

“Forgiveness!” (1 John 1:8-9) Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2010

One day, Frederick the Great was inspecting the Berlin jail. As he walked through the corridors, several inmates sought his mercy, but each time he heard the same sob story: how they really were innocent, how there had been a miscarriage of justice, and on and on and on. Needless to say, the king was not impressed! In fact, by the end of his visit, he was in a pretty foul mood. And just then, he happened to see an inmate sitting quietly in his cell. “You there!” the king shouted, “Why are you in jail?” “For armed robbery, Your Majesty.” “And I suppose you, too, are an innocent victim of circumstances?” “No, Your Majesty. I am guilty and I deserve my punishment.” What?! The king could hardly believe his ears! He was so amazed by the man’s honesty – and pleased – that he turned to the warden and said, “Here now! Release this rascal immediately! We can’t have him corrupting all the fine innocent people in here.” The warden did as he was told, and the prisoner went on his way – went on his way scot-free!

That’s not the way it usually works in life, is it? Pretend you’re okay when you’re not, and you stay in jail; admit that you’re not okay, and you get out of jail free. No, that’s not the way it usually works at all! But that’s exactly the way it works in our relationship with God. In fact, that’s exactly the point of our text: **“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”**

This verse is familiar, of course. We hear it repeated in church week after week. Yet, the wisdom it contains is so deep and the hope it offers is so powerful that we will never exhaust its spiritual riches. As we begin the season of Lent, this is a good time to explore these riches – explore them more deeply. That is what I would like to do this evening. Mulling over this verse phrase by phrase, listening for what God says to us through it, we will discover a wealth of encouragement and motivation – just what we need to get Lent off to a good start!

So first, we begin with a wise observation: **“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves...”** And that’s true, isn’t it? I’m sure we all agree it’s true – at least, in theory. Even so, I’m sure we also agree that even though it’s true, that doesn’t make owning up to our sins any easier. What comes more naturally is covering up – acting as if **“we have no sin.”**

Yes, that’s what comes naturally. And it begins so young! Case in point: take this children’s sermon where the pastor wanted to talk about forgiveness. He never quite got there. And why? Because he started out asking the kids, “How many of you ever sin?” How many of you ever sin? As you might guess, none of them raised their hands. So he rephrased the question: “How many of you ever do things you’re not supposed to do?” Still none of them raised their hands. Frustrated, he asked, “You mean none of you ever do anything wrong?” [*Fold arms; shake head*] And that was that! They weren’t about to admit they did

anything wrong! Not in front of God, their parents, and everyone else! No way! And, of course, the more the kids denied it, the more the congregation laughed – especially the parents – because they all knew the truth. These kids weren't deceiving anyone but themselves!

Still, covering up comes naturally, doesn't it? For children it does. For teenagers it does. Even for adults. We never really outgrow it. In fact, by the time we're adults, we can develop a whole repertoire of defenses, excuses, and rationalizations that are very useful for covering up. These include...

- X "Everybody else does it."
- X "Times are different now."
- X "Mustn't be narrow-minded."
- X "My situation's different."
- X "How can this be wrong when it feels so right?"
- X "It's such a little sin. What harm can it do?"

And on and on and on! Yes, there are many ways to cover up. Some can sound quite persuasive. But even so, the fact remains, **"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves..."**

For starters, **"we deceive ourselves"** if we think it makes a lick of difference whether we consider something right or wrong. God alone determines that. God alone makes the rules. And God has spelled them out in His Word.

Also, **"we deceive ourselves"** if we think it makes a lick of difference whether everybody else is doing something. Everybody else is not God. If He has forbidden something, He has good reasons for it. Majority rule does not apply!

And **"we deceive ourselves"** if we think it makes a lick of difference whether we think a sin is little – too little to do any harm. How can we determine that? Who are we to say? Can we see as clearly as God can what harm a "little" sin might do? You know, little can still be lethal! A cancer cell is little, but think what happens when it multiplies. An AIDS virus is little, but think what happens when it spreads. The same with E. coli, Salmonella, MRSA. Little, little, little – but they can still be lethal! And more to the point: what would we think of someone who ignored these lethal "beauties" just because they were little? What would we think of someone who considered them "no big deal"? We'd say they were foolish – at the very least! We'd say they were deceiving themselves. And the same is true when people ignore sin, excuse sin, cover it up, or rationalize it away. **"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."**

Frankly, whatever its shape or size, there's only one effective way to deal with sin, and that is to confess it! Face the facts, however uncomfortable. Call the sin a sin. Own up to whatever we've done wrong, and repent of it – trusting that **"if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."**

Now, doing this takes moral courage. Sometimes it takes a lot of moral courage. But what else can truly set us free? Nothing but forgiveness can lift the burden of guilt from our hearts. Nothing but divine mercy can bring inner healing and peace. Nothing but the power of grace can rid us of shame, restore self-respect, and help us move beyond whatever we've done. That is what we need, and that is what we'll receive "***if we confess our sins.***" That is the promise in our text: "**If we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**"

Think of that! He will forgive and cleanse! He will pardon and purify! And what a difference that can make in our lives! For when we confess our sins, God doesn't just let us off the hook. *Okay, you can go this time, but I won't forget what you've done.* If that were the case, we would still have reason to feel guilt and shame. But no! In addition to letting us off the hook, God gives us a fresh start. He consigns our sins to eternal forgetfulness, and He looks upon us as pure. *Sin? I don't remember any sin! I choose to see you as totally innocent.* We are free to stand before God with head held high. We are free to try again.

Picture it this way. When we sin, we are like children playing in the mud when our Father specifically told us not to. Confession is going to our Father in all our muddiness, admitting that we have done wrong. And God's response? He not only lets us off the hook without punishing us for our disobedience, but He takes us inside, scrubs away all the mud and grime and filth, and then He puts new clothing on us – fresh, clean clothing. To God, what's past is past, forgiven and forgotten. As for us, we've got a fresh start. "**If we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**"

And how can God be so forgiving? We all know the reason. It's not that our sins don't matter. It's that we matter more – matter so much more that whatever it took to reconcile us to Himself, God was willing to do! Suffer the consequences for our sins? God was willing! Bear the punishment in our place? God was willing! Become one of us to free us from guilt and shame? God was willing! He did just that in and through Jesus Christ. We all know the verse, "**God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.**" Think what that actually meant! It meant sharing our weakness, temptations, and troubles. It meant rejection, abuse, humiliation. It meant dying on a cross and shedding His innocent blood to pay the awful price of sin. And He paid it. He willingly paid it. He willingly paid it in full. When Jesus cried out, "**It is finished,**" He meant what He said. All our guilt is finished. All our shame is finished. We can leave it at the foot of the cross and walk away scot-free. It's the blood of Christ, His sacrifice on the cross, that makes the promise sure: "**If we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**"

Stanley Tan tells how, years ago, a "Parliament of Religion" was held in Chicago in connection with the World's Fair. At this Parliament, all the great religions of

the world were represented, and in those less politically correct times, theologians from each zealously proclaimed the superior benefits of their own philosophy. Then Dr. Joseph Cook arose to speak for Christianity. "Here is Lady Macbeth's hand," he said, "stained with the foul murder of Duncan. See her as she walks through the halls and corridors of her palace. Hear her as she cries in despair, 'Out, damned spot! Out, I say! Will these hands ne'er be made clean?'" Then turning to those seated on the platform, he asked, "Can any of you who are so anxious to propagate your religious systems offer any cleansing...for the sin and guilt of Lady Macbeth's crime?" Silence. Oppressive silence filled the room. Then Joseph Cook concluded, "Only the blood of Christ...can purge the conscience from dead works to serve the living God!"

During this season of Lent, we will look at many aspects of our faith. But surely, this promise of forgiveness is the foundation of our faith and its greatest blessing. There is no reason to ignore sin, excuse sin, cover it up, or rationalize it away. God invites us to come to Him with our sins and let Him give us a fresh start. The promise is sure: **"If we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."**