done, I was on the losing end. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but not because my cousin was gloating, but because I hoped and believed that God would help me. And on my way home I prayed again. But this time, I let God have it. I was so angry, so hurt, that God would turn such a blind eye to my prayer. As a preteen kid, I cursed God. I shouted how much I hated him and that I didn't need him.

It didn't take long for the guilt to set in. I just cursed out the God of the universe. I just told him I hated him. And I thought, "God will never forgive me for this." I kid you not, friends, my cursing at God haunted me for years. Well into my adult years when I would think about God and on the forgiveness of Jesus my mind would turn to that summer day and I wondered, "But will God forgive that? Will he forgive me?"

The things I've shared with you today from God's word have helped me find grace for my guilt and not just the shame of my 12 year old self, but for all the sins that I am ashamed of. God has helped me keep my eyes of faith fixed on what Jesus has done for me on that cross so I can live confidently knowing that my sins are forgiven rather than looking at all the wrongs that I've done where I'm reminded of my guilt.

Friends, that's what you need to practice. Faith in God for forgiveness of sin fixes itself on what Jesus has done on that cross that washes all our sins away instead of looking at, staring at what you're guilty of. So, let me ask you: what are your eyes of faith fixed on? Jesus and his work on the cross for you, or your sins?

I wouldn't be surprised if some of you out there are having a hard time shaking the guilt thinking, "I believe all of what you're saying, Brian. But I still can't believe that God would forgive me." So, let's try and dig a little deeper here. You know all the right information, but you still don't believe. A good rule in life is this: when in doubt, when you're stuck, repent. What that mean is if you're stuck on a problem even though you know all the right information, you need to turn from something. That's what it means to repent; to turn. There's a problem on the inside of you that you need to discover and turn from. If you're struggling to believe you can be forgiven, let me suggest to you a sin that I've seen in me and in others that keeps them from believing in God's forgiveness. That sin is pride.

After all that we've talked about today and you still don't believe God can forgive you it might be due to your pride. That might sound rather startling to you. You might think, "Brian! I'm feeling terrible about myself; I have a hard time looking at myself in the mirror. And you think pride might be my problem?" Let me explain this by asking you a question. Why do you think you're so different, so unique that you can't be forgiven? Why can God forgive your neighbors sins, Paul's sins, my sins, your friends sins, but not yours? Are you somehow different, somehow special to think you can't receive forgiveness when everybody else can? That's pride.

Or maybe you're like, "But I committed *that* sin, Brian!" You never thought you'd commit that sin? Why? Because you're somehow better than other people? That's pride.

Do you see what I'm getting at? Oftentimes, a subtle, deceptive pride creeps into our lives that says, that tempts us, and persuades us to believe that we somehow stand out; that we are unique from others in a way that makes us not like them. That's the sin of pride in us. It's this temptation in us that wants to exalt ourselves above others; that we are unique in some way that should be noticed and given special consideration. You're not that special. You're like every other sinner out there. You can't find forgiveness on your own, but God sent Jesus to die for every one of yours.

Friends, I say these things to help you; I care for you. And I'm not trying to say, "I know you struggle with this." I'm trying to give you something to consider and think about. I do believe this might be a key moment for some of you as pride is keeping you from knowing the forgiving grace of God. And I have more good news: Jesus forgives that pride, too. He forgives it all. Turn from that pride.

If you're wondering, "How do I know if I'm believing that God forgives? Will I be able to tell when I'm trusting God's forgiveness?" Well, one good way you'll be able to tell is if you can do what Paul did. In our passage Paul is aware of both realities; the reality of his need for forgiveness and the truth of what God had done for him. I've hinted at this already, but the way he ends this discussion is a clue for us; he finishes these thoughts with a song of praise. He concludes with a heart of joy of who God is and what he's done. That's a really good way for us to have an idea if we're believing in God's forgiveness. Is your heart happy in God's grace instead of sad because of your failure? Are you able to say with a pure heart, "Thank you, God, for the forgiveness of my sins!" or you can't think of reasons to be grateful? When believe in God's forgiveness of our sins we are moved to worship and joy.

Key vs. 1 Timothy 1:15

Questions for the week

- Why do we want to remind ourselves of our past sins?
- Is pride keeping you from forgiveness? How might you tell?
- Examine your joy. Do you regularly feel joy and happiness for what God has done for you? Since you can't *make* yourself happy, what should you do to find it?