

Some years ago, I ran across a book called *The Grinning Catechism*.¹ Like Luther’s Catechism, it was filled with religious questions and answers. But unlike Luther’s Catechism...well, let me give you an example:

- Question: *What must you do to be forgiven?*
- Answer: *Sin.*

Now, to most of *us* that’s funny. At least, it’s obvious. But to many these days, it presents a dilemma, for while they like the idea of being forgiven, they don’t like admitting that they sin – that is, that they do things they shouldn’t be doing, and should feel ashamed of doing, and need to stop doing a.s.a.p.! So how do you enjoy forgiveness without admitting that you sin? You see the dilemma!

And you see the dilemma for pastors, too. If we preach on forgiveness in general, that goes over well. It’s nice, it’s positive, it makes people feel good! But if we dare suggest something specific needs forgiveness – a specific sin – that’s a whole different ball game! In fact, these days there are very few commandments we can preach on that won’t put someone’s nose out of joint. The one about honoring your father and your mother, that’s still pretty safe. And the one about not stealing, it’s okay if you don’t talk about taxes or tithing. But as for the others – like not letting anything be more important in your life than God, or not misusing God’s name; like keeping the Sabbath, respecting the sanctity of life or the sanctity of marriage; like not slandering others or distorting the truth, and not hankering after things that are not yours to have – when you get down to specifics, let’s just say the most common reaction isn’t repentance. It’s more likely to be resentment – with a good dose of rationalization thrown in. You know the drill: “*Times are different now, and everyone else is doing it, and what difference does it make? Besides, the Bible is so complicated, and no one is perfect, and ‘God is love,’*” and (if none of those excuses work) “*remember, we are forgiven.*” So you see what I mean about the dilemma! In an age of cafeteria religion, where many pick and choose which rules to follow, and would rather *feel* good than *be* good, talking about forgiveness of *sins* is a problem. Forgiveness in general – that’s okay! Forgiveness of something specific – not so much!

Now, this would just be a little dilemma if sins didn’t make any difference. But, of course, a sin wouldn’t be a sin if it didn’t make a difference; God doesn’t make up rules out of thin air. A sin is a sin because it does harm – to us or other people, to society, or the world at large. The harm may be obvious or may not be. It may be physical, mental, or spiritual. It may have immediate consequences or future ones. But bottom line: *sin does harm*. It certainly harms our relationship with God. Ultimately, it could be spiritually fatal. So that’s why God calls a sin a sin. And ignoring it, redefining it, or rationalizing it won’t change that.

¹ *Schmunzelkatechismus* by Gisbert Kranz, Sankt Ulrich Verlag (2005)

What's needed is repentance. That first of all. Recognize the sin is a sin, and either stop doing what you shouldn't be doing or start doing what you should. What's needed first is repentance. But that's not all. Simply changing our behavior doesn't deal with what we've already done. To get past our sins and be free to move on, we need something more. We need the *forgiveness* of our sins.

And what difference will that make? Obviously, forgiveness cannot *undo* what we've already done. Nothing can. But what forgiveness *can* do is remove the burden of our sin and free us of our guilt. It can heal what is broken and wipe the slate clean. It can make us right with God and set us on the right path. In short, forgiveness can pick us up, dust us off, and give us a fresh new start.

And isn't that what we need most of all? Actually, it's pretty powerful, this gift of forgiveness! Getting free from past mistakes, cleansed of inner filth, healed of old wounds, and redeemed from destructive behaviors – what could be better? What could feel better? Forgiveness adds such richness to life! It's indispensable to personal growth. And on top of that, forgiveness is a great spiritual motivator. I mean, it's one thing to be told you should be thankful, but when you've been let off the hook and had the slate wiped clean, it's a lot easier to feel thankful! Likewise with mercy. We all know we're supposed to be merciful, but when you've been spared the consequences of your actions and had someone give you another chance, you'll feel more like showing mercy yourself. And for that matter, how about love? It's one thing to be told to love, but when you've really experienced love – when the very One who could judge you and condemn you takes the punishment for sin in your place, and does it just because you mean so much to Him – well that's a great motivator, too. In fact, the more deeply we experience forgiveness, the more we'll respond with love. Jesus says as much in our text. Those who are forgiven much, love much.

All of which sounds great, doesn't it? But this brings us back to our dilemma. If we don't take sin seriously, forgiveness won't mean much. And if forgiveness doesn't mean much, we won't experience its benefits. Hearts cannot be healed that don't feel the brokenness of sin. Souls cannot be lightened that don't feel the burden of guilt. For that, we must see our sins as sins and repent of them. That is, we must see them as so wrong that wish we had never done them and desperately want to be rid of them. Only then are we ready to *experience* forgiveness and truly enjoy its benefits.

For a perfect example, let's look at the scene in our text. Right in the middle of a dinner party, a woman with a rather unsavory track record makes a spectacle of herself by kissing Jesus' feet, pouring perfume on them, then drying them with her hair. Now, most of us would be put off by that: "*Whoa, lady! You're going a little overboard!*" But Jesus reacts with perfect calm, because he knows *why* she is doing it, *why* she is so overwhelmed with gratitude and love. She has experienced forgiveness – and not just forgiveness in general; forgiveness of specific sins. When she first met Jesus, she was painfully aware how many sins

she had committed and how bad they were. Her sins had ruined her life and harmed others. She had earned people's contempt, not to mention divine punishment. She owned up to it all specifically. And she asked Jesus to forgive it all specifically. And Jesus did forgive it all specifically – down to tiniest, ugliest detail. The Son of God, her future Judge, the only One whose opinion ultimately matters, said to this woman, **“Your sins are forgiven.”** And in that moment, she *experienced* forgiveness! She experienced it down to the very depths of her soul. Cleansing, release, healing, a fresh start – she experienced it here [*head*] and here [*heart*]. Hence, the huge reaction! Hence, the overwhelming need to show her gratitude and love. To Jesus, this is obvious. This woman's behavior just proves that forgiveness has hit home. But to his bewildered host, it's not obvious, so Jesus explains: **“Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.”**

Beautiful! But now, let's compare this biblical scene with a more modern scenario and ask ourselves whether the effect would be the same. What if this woman had come to Jesus with her confession and He had told her, *“Don't worry about those sins. They're no big deal! Times are different now, and everyone else is doing it, and what difference does it make? Besides, the Bible is so complicated, and no one is perfect, and ‘God is love,’ and...oh...well, you're forgiven.”* Hard to imagine? Not for some people! But what *is* hard to imagine is how such “forgiveness” would make much difference in her life. And that's really the point! To be sure, there is no way we can number and repent of every single sin. That's why we need to count on forgiveness in general. But we must not make that an excuse to ignore our sins or not take them seriously, much less redefine them or rationalize them away. The more specific we get in our repentance, the more joy we'll experience in forgiveness, and the more motivated we will feel to show gratitude, mercy, and love. That is what happens when forgiveness hits home.

Of course, it isn't easy repenting of specific sins and accepting forgiveness for them. If it were easy, everyone would do it. But is it worth it? You bet! And to see the advantages, let's think of the choice in more down to earth terms. Imagine you've just been working out at the gym, and man, do you need a shower! The trouble is, when you get to the locker room there's no hot water. It's either a cold shower or no shower, your choice. Now, you hate cold showers, but you also hate to stink. So which will it be? And just to make the choice more interesting, let's imagine someone encourages you to take the easier choice. *“Why worry about stinking? That's such a judgmental term anyway! Think of yourself as having ‘an alternative fragrance.’ Times are different now. Everyone stinks a little. And what difference does it make? Besides, hygiene is so complicated! And remember, God loves stinkers, too.”* Now, all of this sounds persuasive. You're tempted to skip the cold shower. And you almost do – until you remember one small but important fact: *I stink! And if I skip the shower, I will continue to stink. Even if I try to ignore it, redefine it, or rationalize it away, I will stink. Everyone around me will know that I stink. Even if they say nothing, I will*

know that I stink. And do I really want to go through the day painfully aware that I stink? No! So very gingerly you turn on the water. Brrr, is it cold! But the shock only lasts a second. It doesn't take that long to wash away the sweat and grime. And when you're done, how much better you feel! You're clean! Nothing to worry about now! In fact, as you dry yourself off, you wonder why you even considered *not* showering! Sure, it was hard at first, but it was so worthwhile...and it sure beats stinking!

Enough said? We all know the Scripture: **“If we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** Now, this does apply to general confession and absolution, of course, but if we really want to *experience* forgiveness, really want to *experience* inner cleansing, the more honest, specific, and heartfelt our confession is, the better.

By the way, one practice that will help with this is daily examination of our conscience. It's an old Lutheran tradition, at the end of the day, to go over the things we have done or left undone, confess them, repent of them, and ask God's forgiveness and His help to do better tomorrow. Very simple. Very worthwhile. Yes, it can be hard owning up to our sins – kind of like taking a cold shower. But it's not like God is going to say, *“No, I won't forgive you or help you do better.”* Jesus died to forgive our sins. He has promised us His help. **“He who has promised is faithful, and He will do it.”**

So the ball is in our court. Others may choose to ignore their sins, redefine them, or rationalize them, but wouldn't we rather be *rid* of our sins and our guilt? We can be, and what a difference it will make – just like it did for the woman who showed Jesus such gratitude and love! Life can be better, we can be better, and the path forward is clear! **“If we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** Amen.