

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 1, 2009**

THE FREEDOM OF FORGIVENESS

Psalm 32:1-7

If I were to ask you to make a list of the things that are absolutely essential for a person to survive – those things we cannot do without to sustain human life, you would probably come up with a list that includes air (or oxygen), food, water, and shelter. Some of us might want to add things like chocolate or caffeine, TV, the internet, a cell phone, an Ipod, and maybe even a government bailout. But the real essentials, the material things without which we could not survive, are few in number.

I want to suggest that in the realm of relationships, there are some essentials as well, things without which we cannot really live. These are things without which we can never experience the fullness of life for which God created us. What is on this list?

- Jesus. Of course, He is not a thing but a person. And not just any person, but the Son of God and the Savior of the world. Only through faith in Him and His saving work can we be made right with God, and become part of His family and citizens of His kingdom.
- Love. Life without love misses the point of life. We were made by God to love and to be loved. Read 1 Corinthians 13 for a refresher on the value and importance of love.
- Grace. It is God's unmerited favor or kindness, given to undeserving sinners. It is the only way of salvation, "for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is God's grace that saves us. It is God's grace that keeps us. It is God's grace that has brought us safe this far, and God's grace will lead us home (John Newton, *Amazing Grace*). All of us are recipients of God's grace at every moment of our existence. Without it – without grace – life would be unbearable.
- Forgiveness.

Like love and grace, forgiveness is something we all need. It is an essential ingredient in life. Why? Because there is not a single one of us who has not done things we ought not to have done. Not a single one of us has not left undone things we ought to have done. In the things we have done (that we shouldn't have done) and in the things we have failed to do (that we should have done), all of us stand guilty before God. All of us are in need of forgiveness. From God. And from one another. From anyone and everyone we have hurt or offended.

The thing about forgiveness is that we cannot receive it until we are willing to admit that we need it. We cannot experience it until we acknowledge that we are sinners. St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*: "My sin was all the more incurable because I did not think myself a sinner." Your sins may not be the same as my sins, but we are all sinners. If you ask: "Are we sinners because we sin? Or do we sin because we are sinners?" the answer is yes(!). Actually, the theological answer, the biblical answer, is that we sin because in our fallen

condition it is our nature to sin. We sin – we do things we ought not to do, and we fail to do things we ought to do – because we are sinners. From the moment of our conception, every one of us has been infected with the sin virus, which taints every thing we do. It is true in my life. And it is true in yours.

As a result, we need forgiveness, or else it is all over for us. The good news – and it *is* good news – is that God is a forgiving God. Listen to what the Bible says in Psalm 130, when the psalm writer cried out to the Lord “out of the depths” of despair and guilt:

“If You, O LORD, kept a record of sins,
O Lord, who could stand? (Answer: No one.)
But with You there is forgiveness.”
- Psalm 130:3-4a

With God there is forgiveness. No matter what it is that you or I may have done, there is forgiveness with God. A British novelist and confirmed atheist (Marghanita Laski) once wrote: “What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness. I have nobody to forgive me.”

You see, everybody needs forgiveness – atheists, agnostics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, animists, wiccans, and polytheists, as well as Christians. But so many people don’t know where to find it. Or they deny that they need it. Everybody needs forgiveness. And the message of the Bible is that with God, there is forgiveness.

Listen to Psalm 103, where David says:

“The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger, abounding in love.
He will not always accuse,
Nor will He harbor His anger forever.
He does not treat us as our sins deserve
Or repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is His love for those who fear Him.
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”
- Psalm 103:8-12

For all who need it – which is all of us – forgiveness is available from God. Listen to how John explains it in 1 John 1:8-9: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

If we confess our sins – if we own up to the things we’ve done and the things we’ve left undone, if we agree with God that He is right and we are wrong, and turn away from our sins

(which is what it means to repent) – God promises to forgive our sins and to make us clean on the inside. In our hearts. And, friends, never forget that God keeps His promises.

Confession plus repentance equals forgiveness. And remember this, too: The confession of sin must be followed by the forsaking of sin. Forgiveness is not a license to keep on doing the same things or living the same way in disobedience to God and His will. The confession of sin that God desires is accompanied by a heart of repentance and humble surrender to Him.

If you want to see someone who desperately needed forgiveness in his life, and experienced the blessing of being forgiven, look at David. He was the King of Israel. “He had distinguished himself as a man of God, as a composer of psalms, as a faithful shepherd, as a valiant warrior on the battlefield, and as a leader of his people” (Swindoll, *David*, page 180). But David’s sin got him into a royal mess, with devastating consequences in his own life, in the life of his family and that of the nation.

It is most likely that the backdrop for David’s testimony to the blessing of forgiveness in Psalm 32, like his prayer of confession in Psalm 51, was his sin of adultery with the beautiful Bathsheba, his attempts to cover it up, which led to his complicity in the death of Bathsheba’s husband Uriah, and then Nathan the prophet’s bold confrontation of the king with his sin (see 2 Samuel 11-12).

Though he was living a lie, trying his best to hide his sin, it would take a heavy toll on him. Sin will do that, if it is not dealt with and resolved. How did his guilt affect his life? There were sleepless nights. Fatigue. Memories that haunted him. Loss of appetite. A rupture in his relationship with God. He felt the heaviness of God’s hand upon him (Psalm 32:4). Here is David’s testimony in *The Living Bible*: “There was a time when I wouldn’t admit what a sinner I was. But my dishonesty made me miserable and filled my days with frustration. All day and all night Your hand was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water on a (hot and) sunny day until I finally admitted my sins to You and stopped trying to hide them” (32:3-4). “The pressure,” it says in *The Message*, “never let up. All the juices of (David’s) life dried up.”

Not a pretty picture, is it? But maybe you have known that pain and burden in your own life. I don’t know, maybe that is where you are today – right now – in your life. It is not a good place to be.

But, like David, you don’t have to stay there. David discovered the freedom of forgiveness when he came clean and confessed his sins to the Lord. Listen to his testimony in verse 5:

“Then I acknowledged my sin to You
And did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’ –
And You forgave the guilt of my sin.”

Do you hear that? Adultery, deception, denial, murder – we are talking about some serious sin here. And what did God do? He forgave it all. In His magnificent mercy and grace, He said: “I will not hold your sins against you.”

No sin is too big. And no sin is too small. For all who turn to Him with hearts of repentance and faith, the redeeming grace of Christ covers it all. It covered all of David’s sins. And it covers yours and mine.

When he finally experienced the unfettered freedom of God’s forgiveness, how did David respond? He said:

“Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven,
Whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the one whose sin
The LORD does not count against him (or her)
And in whose spirit is no deceit.”
- Psalm 32:1-2

Blessed. Blessed are the forgiven. That includes you. Or, it *can* include you, if you, like David, will take the step of honest and humble confession of your sin, turn away from it in repentance, and trust in the provision God has made for your forgiveness in the death of Christ for you. If you need God’s forgiveness in your life, I urge you in the name of Jesus to turn to Him, as David says in verse 6, while He may be found. The day will come when it will be too late for each one of us. Don’t wait until then. And don’t ever think that you can hide your sin from God. Though no one else may know, God does. And the sin we harbor in our hearts grieves His heart. As it says in Isaiah 55:6:

“Seek the LORD while He may be found.
Call on Him while He is near.
Let the wicked forsake their ways
And the unrighteous their thoughts.
Let them turn to the LORD, and He will have mercy on them,
And to our God, for He will freely pardon.”

Forgiveness doesn’t wipe out all the consequences of our sins. Sin has ripple effects, and sometimes those ripples affect whole families, whole churches, whole generations and even nations. Those consequences may be more painful than we can imagine. But, as David discovered, forgiveness does bring freedom. To both the forgiven and the forgiver.

Let me wrap up this message with a story told by a pastor named George. George’s parents were married 60 years ago, in 1949. They divorced in 1958. It may not have been the only reason, but there was an extramarital affair that contributed to the divorce. George didn’t find out for years that his dad remarried after the divorce. In 1976, God used George and his wife Ellen to lead his stepmother, Betty, to faith in Christ. It was something they thought would never happen. But the Lord did it. And He gave George and Ellen the privilege of being a part of it.

A couple years later, Betty (George's stepmom) came up to him after an event at their church one Sunday evening and said: "George, I need to say something to you."

"What is it?" George asked.

"I want you to forgive me," she said.

"For what?"

She said: "You know."

And George did know.

After they talked a bit, she said to George: "I need to do one other thing. I need to tell your mom. I need to ask your mom to forgive me." And she continued: "I'd like to do it tonight."

George called his mom and asked if it would be OK for Betty to come over and talk. You have to understand that there had been no civil words spoken between George's mom and stepmom for 20 years. But George's mom said: "Yes, I will speak with her. I will. Bring her over."

George went with her, and when they walked through the door the two women fell into each other's arms. Betty said: "Mary, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

Mary (George's mom) said: "I forgive you."

And George thought to himself: "I am watching a miracle. I am watching something that can only be explained by the grace of Jesus."

Friends, forgiveness is a miracle. A miracle of the grace of Jesus.

Forgiveness brings freedom. Just ask David. Being forgiven brings freedom. Just ask Betty. Forgiving others brings freedom, too. Just ask Mary.

Blessed are the forgiven. Blessed are the forgivers. Be blessed. And be a blessing to others. Let it be so in us, to the praise and glory of God. Amen.