



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

## **A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)**

### **Chapter 19**

### **The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins**





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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 19.1 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

#### The Main Thing

We have now discussed the major teachings of the Bible. But before we conclude this study, we want to return once more to a discussion of the main thing. In his *Large Catechism* Martin Luther stated in his discussion of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed: *"Everything in this Christian community is so ordered that everyone may daily obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and signs (sacraments) appointed to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live on earth. Although we have sin, the Holy Spirit sees to it that it does not harm us because we are a part of this Christian community. Here there is full forgiveness of sins, both in that God forgives us and that we forgive, bear with, and aid one another. Outside this Christian community, however, where there is no gospel, there is also no forgiveness"* (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 438).

This is what we have as Christians – as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ – that is not to be found anywhere else on earth: the forgiveness of sins. This means both that God forgives us and that we forgive one another. Surely the greatest gift the Holy Spirit can give us is the forgiveness of sins, won by Christ for all by His life and by His death, and conveyed or transmitted to us by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

After Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the dead and had opportunity to talk to His disciples, what did He say to them? **"Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations"** (Luke 24:47)

What did the Holy Spirit move the apostle Peter to say on the day of Pentecost after he accused the assembled crowd that they were guilty of crucifying the Son of God? When they asked him what they should do, Peter replied: **"Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins"** (Acts 2:38).

What did the missionary Paul say as he traveled through towns and villages, speaking to both Jews and Gentiles? This was his message: **"Let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man (Jesus) is preached to you the forgiveness of sins"** (Acts 13:38).

#### Our Need for the Forgiveness of Sins

All human beings need forgiveness of sins, because all human beings are sinners. Listen to what God tells us in His Word. Ecclesiastes 7:20: **"For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin."** Romans 3:9-10: **"What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: 'There is none righteous, no, not one.'** Romans 3:23: **"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** Romans 5:12: **"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned."**

Because we sinners tend to minimize our faults and excuse our wrongdoing, God wants His law to be proclaimed loudly and clearly, for it is God's law as written in our hearts and as taught in the Bible that shows us our sins and our innate sinfulness. God's law condemns us all because we have not obeyed it. The man who wrote Psalm 130 understood this, for he cried out to God: **"If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You"** (Psalm 130:3-4).

It is not only the unbelievers who need the forgiveness of sins. Those of us who are true believers in Jesus Christ need forgiveness of sins also, for we sin every day. That is why Jesus taught His own disciples to pray: “**Forgive us our debts**” (Matthew 6:12) and: “**Forgive us our sins**” (Luke 11:4). Even those who are leaders and teachers among the believers need forgiveness. King David was the leader of God’s people, a servant of God, and yet he said: “**Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous**” (Psalm 143:2).

The apostle Paul certainly confessed that he was a sinner, not only in his early days when he persecuted Christians in his hatred of Christ, but also after he was converted and called to be Christ’s apostle and missionary to the Gentiles. Listen to what Paul had to say about himself: “**For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. ... So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin**” (Romans 7:18, 25). Paul realized he was far from being perfect, for he told his fellow-believers in Philippi: “**Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me**” (Philippians 3:12).

John wrote: “**If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ... If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him (God) a liar, and His word is not in us**” (1 John 1:8-10). God is not a liar. He says we are sinners, and so we are.

For this reason, Martin Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism*: “*Forgiveness is constantly needed, for although God’s grace has been acquired by Christ, and holiness has been wrought by the Holy Spirit through God’s Word in the unity of the Christian Church, yet we are never without sin because we carry our flesh around our neck*” (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 438). We Christians continually need the forgiveness of sins, because our sinful flesh continually leads us into sin.

### **Questions**

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1. What did Martin Luther say about the forgiveness of sins?
2. What did Jesus say about the forgiveness of sins?
3. What did Peter and Paul say about the forgiveness of sins?
4. Why should we be concerned about the forgiveness of sins?
5. Who are the only persons who do not need the forgiveness of sins?
6. Why can we be sure that believers in Jesus need forgiveness of sins?
7. If we deny we are sinners, whom are we calling a liar?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 19.2 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

#### God's Solution to Our Sin Problem

Even though many of our sins are sins against other human beings and even against ourselves, in reality all of our sins are against God, who has commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to love Him most of all. By committing adultery and murder, King David sinned against many people, but in his psalm of penitence he said to God: **“Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight”** (Psalm 51:4). God hates sin, and He is the only One who has the right to punish us for our sins, since He is holy and just.

Since all of our sins are against God, God is the only One who can forgive sins. The scribes at Jesus' time were actually correct when they said: **“Who can forgive sins but God alone?”** (Mark 2:7). The most wonderful thing about God is that He does forgive sins. The Lord God Jehovah (Jahveh) revealed His name to Moses in this way: **“And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin’”** (Exodus 34:6-7).

David understood this, for he wrote: **“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits; who forgives all your iniquities”** (Psalm 103:2-3). Another psalm declares: **“If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You”** (Psalm 130:3-4). The prophet Micah wrote: **“Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity?”** (Micah 7:18).

Jesus compared His heavenly Father to an earthly king whose servant owed him such a huge amount that he could not possibly pay it all. Jesus said: **“Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt”** (Matthew 18:23-27). Our sins against God are like huge debts that can never be paid. But God forgives all these sins, no matter how many and great they may be.

But must not the holy God who hates sin punish sin in holy justice? Yes, God must punish sin. He cannot ignore sin, or act as though sin has not happened. This is the wonder of God's love and compassion. God found a way to punish sin and save sinners. Already in eternity God planned His solution to our sin problem, and as soon as sin entered the world through the sin of our first parents, God announced His solution. The solution was the sending of His own Son as the Seed of a woman to take on Himself all human sin and be punished as the God-man in place of sinful human beings. Without the Son of God being the substitute for the human race under the punishment of God there could be no forgiveness of sins for anyone. The apostle John wrote: **“Your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake”** (1 John 2:12).

Over and over again the New Testament proclaims the truth that God forgives sins for only one reason: Jesus was punished for our sin in our place when God poured out on Jesus, His Son, the full wrath and hatred of God against sin. Without Christ's suffering in our place on the cross there could be no forgiveness for anyone. The apostle Paul proclaimed it plainly in his recorded sermons. For example,

he summarized his message in Antioch of Pisidia with these words: “**Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man (Jesus) is preached to you the forgiveness of sins**” (Acts 13:38).

In his letters Paul repeated this same truth. “**In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace**” (Ephesians 1:7). “**And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you**” (Ephesians 4:32). “**And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross**” (Colossians 2:13-14).

God cannot and does not forgive sins by simply saying the word of forgiveness. His Word of forgiveness is based on His action of punishing His Son, Christ Jesus, in our place. Without the suffering and death of Jesus there is no forgiveness. The letter to the Hebrews simply says: “**Without shedding of blood there is no remission**” (Hebrews 9:22). In the Old Testament ritual, which God established, there could be no forgiveness without the shedding of animal blood. But this animal blood did not actually take away any sins. The bloody animal sacrifices portrayed in advance the true sacrifice of the Son of God on the cross that removed sin. “**Now, once at the end of the ages, He (Jesus) has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself**” (Hebrews 9:26).

For this reason, Martin Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism*: “*We could never come to recognize the Father’s favor and grace were it not for the LORD Christ, who is a mirror of the Father’s heart. Apart from Him we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge*” (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 440).

## Questions

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1. In what way are all our sins against God?
2. Who is the only one who can forgive sins?
3. Prove from Scripture that God truly does forgive sins.
4. What parable did Jesus tell to explain the forgiveness of sins?
5. How has God punished all human sin?
6. Why is God able to forgive our sins?
7. Why was Jesus’ death on the cross necessary before God could forgive us?
8. What was the purpose of the bloody animal sacrifices of the law?
9. Why are such bloody animal sacrifices no longer necessary?
10. In what way is Jesus a mirror of the heart of God?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 19.3 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

#### God Has Forgiven All Sins

Since Jesus was the Substitute for the entire human race in His sufferings and death, the sins of the entire human race (past, present, future) have been taken away. For this reason, God forgives all sins of all sinners, and the Gospel (Good News) of Jesus is the announcement of that fact to the world. John the Baptist, God's special messenger to prepare the Jewish nation for the coming of their Savior, did not tell the people that Jesus was the Savior of Israel only, but for the whole world: "**The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'**" (John 1:29).

Paul, God's chosen apostle to the non-Jews emphasized this point in his sermons and letters. He wrote to the Christians in Corinth (made up of both Jews and non-Jews): "**We judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all**" (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). In other words, God counts the death of Jesus on the cross as equal to the death of every sinner. Jesus was punished on the cross with the punishment deserved by all sinners. Therefore, since the sin of all has been punished in the punishment of Christ, no punishment remains for sinners. God forgives them all because Jesus suffered and died for them all. This means that since Jesus died for each one of us, God forgives each one of us.

Paul wrote to these same Corinthians: "**God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them**" (2 Corinthians 5:19). God does not impute (count) the world's trespasses (sins) against the world, because He has already counted the world's sins as the sins of Christ, and He has already punished the sins of the world when He punished Christ. Paul explained this amazing substitution of Christ for the world in these words: "**He (God) made Him (Christ) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him**" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Christ, the Righteous One, became the One counted as a sinner – the only sinner – because God transferred the world's sins to Him. The world, on the other hand, although guilty of sin, is given Christ's righteousness, and therefore the world is counted righteous because of Jesus and His vicarious atonement, that is, His suffering and dying as the world's Substitute.

Since Christ reconciled the world to Himself, Paul can say to the Corinthians: "**God ... has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ**" (2 Corinthians 5:18). Every sinner can include themselves in the number of those for whom Jesus died, and every sinner can then also conclude that God has forgiven them their sins for Christ's sake, that is, because of what Christ did on the cross. The apostle John wrote: "**He Himself (Christ) is the propitiation (payment) for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world**" (1 John 2:2). Not only did Jesus pay for every sin by His suffering for the whole world, but John also teaches us that every sin has been taken away. He says: "**The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin**" (1 John 1:7). All sin includes the original sin that we inherited from our parents as well as the many actual sins we have ourselves added by our sinful thoughts, words, and deeds. God has forgiven all sins of all people because of Christ's redemption.

Was there any good quality in us that led God to send His Son to reconcile the world to Himself? Was there any merit or worthiness in us that moved Christ to take our place under God's wrath against sin and suffer and die on the cross as our Substitute? Is the forgiveness of sins something that God owes to us because of our character, personality, or behavior? God's answer is all such questions is "no". The

only answer God gives to explain His motivation for doing what He did to save us is love. It is undeserved love, which the Bible calls grace. It is written: “**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). Paul testified: “**In Him (Christ) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace**” (Ephesians 1:7). The book of Revelation speaks of Jesus as “**Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood**” (Revelation 1:5). In His parable of the forgiving king Jesus spoke of the king as one “**moved with compassion**” (Matthew 18:27). It was this compassion that led the king to release his servant and forgive him his debt.

### **Questions**

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1. Why can we call Jesus the Substitute for the whole human race?
2. How can each one of us say that he or she died on the cross?
3. What does it mean to impute trespasses to someone?
4. How can God not impute the trespasses of the world to the world?
5. What transfer took place on the cross?
6. Why can each one of us consider himself or herself forgiven by God?
7. What good thing did we do to deserve God’s forgiveness?
8. What led God to work out His plan for saving the world from its sin?
9. What is meant by the term “grace”?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 19.4 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

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

Through His perfect obedience in life and in death our Lord Jesus has won for all mankind the forgiveness of sins. Jesus completed His work of redemption and reconciliation. But now it is necessary that this forgiveness be transmitted or conveyed to individual sinners so that they may take hold of it and apply it to themselves. For this reason, God's forgiveness must be distributed to the world and it must be received by individuals so that its benefits may be enjoyed. This is the specific work of God the Holy Spirit.

In his explanation of the Third Article of the *Apostles' Creed* in his *Large Catechism*, Martin Luther discussed the distribution of God's forgiveness in this way: *"Neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ, or believe in Him and receive Him as Lord, unless these were offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed; Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by His sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden so that no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not remain buried but be put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which He has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure, this redemption"* (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 436, emphasis added).

If, for example, a large city needs food or its people will starve, and the food it needs is stored in a warehouse in a neighboring city, but there is no way to bring the needed food to that city, then the stored food will do the starving people no good at all, even though the warehouse contains enough food for all. The food must be distributed; it must be brought to the starving citizens so that they may eat it and survive. In the same way God's forgiveness that Jesus has won for all must be distributed to those who need it; otherwise there is no benefit, and the sinners whose forgiveness Jesus has won will still be lost because the forgiveness has not been brought to them by means of the Gospel of Christ.

God offers and conveys His gift of forgiveness by means of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. This is what the apostle Paul calls "**the word of reconciliation**" (2 Corinthians 5:19): "**God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.**" Those who know what Jesus has done for the world through His suffering and death are to let others hear this Good News of what Jesus has done. When believers in Christ speak this Gospel to others or support others who speak this Gospel in their name, they are involved in the distribution of forgiveness, or what Paul calls "**the ministry of reconciliation**" (2 Corinthians 5:18): "**Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.**" In this way we become "**ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God**" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

In His ministry on earth Jesus Himself conveyed the forgiveness of sins to individual sinners. He could do this, because He knew what He was going to do on the cross. For example, a paralyzed man was lowered from the roof in front of Jesus. Jesus did not at once heal the man, but He said to him: "**Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you**" (Matthew 9:2). Then Jesus said to the crowd: "**The Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins**" (Matthew 9:6).

On the evening of Easter Sunday, the risen Savior gave to His followers this power and authority to distribute God's forgiveness to others. We read: "**Jesus said to them again, 'Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.' And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them'**" (John 20:21-23). He gave them their marching orders to go into all the world with the Gospel of forgiveness. He said to them: "**Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations**" (Luke 24:47).

The Holy Spirit spoke through Peter on the day of Pentecost: "**Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins**" (Acts 2:38). Baptism conveys the forgiveness of sins, as does also the Lord's Supper. For Jesus said: "**This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins**" (Matthew 26:28).

Since Jesus has given the authority to distribute His forgiveness to His followers, and the totality of His followers makes up the Christian Church, it is the Christian Church which has the authority to distribute God's forgiveness everywhere. For this reason, Luther says in his *Large Catechism*: "*We believe that in this Christian community we have the forgiveness of sins, which takes place through the holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire Gospel. This encompasses everything that is to be preached about the sacraments and, in short, the entire Gospel and all the official responsibilities of the Christian community*" (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 438). "*Before we prayed for it or even thought about it, He gave us the Gospel, in which there is nothing but forgiveness*" (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 452).

So also in the *Smalcald Articles* Luther wrote: "*The Gospel ... gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in His grace: first, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the Gospel); second, through baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters*" (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 319).

Thus, the Holy Spirit distributes Christ's forgiveness to us by giving us the Gospel, the Good News. This Gospel comes to us through Baptism, through the spoken Word, through the written Word, through the Lord's Supper, through general or private absolution after we confess our sins, and even through ordinary conversation, when a Christian tells someone else that his or her sins are forgiven because Jesus paid for them by His suffering and death and that Jesus rose from the dead to assure us that they have truly been removed.

## Questions

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1. Why does the forgiveness of sins won by Christ need to be distributed?
2. Which Person of the Triune God has the task of distributing forgiveness?
3. How is Christ's forgiveness distributed to individuals?
4. What is meant by the ministry of reconciliation and the word of reconciliation?
5. When did Jesus give His disciples the authority to distribute forgiveness?
6. Why must we call Baptism and the Lord's Supper ways by which forgiveness is distributed?
7. What other ways does Luther mention as ways to distribute forgiveness?



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## 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?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 19.6 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

#### The Meaning of Justification

Instead of using the words “forgiveness” or “remission” to refer to the gift that Christ has won for us and that the Holy Spirit distributes to us through the Gospel, the apostle Paul often uses the terms “justify” and “justification”. What we have thus far learned from God’s Word about forgiveness is amplified and clarified by what God’s Word teaches about justification. Forgiveness and justification are very similar. Forgiveness removes what we have but must get rid of: our sin and guilt. Justification gives us what we need but don’t have: perfect righteousness.

Justification is a courtroom term. It has to do with a judge, a court of law, the accused, and the verdict. The verdict is either guilty or innocent, condemned or acquitted. When God justifies you, that does not mean that you are not guilty. It means that God does not count you guilty. He declares or pronounces you to be just. This is what the word “justify” means: to declare someone not guilty, to declare someone righteous and holy.

In human matters a good judge is one who examines the evidence and based on the evidence declares a person either guilty or not guilty. If the person is guilty according to the evidence, the judge declares the person guilty and condemns them. If the person is innocent according to the evidence, the judge declares the person not guilty – he justifies them; he acquits them. It is written: **“He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord”** (Proverbs 17:15). It is wrong for a human judge to declare a wicked man innocent and an innocent man guilty. The prophet Isaiah warned: **“Woe to men mighty at drinking wine, woe to men valiant for mixing intoxicating drink, who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away justice from the righteous man!”** (Isaiah 5:22-23). A corrupt judge is willing to declare a guilty man innocent when he is given a bribe, often a payment of money, but a just and fair judge cannot be swayed in his judgment by money or by any other favors.

How much righteousness do we need in order to be able to be declared righteous by God, the Judge of all? The holy God has a high standard: **“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy”** (Leviticus 19:2). Jesus Himself told His followers: **“Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect”** (Matthew 5:48). If we want to stand as righteous before the holy God, we must be perfectly righteous and holy, as God Himself is holy. The holy God demands perfect righteousness from all human beings. There is no other way we can stand before God and expect to attain His favor and eternal life with Him in heaven. It is not enough for us to know what is right. We must do what is right in thought, word, and deed. The apostle Paul wrote: **“For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified”** (Romans 2:13).

This presents us with a very serious problem, for God’s Word and our own conscience join together to make us aware of the fact that we are far from being as holy and as perfect as God. This is true of both believers and unbelievers alike, for it is written: **“There is none righteous, no, not one”** (Romans 3:10). David was a servant of God, but He did not want God to judge him based on the evidence of his life. He prayed: **“Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous”** (Psalm 143:2). The prophet Isaiah shows how far we are from perfection: **“But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags”** (Isaiah 64:6).

Since sometimes we do not consider ourselves all that bad, God has given us His law to show us our sins and our innate sinfulness. The apostle Paul wrote: “**Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin**” (Romans 3:20). The fact that we sin and that we are sinners puts us under God’s curse. “**For it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them’**” (Galatians 3:10-11). There are no loopholes. It is not good enough to do some of the required things some of the time. We are to continue to do all things that are written in the law. There are no exceptions. For this reason, we cannot be saved by God’s law or by the Ten Commandments. If we could keep these commandments perfectly, we could be saved by the law. But if a person attempts to save himself by the law, all he can accomplish is to put himself under a curse. “**For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; ... but that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident**” (Galatians 3:10-11).

God has not given us the Ten Commandments so that we could save ourselves by keeping them. That is clearly impossible. Martin Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism*: “*The Ten Commandments do not succeed in making us Christians, for God’s wrath and displeasure still remain on us because we cannot fulfill what God demands of us*” (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 440).

### Questions

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1. What is the difference between forgiveness and justification?
2. What is the meaning of the word “justify”?
3. On what basis must earthly judges pronounce their verdict?
4. What are the two verdicts that a judge can pronounce?
5. Who is the judge of all, and what kind of judge is he?
6. What must be this judge’s verdict on everyone, according to the law?
7. Prove your answer to question 6 is correct based on Scripture.
8. Why must even believers in Christ be judged as guilty according to law?
9. Why is it that the Ten Commandments cannot save anyone?



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

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 19.7 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

#### God Has Pronounced the Whole World Righteous in Christ

Since God demands perfect righteousness, and none of us is righteous, it is obvious that if we are going to have such a perfect righteousness, it will have to come from outside of ourselves. We do not have such righteousness, nor is there any way we can attain it by any strength or desire in us. The perfect righteousness that we need comes from God. The prophet Isaiah wrote: ***"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness"*** (Isaiah 61:10). The perfect righteousness we need can come to us only from God. When we are covered and clothed with this righteousness from God, then we are saved, then we have reason to be joyful. Even though we are not righteous, God, the just Judge, pronounces us righteous. He justifies us.

But how can God be a just Judge if He declares sinners like us righteous? The answer to this question demonstrates God's love and God's wisdom. This is God's answer as summarized by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans: ***"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood"*** (Romans 3:23-25). How many have sinned? All. How many are justified (declared righteous)? All. On what basis does God justify them all? It is because of the redemption of Christ Jesus, because of the bloody sacrifice He made on the cross as the payment for all human sin of all ages and places. It was God's undeserved love ("grace") that led Him to do this. It was God's wisdom that figured out the way for Him to be just and punish sin, and at the same time to love and save the sinner. Paul tells us that there was nothing in us that qualified us to be justified. He tells us clearly that God ***"justifies the ungodly"*** (Romans 4:5).

Perhaps the clearest presentation of God's justification of all ungodly sinners occurs in the fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. Here we have a grand comparison between Adam and Jesus Christ. This comparison begins at Romans 5:12 and continues to the end of the chapter. Here is Paul's summary: ***"As through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous"*** (Romans 5:18-19). Adam's offense in Genesis 3 brought about God's judgment on the whole human race, resulting in condemnation for all human beings. But then came the second Adam, Jesus Christ, who was not disobedient like Adam but was perfectly obedient in all things, even to the point of death. Whereas Adam's disobedience led to condemnation, Christ's obedience led to the opposite of condemnation, namely, justification. How many were condemned through Adam's disobedience? All. How many were justified (declared righteous) through Jesus' obedience? All. Thus, God in fact has justified the whole world. God has declared or pronounced the whole world to be righteous because of Christ's actions of obedience, which included His perfect obedience to the law of God throughout His life as well as His obedience to His Father's will in allowing Himself to be punished on the cross for the sin of the world.

God has justified the whole world on the basis of Christ's redemption of the whole world. There is no sin for which Jesus was not punished on the cross. For this reason, God is just in declaring all persons righteous in Christ. When Christ was punished for the sin of the world, all the sins of everyone were

punished. Therefore God is righteous in saying: “The sins of the whole world are forgiven. I declare all of you to be righteous and holy in Christ.”

The prophet Jeremiah had foretold the coming of this perfect righteousness for the world: “**Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord, ‘that I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; now this is His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS**” (Jeremiah 23:5-6). We are not righteous in ourselves, but the Lord Jesus, the Son of David, is our righteousness. Clothed in His robes and covered by His righteousness, we are holy, and this means also that our sins are forgiven.

Paul explained this to the Christians in Corinth like this: “**But of Him (God) you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God; and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, that, as it is written, ‘He who glories, let him glory in the Lord’**” (1 Corinthians 1:30-31). And again: “**For He (God) made Him (Jesus) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him**” (2 Corinthians 5:21). All human sin went to Christ, and He was punished for it. All of Christ’s righteousness then went to the sinful world. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead proves that Jesus’ sacrifice was satisfactory, and God could now freely declare the whole world to be righteous in Christ. Jesus “**was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification**” (Romans 4:25). “**Having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him**” (Romans 5:9).

One of the confessions that is accepted by the Church of the Lutheran Confession is the *Brief Statement* of 1932, which states: “*Scripture teaches that God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ*” (#17). All the world’s sins were placed on Christ, and He was punished for them on the cross. When God raised Him from the dead, God declared Him righteous and the whole world righteous in Him. This justification of the whole world in Christ is called universal justification, because it applies to the whole world of sinners. It is also called objective justification, which means that it is a ready blessing for the whole world, whether it is believed or accepted by the sinner or not.

### **Questions**

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1. What kind of righteousness do we need in order to face the holy God?
2. What is the only righteousness that can come from within us?
3. Where must the righteousness that we need come from?
4. What is the basis for God's justification of the world?
5. What is universal justification?
6. Give the Scriptural proof for universal justification.
7. How does the comparison between Adam and Christ teach universal justification?
8. Why does the Bible say that God “justifies the ungodly”?
9. What does the resurrection of Christ have to do with justification?
10. Why can Jesus rightly be called “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS”?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 19.8 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

#### Justification By Faith

The Good News of Christ, that is, the Gospel of Christ, is that there is forgiveness of sins available for all through the life and death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was punished for the sin of the world. This Gospel comes to us through the Word of the Gospel and through the Gospel sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. But in order for us to receive the benefits of forgiveness for ourselves individually, God must work trust in our hearts so that we rely on what God is giving us in the Gospel for our salvation.

The forgiveness of sins has been won for all through the work of Christ. God declares the whole world justified (righteous) because of Christ. When God tells us in His Word that Christ has saved us from our sins and that we are righteous in Him, He works in our hearts so that we put our confidence in what He says. When we believe in Jesus as our Savior, we possess the full benefit of what is being offered to us and what has been won for us: forgiveness of sins, justification, and the promise of eternal life. This is what is meant by "justification by faith". It means we are persuaded that we cannot earn, merit, or deserve forgiveness by anything we can do or leave undone, but that we simply believe that Jesus Christ has taken away our sin and we are righteous in Him.

The apostle Paul emphasized that justification is received by us through faith (trust) in what Christ has done and what the Holy Spirit has brought to us through the Gospel. We read this especially in his letters to the Romans and Galatians. **"There is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith"** (Romans 3:30). Whether we are circumcised Jews or uncircumcised non-Jews (Gentiles), the way to receive justification is exactly the same: through faith.

The patriarch Abraham gives us an example of such faith. Again and again God told Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, and that he and his family would be a blessing for all nations and peoples of the world. By this God meant that Abraham would become the father of the people from whom God was going to send the Savior of the world: His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. On one such occasion **"He (God) brought him (Abraham) outside and said, 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness"** (Genesis 15:5-6). Notice how this works. God came to Abraham with the promise. God's promise worked faith in Abraham's heart, so that he believed God's promise. By believing that promise he is counted as righteous in God's eyes. God counts Abraham's faith as righteousness. This is justification by faith.

Paul explains Abraham's case like this: **"For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness"** (Romans 4:3-5). Working our own way to heaven and believing (trusting) that God has given us heaven as a gift are two opposite things. God does not owe us heaven because of our working for it. God gives us forgiveness and eternal life because of what Christ did, and He creates the faith by which we accept the gift and enjoy it. It is all grace, all undeserved; it is not a matter of what God owes us as a debt. He owes us nothing but punishment because of our sins. But He gives us in Christ a perfect righteousness that is ours simply through faith, a faith that He himself creates in our hearts through the Gospel.

Paul says that David taught the same thing. After referring to Abraham's faith as the way by which he received the righteousness of God, he says: "But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works" (Romans 4:5-6). The only way by which we can receive God's gift of justification for ourselves individually is by faith in Jesus Christ.

Here are some more testimonies from the apostle Paul. "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified" (Galatians 2:16). "But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe" (Romans 3:21-22). God did what He did "to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26). "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28). "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1). "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4).

God wants us to think in this way:

- a. God has already justified the whole ungodly world because of Christ.
- b. I am part of this ungodly world.
- c. Therefore, I too have been justified and declared righteous in God's sight.

The only sin that condemns now is unbelief, because unbelief rejects or ignores God's gift of righteousness in Christ, which is the only way we can stand holy before God. When we believe in Jesus, then we have God's justification for ourselves. This is called individual justification or subjective justification. God no longer counts my sins against me, because He has already counted them against Christ, in whom I believe. God now counts Christ's righteousness as my righteousness. I am holy in the sight of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

Again we quote the *Augsburg Confession*, Article IV:

"We ... become righteous before God

- 1) OUT OF GRACE
- 2) FOR CHRIST'S SAKE,
- 3) THROUGH FAITH, ...

for God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in His sight" (Book of Concord, Kolb-Webgert edition, pp. 38-40).

*The Formula of Concord*, another of our Lutheran confessions, says: "Poor sinful people are justified before God ... on the basis of sheer grace, because of the sole merit, the entire obedience, and the bitter suffering, death, and the resurrection of our Lord Christ alone, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness. The Holy Spirit conveys these benefits to us in the promise of the holy Gospel. Faith is the only means through which we lay hold of them, apply them to ourselves, and appropriate them. Faith itself is a gift of God" (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert edition, pp. 563-564).

## Questions

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1. How many persons has God declared righteous because of Christ's work?
2. How does God bring the Good News of this righteousness to people?
3. What is the only way by which we can receive justification?
4. Prove that your answer to question 3 is correct based on the Bible.
5. What is the difference between Jew and Gentile regarding the way to be saved?
6. What is the difference between wages and debt, on the one hand, and grace and gift, on the other?
7. Which came first: Abraham's faith or God's promise?
8. What is wrong with saying we are justified by works of the law?
9. Which persons does David call blessed? What does this mean?
10. What does it mean to be justified by faith?
11. What is the difference between universal justification and individual justification?
12. What is the difference between objective justification and subjective justification?
13. Explain the three points emphasized by Augsburg Confession Article IV.



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 19.9 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

#### Again – The Main Thing

From the first promise spoken by God in Genesis 3 to the last pages of Revelation the whole Bible teaches justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith. The apostle Peter said to Cornelius and his household: **"To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins"** (Acts 10:43). Justification by faith in Christ is thus the theme of the entire Bible. It is the main teaching of the Bible. That is why the apostle Paul stressed this teaching in his mission sermons. On his first mission trip with Barnabas to modern-day Turkey, he told the people of Antioch in Pisidia: **"Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses"** (Acts 13:38-39). They could not be justified by the law of Moses, and neither can we. It is only Jesus who has won forgiveness and justification for the world, and it is only by faith in Jesus that we can receive this forgiveness and justification. Everyone who believes in Jesus is justified (declared righteous) in the sight of God. Our Lutheran fathers claimed that this teaching of justification by faith in Christ is the main teaching of the entire Bible.

The teaching of justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, is a teaching that shows that Christianity is different from all other religions. All other religions are religions of laws and works, of merits and rewards, or they are religions for this world only and promise no eternal future. They can provide no assurance of salvation because they are based on what we do or do not do. But Christianity is based on what God has already done in His love for us through Jesus Christ, and therefore those who trust in Jesus can be absolutely sure of their salvation. When Peter was on trial before the Jewish authorities, he proclaimed the saving power of Jesus: **"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"** (Acts 4:12). God has provided only one Savior for all, and that one Savior is His Son, Jesus Christ. He is the only Savior for the whole world; there is no other Savior. If we are going to be saved, it must be through Jesus. God has no second plan for those who reject Jesus.

What does God say to those who reject Jesus and attempt to save themselves by their own efforts? This is His answer, given by His apostle Paul: **"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith"** (Galatians 5:4-5). If we depend on our own efforts to keep God's law, even in part, we have lost the only real Savior, Christ Jesus, and we have put ourselves back under God's curse that condemns all sinners. Martin Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism*: **"All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites ... cannot be confident of His love and blessing, and therefore they remain in eternal wrath and condemnation. For they do not have the Lord Christ"** (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert edition, p. 440).

The teaching of justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith gives certain comfort to troubled sinners. King David was such a troubled sinner after he became aware of his great sins of adultery and murder, even after the Lord had given him such great blessings. But when he knew that there was forgiveness for Him from God because of God's promise of salvation through the coming Messiah, he wrote: **"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity"** (Psalm 32:1-2). In these words **"David ... describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works"** (Romans 4:6).

This is the meaning of justification for us sinners. God counts us as righteous in His sight because of the Savior in whom we trust. God counts Christ's righteousness as ours; He imputes Christ's righteousness to us sinners. **"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"** (Romans 5:1). **"We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation"** (Romans 5:11). **"It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"** (Romans 8:33-35). The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* says: *"This faith alone receives the forgiveness of sins, makes us acceptable to God, and brings peace and tranquility to the conscience"* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert edition, p. 139). We can be sure our sins are forgiven, because this forgiveness relies on what God has done, not on what we have done.

The teaching of justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, gives all glory to God. God's law knocks all of us down; the law declares all of us to be sinners who deserve eternal punishment. There is no one who is better than anyone else. Therefore no one of us can boast that we are somehow more worthy of eternal life than the next person. Since we ourselves can contribute nothing to our own salvation, all the glory of our salvation must go to God. He deserves praise for having saved us; we deserve no credit at all for our salvation. All glory goes to God.

At one time in his life the apostle Paul, as a typical Pharisee, boasted about his own accomplishments in keeping God's law. He certainly felt superior to other Jews and much superior to the heathen Gentiles. But after he came to know Jesus Christ and the teaching of salvation by grace, he made it a point to take away from us any reason for boasting. He says: **"What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin"** (Romans 3:9). Again he asks: **"Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith"** (Romans 3:27). In other words, if we were able to save ourselves by our works, or even contribute even the smallest thing to our salvation, we would have something to boast about. But the fact that we are saved by grace means that all the glory must go to God, who saved us.

**"For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all"** (Romans 11:32). **"For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen"** (Romans 11:36). Our salvation is all God's doing, **"that no flesh should glory in His presence"** (1 Corinthians 1:29). **"He who glories, let him glory in the Lord"** (1 Corinthians 1:31). **"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"** (Ephesians 2:8-9). **"To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen"** (Revelation 1:5-6).

Therefore we confess in the *Brief Statement* of 1932: *"Through this doctrine alone Christ is given the honor due Him, namely, that through His holy life and innocent suffering and death He is our Savior"* (#18).

By His life, death, and resurrection Jesus Christ won the forgiveness of sins for all sinners and established justification for all sinners. But the only way by which we sinners can receive the benefits of Christ's work for all is by faith, that is, by trusting in what Jesus has done for us all. Even Abraham in Old Testament times received Christ's benefits by faith in Him, for his faith in God's promise of the Savior was counted to Abraham for righteousness. He was **"fully convinced that what He (God) had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore 'it was accounted to him for righteousness.'** Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification" (Romans 4:21-25).

**Questions:**

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1. What teaching does the Bible emphasize from Genesis to Revelation?
2. Why can no one be justified by the law of Moses?
3. In what way is Christianity different from all other religions?
4. Prove from Scripture that there is no Savior for the world except Jesus.
5. What does it mean to fall from grace?
6. Why can we not be truly comforted by a religion of works?
7. What gives us absolute assurance that our sins are forgiven?
8. Which kind of person did King David say was a blessed person?
9. What does it mean to impute iniquity to someone?
10. Why is it that Christians should not boast about their salvation?
11. What kind of boasting is proper for Christians?
12. How does the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ give all glory to God?
13. How was Abraham counted righteous in God's sight?



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## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 19.10 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

#### Forfeiting God's Forgiveness in Christ

The Holy Spirit's role in the forgiving of sins is to tell people about Jesus and the forgiveness of sins He won for them. In other words, the Holy Spirit transmits the Gospel of Christ all over the world through those whom He has already brought to faith in Christ, who thus become the ministers of reconciliation bringing the word of reconciliation to groups and individuals everywhere. The Holy Spirit works through the means of grace to bring about conversion, that is, to cause people to turn from their unbelieving way of life and to find in Jesus Christ and His Gospel the forgiveness of sins they desperately need. After bringing persons to faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit works in them and through them to produce the fruits of faith.

On His last night before His death Jesus said to His disciples: **“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me”** (John 15:26). **“He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you”** (John 16:14-15). On the evening of Easter Sunday Jesus said to His disciples: **“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them”** (John 20:22-23). Then, on Pentecost, Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on His followers, and the Holy Spirit began His work of testifying about Jesus and glorifying Jesus, using the disciples as His tools, as the ambassadors of Christ and ministers of the new covenant.

No Christian on his own and by his own power can convert anyone to Christ. But the Holy Spirit will work through the Word of God the Christian speaks and, in that way, will carry out His will. That is why the apostle Paul wrote: **“No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit”** (1 Corinthians 12:3). Objective justification is the work of Jesus Christ in atoning for the sin of the world and establishing righteousness for all sinners. But it is the Holy Spirit who brings the message of objective justification to all and works subjective justification (or individual justification), by which the sinner is led to accept the forgiveness and justification won by Christ for all. Because of the Holy Spirit's involvement, Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **“You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God”** (1 Corinthians 6:11).

We must give all credit to God for our justification, conversion, and eternal salvation, as well as for God's decision from eternity to bring us to faith in Jesus Christ, keep us in that faith until the end of our lives, and then usher us into our eternal home with Him. The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: **“But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

Nevertheless, God's gift of forgiveness in Christ, which is offered to all sinners in the Gospel, is forfeited by many through their rejection of God's gift in unbelief. Jesus never promised that all who hear the Gospel will be brought to faith in Him. He told His disciples to bring the Gospel to all, but He also told them in advance that there would be some, even many, who would reject it. His words are plain and clear: **“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). Jesus had already

taught this truth to Nicodemus: “**He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God**” (John 3:18). “**He who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him**” (John 3:36).

The apostle Paul experienced such rejection and unbelief as the Holy Spirit brought the Gospel through him to the cities and villages of the Roman Empire. What happened in Antioch of Pisidia happened in many other places. After presenting the Gospel of Christ to the Jews in Antioch, Paul addressed those who did not accept his message with these words: “**It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles**” (Acts 13:46). It was not just the Jews, however, many of the Gentiles rejected his message also.

Jesus told a sad story about the way those who are freely forgiven by the Lord can forfeit the forgiveness offered to them: “**Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, “Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.” Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, “Pay me what you owe!” So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.” And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?” And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses**” (Matthew 18:23-35).

The sadness in Jesus’ voice is evident when He said the words: “**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate**” (Matthew 23:37-38). It is sad but true: One loses forgiveness in the Gospel for himself if he does not believe it.

## Questions

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1. How does the Holy Spirit forgive sins?
2. What authority did Jesus give to His followers on the evening of Easter Sunday?
3. How does the Holy Spirit carry out His work of spreading the Gospel?
4. Why is it that all people will not go to heaven, if Jesus died for all?
5. Who must get the credit for the salvation of sinners?
6. Whose fault is it when sinners reject the saving Gospel?
7. Prove that you answer to question 6 is correct based on something spoken by the apostle Paul.
8. When does the wrath of God remain on someone for whom Jesus died?
9. What is the main point in Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant?
10. Why was Jesus so sad when He thought about Jerusalem?



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

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 19.11 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

#### Spreading the Word

As persons whom the Holy Spirit has already brought to faith in Jesus, we have the splendid privilege of being used by the Holy Spirit to tell others about Jesus. On the night before He died, Jesus told His disciples: **“You also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning”** (John 15:27). Jesus had been training them for this work for more than three years. Now it was time for them to begin this great work. After Jesus rose from the dead, He told them again: **“As the Father has sent Me, I also send you”** (John 20:21). He said to them: **“Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things”** (Luke 24:47-48).

Jesus' twelve apostles are no longer living, but they are still our teachers through the New Testament that they wrote as the Holy Spirit guided them. The Gospel they proclaimed is now being taught by others who have taken their place. In fact, all those who believe in Jesus transmit His Word to others, and some have been chosen by these believers to preach the Gospel in their name. All of us who believe in Jesus Christ have our roles to play in bringing the Gospel to others and in strengthening the faith of those who are already believers. As we have said before, believers in Jesus are now ambassadors for Christ. As it is written: **“Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God”** (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

The Church of Christ on earth is made up of all the believers in Jesus Christ. It is the work of the Christian Church to spread the Gospel of forgiveness everywhere. The Holy Spirit works through the Church, that is, through the believers in Christ that make up the Church. Martin Luther says in his *Small Catechism*: **“Daily in this Christian Church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins – mine and those of all believers”** (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert edition, p. 356).

Luther enlarges on this topic in the *Large Catechism*: **“The Holy Spirit effects our being made holy through the following: the community of saints or Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. ... He has a unique community in the world, which is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God. ... In this Christian community we have the forgiveness of sins. ... Here there is full forgiveness of sins, both in that God forgives us and that we forgive, bear with, and aid one another. ... All this, then, is the office and work of the Holy Spirit, to begin and daily increase holiness on earth through these two means, the Christian Church and the forgiveness of sins. Then, when we pass from this life, in the blink of an eye He will perfect our holiness and will eternally preserve us in it** (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert edition, pp. 435-439).

As ambassadors for Christ, it is our privilege to convey God's forgiveness to others by praising our Lord and telling others what Jesus has done for us. We are to be like the man whom Jesus cured and then sent on his way, telling him: **“Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you”** (Mark 5:19). Each one of us is given the honor of doing his or her part in the great work of spreading the Gospel. The apostle Peter wrote to the

Christians in his care: “**You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy**” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Christians are ambassadors for Christ not only when they talk about Jesus, but also when they live honorable lives according to His Word. Our lives must match our talk; otherwise, what we say will be choked out by what we do. It is our privilege as ambassadors for Christ to convey the Gospel to others by bringing forth the fruits of faith in our daily lives. The first and best fruit of faith is love: love for God, His Word, and His salvation, but also love and concern for our fellow-believers, and, in particular, love and concern for the poor and needy in our surroundings.

Jesus compared Himself to the vine and called us the branches attached to this vine: “**I am the vine, you are the branches, he who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing**” (John 15:5). “**By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples**” (John 15:8).

People form their opinions about Christ based on what they see among the followers of Christ. The apostle Paul told the Christians in Corinth: “**You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart**” (2 Corinthians 3:2-3). It is important that we talk about Jesus and use the Bible to inform our neighbors concerning the only way of salvation in Christ. But even those who do not read the Bible can read us; that is, they can observe us and our way of life and in that way be led to examine the truth about Jesus.

Paul wrote to the Galatians: “**Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith**” (Galatians 6:9-10). What should outsiders see in us who call ourselves Christians? “**The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control**” (Galatians 5:22-23). Jesus said to His followers: “**Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven**” (Matthew 5:16). Missionary Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi: “**Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life**” (Philippians 2:14-16).

As believers in Christ, we are all ambassadors for Christ, but we do not all have the same gifts. God has given some Christians special gifts for teaching His Word and bringing the Gospel to those who have not heard it or have been confused by false teachers. Those with these special gifts should be chosen by the other Christians to speak in their name as teachers, pastors, evangelists, and missionaries. But whatever our gifts may be, we can use them in the spread of the Gospel and to support those that we send out in our name and in the name of Christ.

The Great Commission, as spoken by Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20 and Mark 16:15-16, gives us our chief assignment as Christians: to make disciples of Jesus by baptizing and teaching, going all over the world to bring the Gospel to everyone. Jesus assures us that He will be with us in this great endeavor. “**Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age**” (Matthew 28:20).

Those who are called by Christians to preach the Gospel in their name need to be supported by those who have called them. We support them by our prayers, by our assistance, by our gifts for their financial support, and by our continual encouragement. Financial support for pastors, teachers, and missionaries is necessary, for the apostle Paul wrote: “**Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel**” (1 Corinthians 9:14). That is, they should receive their living or livelihood from the Gospel. Paul himself was an exception to this rule, for he supported

himself by making tents. This same thing may be necessary in our time also for various reasons. But our goal is always to provide for the preaching of the Gospel by our free-will offerings. **“God loves a cheerful giver”** (2 Corinthians 9:7).

So how can we support the preaching of the Gospel? We can talk about Christ in our community among our friends, neighbors, and relatives. We can support our own congregation and servants of the Word it has called. We can establish Christian schools for the training of the young. We can join together with other like-minded Christians and congregations to support bigger projects, like supporting missionaries in other countries. We can support educational institutions that have been set up for the training of pastors, teachers, evangelists, and missionaries. We can consider offering ourselves with our gifts as church workers in various fields.

One of the summaries of what we believe and teach is the *Brief Statement* of 1932. In that document we state: *“The Christian Church must not remain at home with the means of grace entrusted to it, but go into the whole world with the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. ... The churches at home should never forget that there is no other way of winning souls for the Church and keeping them with it than the faithful and diligent use of the divinely ordained means of grace”* (# 22).

Finally, as ambassadors for Christ, we can make our homes Christian homes, where husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and children love Jesus, their Savior, and strive to live according to His Word. God says to parents: **“You, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord”** (Ephesians 6:4). Jesus’ apostles began their work in Jerusalem where they were before they went out into the world. So too our mission work begins at home with our own families and in our own circles. This means that we learn to confess our sins to one another, and forgive one another, as the apostle Paul wrote: **“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you”** (Ephesians 4:32), **“bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. ... Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord”** (Colossians 3:13-16).

## Questions

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1. Whom does the Holy Spirit use to carry out His work of spreading the Gospel?
2. In what way are Jesus' apostles still spreading the Gospel today?
3. What can you do to help in the work of spreading the Gospel?
4. What are some of the gifts needed for the spreading of the Gospel?
5. In what way is every Christian an ambassador for Christ?
6. Why is it important for Christians to live like Christians each day?
7. Why are Christians called epistles or letters that people can read?
8. Which persons should be chosen as Christian pastors and teachers?
9. How can we support those who are called to special work in the Church?
10. What is the only way in which persons can become Christians?
11. How can Christians do mission work in their own homes?