



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 19.5 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

### The Reception of God's Forgiveness in Christ

How do we on our part receive the gift of forgiveness? The only way by which God's gift of forgiveness can be received by us is by faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior. Jesus made that very plain when He told His disciples after His resurrection: **"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned"** (Mark 16:15-16). The Greek words translated "believe" and "faith" are words *pisteuō πιστεύω* and *pistis πίστις*, which are related to each other. To have faith in someone is to trust in, rely on, and depend on that person in what he says and in what he does. The Holy Spirit wants us to believe that God is telling us the truth in the Bible about Jesus and what He has done for us. He wants us to put our trust in the good news of forgiveness through Christ. He wants us to depend on this and rely on it for our salvation and eternal life and not to depend on anyone else or anything else for our salvation. Jesus said: **"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life"** (John 3:16).

Jesus' apostles Peter and Paul listened to their Lord Jesus and taught the same things He did. In fact, Peter told Cornelius and the crowd gathered in his home: **"To Him (Jesus) all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins"** (Acts 10:43). All the Old Testament prophets taught the same thing as the New Testament apostles of Jesus. Forgiveness of sins can be received by us in only one way: by believing in Jesus Christ. Paul certainly agreed with this, for he wrote to the Christians in Rome: **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek"** (Romans 1:16).

Our Lutheran fathers confessed this truth in Article IV of the *Augsburg Confession*: *"Human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works. ... But they are justified as a gift (that is, BY GRACE) on account of Christ (FOR CHRIST'S SAKE) THROUGH FAITH when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for His sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us"* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, pp. 38-41, emphasis added). The three key points are spelled out in capital letters: BY GRACE, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE, THROUGH FAITH.

This faith by which we receive the benefits of Christ's suffering and death is not something we can manufacture on our own. The faith by which we receive God's free gift of forgiveness that Christ won for us is itself a free gift. Our faith in Christ is a creation of the Holy Spirit, who creates such faith in our hearts by means of the Gospel. It is written: **"How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? ... So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"** (Romans 10:14, 17). **"No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit"** (1 Corinthians 12:3). **"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them"** (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Because the forgiveness of sins was won by Christ and is given to us by the Holy Spirit, and it is not dependent on us and our merits or actions, we can be assured that the forgiveness of sins is ours, really and truly. The apostle Paul wrote: **"Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace,**

so that the promise might be sure to all the seed" (Romans 4:16). God is not lying to us when He tells us through His apostles that our sins are forgiven because Christ took our punishment for us. Paul wrote to Titus about the **"hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began, but has in due time manifested His word through preaching"** (Titus 1:2-3). Like Abraham we should be **"fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform"** (Romans 4:21).

Our God wants to save us. It is for that reason that Christ came to this earth to live and die for us. God wants to save every one of us. And for that reason, Jesus died for all sinners, and told His disciples to take the Gospel to all the world. Paul wrote: **"If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"** (Romans 8:31-32). **"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ... For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 8:35, 38-39). Our salvation is not based on our own will or our works. **"It is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy"** (Romans 9:16). May each one of us say with Paul: **"I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day"** (2 Timothy 1:12).

What a precious gift forgiveness of sins is! Without it we remain under God's wrath, **"for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness"** (Romans 1:18). But with it we have not only forgiveness of sins but eternal life. **"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Romans 6:23). King David was a great sinner, but he became a blessed man through God's forgiveness. That is why he sang: **"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin"** (Romans 4:7-8).

We can and should be certain that our sins are forgiven. Our forgiveness does not depend on us ourselves, our deeds, or our character. Forgiveness depends on Jesus' death and resurrection and on God's promise. When we depend on ourselves for salvation, we can never be sure that we have done enough to satisfy God. But when we depend on Christ for our salvation, we have a sure hope, because what God has done through Christ is enough. We can be sure of it, because it depends on Him, not on ourselves.

## Questions

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1. What is the only way by which forgiveness can be received by anyone?
2. Provide Biblical evidence for your answer to question 1.
3. What are the three items emphasized by Article IV of the Augsburg Confession?
4. Explain the meaning of each of these three items.
5. Where does faith in the forgiveness of sins come from?
6. Why can we be sure that our sins are truly forgiven?
7. Prove from Scripture that faith in Christ's forgiveness is a gift from God.
8. Why is the forgiveness of sins such an important blessing from God?