

The Difficult Sayings of Jesus #11 -- How Do We Know We Are Forgiven?

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[0 : 00] Truly remarkable passage of scripture from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and it is oozing with comfort and assurance, and I do not know of anything that the human heart needs more desperately than that.

We have often stated that forgiveness from God is the greatest human need and the most priceless possession on the planet. Recently, we noted the obvious differences between the availability of forgiveness prior to the death of Christ and forgiveness after the death of Christ.

There is a huge difference, and both of these positions are taught in the New Testament. Obtaining God's forgiveness was clearly a conditional factor under the Mosaic Law and in the Sermon on the Mount.

There, in crystal clear language, our Lord made the statement, If you do not forgive others their transgressions, neither will your Heavenly Father forgive you.

There isn't any way that you can escape the performance aspect of that. Our Lord makes it very, very clear that our being forgiven of God is dependent upon our forgiveness of others.

[1 : 27] I don't think there is any possible way of disputing that. But then, when you come over to Paul's letter, such as what we just read, and what we will be looking at later, he talks about having been forgiven, past tense, all trespasses.

And at first glance, it's difficult to see, how do you square those? One gets the impression that what the Apostle Paul is saying is that God has made a kind of, and for lack of a better term, I'll just call it a blanket, a blanket of forgiveness available to those who are in Christ.

And he covers us with that. It is total. It is complete. It is entire. It leaves nothing out. And it says nothing about our need to forgive others.

Although, we are told that we are to be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us.

So, yes, indeed, we who are believers are very definitely called upon to forgive others who wrong us. But in no way, shape, or form is that connected to our personal salvation.

[2 : 49] And yet, it's hard to escape any other conclusion based on what is given there in the Sermon on the Mount. We'll not go back to those references, but they are available on the CD that was produced and made available last week, and copies of it can be obtained today for anyone who wants them.

We were in the Gospels, and there is no question that there is a clear-cut difference in these presentations. And for some people, as I pointed out, that doesn't present a problem at all because their view is, well, this is what Jesus said here in the Sermon on the Mount.

This is what Paul said over here. You can forget about what Paul said, but we want to get it from the real authority. We'll take what Jesus said. You can have what Paul said. I'm not interested in that. That's a big, big mistake.

And it is because of that mistake that much of Christendom has been weakened in ways that I cannot begin to describe. And what I base that statement on is the fact that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God.

And what the Apostle Paul wrote under inspiration is just as much the Word of God as what Jesus Christ said under inspiration.

[4 : 03] Now, I know some people will gasp at that. Because they say, it looks like we're making Paul and Christ equals. No, not at all. Paul does not even begin to be an equal of Christ.

No one does. But the point that needs to be made and not forgotten is this. The Bible has but one author, even though it has many writers. And what God inspired through whomever the writers were that he used to inspire, it is all the Word of God and it all comes with the same complete full authority.

We call that the plenary or the full or the complete inspiration of Scripture. No part of the Bible is more the Word of God than another part.

If God is behind it and inspired it, it all comes with equal authority. And we made the distinction that there are lots of places in the Bible that's a lot more interesting, a lot more inspiring, a lot more enjoyable, a lot more comforting to read than other parts.

But that doesn't make them somehow more God's Word or come with more authority than anything else. Bottom line is this. What the Apostle Paul said is what Jesus Christ himself inspired him to say through the Spirit of God.

[5 : 27] In the same way that he inspired Moses and Dehemiah and Ezekiel and Daniel and Luke and Paul and all the rest. It is all inspired of God.

Then that does present a problem. Because if it all comes with equal authority, it appears that we've got a real difficulty here. And the difficulty is resolved only, I think, when you understand what is afoot dispensationally.

In other words, the law of Moses under the Old Covenant was in force. It was given to the Jew exclusively, never given to the Gentile.

But it placed the Jew under certain stipulations, regulations, requirements, etc. It involved the sacrificial system and all of the temple services and everything.

That was all part and parcel of the Old Testament. And it is very, very much performance-based. Very much dependent upon people's behavior. However, when Christ died on that cross and uttered those immortal words, it is finished.

[6 : 43] Everything changed. Everything changed. Something incredibly dramatic happened on that cross.

That impacted the human race in a way that it will never be the same. And what it was, was that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.

That when Christ took the sin of the world, of all humanity that had ever lived or ever would live, took that upon himself and underwent the punishment that God deemed it deserved.

Everything changed. Everything changed. Everything changed. The way of access to God is now open for all in a way that it never was before.

And that, I think, was the significance also of the temple, the veil in the temple being rent from the top to the bottom. Because prior to that time, in order to approach God, who dwelt with his people in the Holy of Holies, on the mercy seat, in the Ark of the Covenant, behind the veil, in the most holy place, high priest went there once a year, not without blood, to make atonement for the sins of the people.

[8 : 06] And that was exclusively for Israel, who was targeted to be the nation that would bring light to all of the Gentiles, that is, to all of the rest of the world.

But they weren't terribly interested in doing that, and we saw they were eventually set aside, and they still remain set aside. So when that veil in the temple was rent, it made a cleavage where there had been a separation before.

Now, the way of access is open. It's just like a door that was closed has been opened. And what God is saying is, previously, before the death of Christ, the only way that God could be approached was through that mediator, the high priest, for the Jew, in the holy place, once a year.

Very specified, very limited, very definite, but now, now, the veil is torn in two. And the picture that is portrayed is, the way of access is open.

And Hebrews tells us that, Christ himself, has become the new and living way, that it is his flesh that is that veil. So that makes forgiveness available in a way that it was not available before.

[9 : 35] And this becomes the essence of the gospel. This is what the good news is all about. Is that everyone, whosoever will may come, you can now come to God through Jesus Christ, on your own, without any mediary, because Christ is the mediator.

That is indeed good news. While this is not a problem for many Christians to see this distinction that is made here, because they just defer, they say, well, if you have to choose between Paul or Christ, I'll take Christ.

No, no, no, no. You don't have to choose. It isn't, do you go with Christ, or do you go with Paul? You go with both. But you go with them in accordance with the program that they were involved in, and that they were addressing at the time.

Christ was a minister to the circumcision, to confirm the promises that were given to the fathers. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles. Christ came exclusively to Israel, but for the whole world.

And Paul was raised up to be the apostle to the Gentiles. That's everybody else who is not a Jew.

[10 : 55] Even noting and resolving what appears to be contradictory, but clearly is not, a valid question then remains, and this is the one I mentioned was submitted to me in writing, So how do we know we have been forgiven by God?

And forgiveness by God, of course, is inextricably coupled with the security of the believer, because you cannot have one without the other. Assurance that you are saved is synonymous to assurance that you have been forgiven.

And herein is a continuing kind of problem, because we mortals have this thing embedded in our psyche that we just cannot seem to get rid of.

And that is a merit system, a performance-based system. And the reason it is so embedded in us is because that's the way it works in virtually all of life.

You do good, you are rewarded. You do bad, you are punished. That's logical. That's consistent. Everybody's familiar with it. From the time you learned this when you were about two years old, and a phrase you kept hearing over and over and over from your mother and father, no, no, no, no, no, no, how many times do we have to say no, no?

[12 : 23] And we start growing up with that. There are certain things you are not supposed to do, and if you do them, you are going to get in trouble. That's the performance-based system that is so embedded in our psyche that when a subject like grace comes along, it just really throws us because it is contrary to everything we've been about and every way that we've functioned because grace has nothing to do with merit.

In fact, grace derives its meaning from a lack of merit, and that's puzzling. That's puzzling.

It does not fit the model that most of us, perhaps all of us, started developing when we were at a very young age.

So we just tend to bring that right over into our relationship with God, and aren't there places that seem to indicate that? Just as the conditional forgiveness that we've been talking about, that's very performance-based.

Very performance. In fact, as you go through the Sermon on the Mount, which we will do, we are not going to take the Sermon on the Mount verse by verse, but we are going to skip through it and take more of the, several of the more troubling passages, such as, if anyone asks of you to borrow from you, give it to him freely, and don't expect it in return, don't expect to be paid back.

[14 : 13] Would you like to operate under those rules today? Why not? And if anyone asks you to go with him a mile, go two miles. And such, we find these things in the Sermon on the Mount and we just swallow hard and look at them and we say, boy, do I really have to do that?

And if not, why not? After all, it's what Christ said. While we are talking about this subject of forgiveness, we need to go to a familiar passage and, well, let's go there first.

It's 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians 5, and it says forth in a few verses what I've been talking about and says it so much better.

2 Corinthians 5, and we'll have to begin with verse 14. For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died.

And he died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and rose again on their behalf. Therefore, from now on, we recognize no man according to the flesh, even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him thus no longer.

[15 : 44] Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. The old things passed away, behold, new things have come. Now, all these things are from God.

who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. Namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

A good question could be asked here. Does this really mean what it says? did he reconcile the whole world to himself?

If language means anything, I think we have no choice but to take it at face value. After all, who all of the world was involved in the fall of Adam and the consequences that ensued from it.

Every last living one of us. And the proof of that, that we are all children of Adam and that we all partake of the consequences of Adam is our death.

[17 : 06] Our physical death. That's proof positive. If there's anybody who doesn't think that they are a child of Adam and have not been infected with the sin nature, you just wait.

One of these days you're going to take your last breath. And that will be proof positive that you are a child of Adam. The wages of sin is death. Now, if Christ, and let me just inject this, although I don't want to go there, this will help to explain why even believers die.

We are told to have eternal life in Christ, yet we die physically. And according to Romans 8, that's because our spirit, our soul, has been redeemed, our bodies have not been redeemed, that's why we still age, that's why our bodies will still see corruption, that's why we still die physically, because we await the redemption of our bodies, according to Romans 8.

Our spirit has been redeemed, in that Jesus Christ paid the ultimate price to redeem the entire human race. How much of the race was lost?

All of it. How much of the race did Christ redeem? All of it. He left no one unredeemed. That's the burden of this verse.

[18 : 30] Reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed to us the word of reconciliation. reconciliation. Now, this does get a little sticky, so I'm going to give you the Wiseman interpretation of this with fair warning.

This is my best understanding of the issue, and I don't claim to have all the light on it that I would like. I don't have all the light on anything in the Bible that I would like.

But I see here what I think is an undeniable double tier, or two tiers, of redemption. And the first is a general redemption that responds to the general fall of all humanity.

When Christ died, he did redeem every single human being, every member of the human race who would ever live. This is not, and I know there are some who are quick to jump on this, this is not a teaching or endorsement of universalism that says eventually by and by everybody is going to make it to heaven.

That is not what we are teaching and that is not what the passage is teaching. It is teaching, however, that when Christ died for the sins of all humanity, he made every single human being savable.

[19 : 58] It doesn't mean everybody is saved. It does mean everybody is capable of being saved. saved. It makes no difference how vile a sinner's sin may be.

In either quantity or quality, the grace of God is even greater and is able to respond to that.

In other words, no human being can out-sin the grace of God. No human being can sin in such a way that God could look at him and say, now there's one that got away because there's no way that I could save him.

He's just too wicked, too evil, too vile. My grace has its limits, you know. No, no. No, no. His grace has no limits.

His grace has no limits. Two classes of people are very, very difficult to reach with the gospel. One believes they're too bad to be saved and God wouldn't want anything to do with them because they've done a lot of nasty stuff in their background.

[21 : 06] And the other person is the one who thinks he's too good to be saved because he's really a nice person and God should be pleased with him just the way he is because after all he is, why shouldn't God be?

Both of those kind of people are really difficult to reach. The one who can be reached with the gospel is the one who has faced the truth about himself.

And you know, you know where you stand with God or where you don't. And when you are willing to come to grips with the reality of that and do what the scriptures call repent, which means change your mind, then salvation is available for you as well.

Let's read on with this passage. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and I take it that this involves primarily Adam's transgression.

When Adam sinned, everything came crashing down with him, because Adam had already been installed by God as the federal head of the human race and of all creation.

[22 : 27] temptation. And when Adam succumbed to temptation, morally, everything fell with him, including the animal kingdom, the vegetable kingdom, the thorns and thistles, everything became part of the fall, and all of humanity, because we are all children of Adam.

now, Christ's death for man's sin eliminates Adam's transgression.

And I believe what the text is saying is that none of us will be held accountable to God for Adam's transgression. Nobody will ever be able to say, it wasn't my fault, Adam did it, and I just got this from Adam.

We are all accountable, we are all responsible, moral human beings before God. That means because Jesus Christ paid the price for the whole of the human race, it is a truth that is presented to you individually, personally, for your response.

So here we have the death of Christ for human sin. What's your response to that? What do you see in that?

[23 : 57] What does that mean to you? The response can be all the way from indifference, to unbelief, to so what, to, so the Bible says Christ died for me, big deal, I didn't ask him to die for me, I don't want anybody to do me any favors, I don't need that.

I mean, there are all kinds of human responses. But when the gospel is preached, when the good news is declared, people have an opportunity to interact with the good news.

God is to come across to you. As we read on, he says in verse 20, therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ as though God were entreating through us.

We beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. And the only way, and I can read this, and I've tried to read it every way imaginable, and I've consulted the commentaries from the ancients and the recents, and I cannot see anything here other than a two-level or two-tier or a double kind of reconciliation.

And that is in verse 18 and verse 19, it is the entire world being reconciled to himself, but then when he comes down to verse 20 and says, be reconciled to God, that almost sounds like, what are you talking about?

[25 : 22] In verse 18 and 19, you told us that we have been reconciled to God, now here in verse 20 you're telling us to be reconciled to God. What is this? Are we or aren't we?

Well, yes and no. Corporately, as a member of the human race, yes, and this provides the basis for infant salvation. This is the rationale for assigning babies to heaven, babies who die before the age of accountability.

But there comes a time in the life of each of us and it's probably different for all of us when we become morally accountable and responsible to God for ourselves.

And when we do, we lose that state of innocence in which we were born, that state of reconciliation in which we were born, and we fall personally, individually, on our own sin, because of our own rebellion, our own sin, not because of Adam's, but because of mine.

And that's why we need personal, individual appropriation of forgiveness. forgiveness. That comes as an act of the will.

[26 : 45] When you receive Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, it was an intentional, deliberate act of the will. And Paul says in verse 21, he made him, this is, God made Christ, who knew no sin, to be sin on our behalf, that, and this is a purpose clause in the Greek, it means in order that, or to the end that, to the end that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

And by the way, that might does not imply any kind of possibility of it not happening. Might, as in maybe, that's not the meaning that's conveyed at all. It is so that it can be realized as a reality, and we become the righteousness of God in him.

You realize what that's saying? How righteous do you have to be for God to accept you?

You have to be just as righteous as he is. Well, who can be that? That's the point. That's the point.

the righteousness that God accepts is not a matter of quantity. It's a matter of quality. It's what kind of righteousness do we have?

[28 : 23] Because God only traffics in one kind. That is a righteousness that lacks nothing. And if you are honest, you look at yourself, your only response ought to be, well, then, I'm sunk.

You're right. You are. We all are. We're in a world of hurt. There's no help. There's no hope. We are lost.

And that's what makes the good news, good news. It is only available for people who know and accept the reality that they are lost.

If you don't think you're lost, then this is not for you. If you don't think that you're a sinner, this is not for you.

You'll have to figure out something else. But for those of us who have faced the reality and we know that we are flawed, failed, fickle, rebellious human beings, at times our behavior embarrasses even ourselves, when you recognize that and acknowledge that and get honest with yourself, then you are a candidate.

[29 : 42] That's good news. Then you are a candidate. Because Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Paul said, the Apostle Paul who wrote one third of the New Testament says, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.

I rank right up there with the biggest of them. And he saved me. Probably a couple of reasons why a person doesn't feel forgiven.

How do we know that we have been forgiven of God? And let me say this, I don't want to try to talk anybody into thinking that they are forgiven.

or talk anybody into being assured. That's not my role. That's not my responsibility. The scriptures alone address these issues.

And if God telling you that you are forgiven is not satisfactory, what else can we do?

[30 : 52] What can be done to make it satisfactory? Do you realize what many are looking for is a feeling of forgiveness?

What would that feel like? And would you have that feeling tomorrow? Would that feeling continue if everything is pulled out from under you and you suffer some major losses?

Would you still have that feeling? Now we are emotional beings and God has constructed us that way and I can't imagine living a life without emotions and feelings because they're wonderful.

They're part of what makes life worth living but they're not dependable. And the reason they're not dependable is because what you feel is determined by what's going on in your life at the time or your perception of it.

Your feelings decide to feel the way they do because of what you are experiencing in your life at the time or your perception of it.

[32 : 10] It is feelings are always related to reality or perceived reality. Now sometimes our feelings mislead us because our perception of reality was not right.

We heard last night that one of our best friends was killed in an automobile accident. Does that affect our feelings?

Absolutely. If you were close to this person you feel a tremendous sense of loss. And you're saddened by it, grieving.

Maybe even brought to tears. Because that is your reality and you are living it and responding to it with your emotions. That's part of the human condition.

However, a couple of hours later you get a call and say, you know what, it was all a mix-up. It was a mistake. The name is the same but it's a different person.

[33 : 11] It's not your friend at all. It's someone from three counties away that you've never met. And what happens to your feelings? Well, they change immediately from sadness to elation.

And if you're like most of us, you aren't really spending a whole lot of time feeling sad for the mistaken person who was killed. You're just enjoying the feelings of relief that comes from knowing that it wasn't your best friend.

so the way we feel is determined by what's going on in our life. And it can be the same way in connection with the way you feel that God has or has not forgiven you.

Well, I don't feel forgiven. Well, some days, some days I don't have words to describe to tell you how I feel. but does that change anything that is really true?

No. No. What is real is real. What is true is true. And it's nice when our feelings coincide with it.

[34 : 19] But when they don't, don't believe your feelings. Go with the fact. There is no better assurance that we can have that we have been forgiven other than what God himself has telling us.

And here we have the righteousness of God in him. We are fully, freely forgiven forever. And we say this on the authority of God himself not because we can muster up a feeling of forgiveness.

A person might not feel forgiven for at least three reasons. Number one, they aren't. They don't feel forgiven because they're not forgiven.

They have never really dealt with the basis for forgiveness, which is coming into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and experiencing the forgiveness that he provides. forgiveness. So, if you don't feel forgiven, it might be because you're not. Because you've never really come to Christ as someone who needs to put their faith and trust in him.

[35 : 37] And the only answer for that, of course, is that you do so. Secondly, a person might not feel forgiven because they are simply untaught. They just don't have a handle on grace. even though they have really trusted Christ as their Savior, they are not grounded in the faith. They are moved by every wind of doctrine that comes along.

They are a pushover for every cult that comes down the pike. They have no teaching, no training, no basis for grounding or assurance. Little wonder that they have no feelings of assurance.

They have no basis for it. They have no thus saith the Lord. And then, this is another big one. Some people are truly forgiven and they are true believers and when they die they are going to be in heaven.

But they don't feel that way. And the reason they don't is because they know their lifestyle is displeasing to the Lord.

[36 : 43] They know they ought not to be doing the things they are doing and engaging in the things they are engaging in and they fall right back into the old performance thing again and thinking well, I'm not behaving as I ought to behave therefore, God probably doesn't love me anymore and if I ever was saved, I'm probably not saved now.

What a terribly wretched place for a person to be in. they are fearful that their lifestyle, their actions, their deeds reflect to them a reality that they aren't connected with God at all.

And what do they need to do? What's the answer for them? What's the way back? Remember the prodigal?

Luke 15, when he came to himself. He said, I will arise and I will go to my father and I will say, Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight and am no more worthy to be called your son.

Make me as one of the hired servants and the father will not even let him finish the line. he puts a ring on his finger, puts him in a robe, orders the killing of the fatted calf and it's time to celebrate.

[38 : 17] The way back is the same as it was for the prodigal. By the way, the prodigal was a son before he left.

He remained a son while he was gone and he was a son after he came back. but he had to come back with a repentant attitude and that means a changed mind.

What did he change his mind about? I want to get away from this place. I want to split from this. This is Hicksville. There's no excitement around here. There's nothing to do. I want to go out and make my fortune.

I want to live. And he went out and wasted his living on riotous living and harlots and gambling and booze and all the rest of it.

And when he hit the bottom is when he was in the pig sty down there rooting and competing with the pigs for the food that was available. And reality sunk in.

[39 : 19] And he said to himself, good grief, what have I come to? And you know what he said about the home place and about the father and about all the restrictions and all of the nonsense that caused him to leave?

He changed his mind. That's what repentance is. Maybe it would be better to say a change of heart.

Because it isn't just an intellectual thing. It is an emotional thing also. That recognizes that one is wrong. You have offended God.

How do you get back? You repent. There is rejoicing in the presence of angels over one sinner who repents. Whether you're coming for salvation or whether you're coming for restoration of fellowship, the way back is always the same.

You have to acknowledge, own up to it, take responsibility, say, it's me. I'm not blaming anybody else. It's me. And whether you're on the other side of Christ and have never come to him, or whether you are as a believer and you are not living as you know you ought to live, the way back is always the same.

[40 : 35] And God absolutely delights in anyone coming to the truth and repenting. And the reason he does is because God is a God of reality.

And this is real stuff. God traffics only in reality. So how do we know we've been forgiven? Because God himself tells us that we have the righteousness of Christ.

And there is that big old blanket of forgiveness. And that is for our judicial righteousness. That's our legal righteousness. That's our standing. That's our official righteousness before him.

And when Paul said that we might have the righteousness of God in him, that's exactly what it means. It means God imputes to you the very righteousness that is his own.

That's what makes you accepted in the beloved. Is you're not in your righteousness, you're in Christ's righteousness. That's what makes us acceptable.

[41 : 52] And that's the basis for forgiveness. Can you imagine that God receives and accepts you in the same way that he receives and accepts his own dear son?

Can you fathom that? That's exactly what it is. That's why Paul uses the phrase over and over and over again in his epistle, in Christ.

In Christ. In Christ. What does that mean? That means you are bonded to him. You are welded into Christ. You are bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh. It means that his righteousness is your righteousness.

His destiny is your destiny. His life is your life. That's what it means to be in Christ. Are you? Are you?

Would you pray with me, please? Father, this is such a bottomless theme. We can never, never plumb the depths of it.

[43 : 10] We can only, we can only rejoice in its simplicity, in its straightforwardness, and we would be the first to agree.

It sure does sound too good to be true, but we know that you cannot lie, and that you cannot lead us astray. And our heart's desire for each and every person here is that they may know the joy and the assurance of sins forgiven, because Jesus Christ is their substitute, and their faith and their trust is in him.

Not in their good intentions, not in their character, not in their membership in a church somewhere, but it's placed solely in the Lord Jesus.

And those who have their faith placed there have not only the right, but even the responsibility to rejoice and revel in your grace and your goodness and your forgiveness.

How blessed we are to know that your forgiveness knows no bounds and that your grace has no limitations. we are counting on that, and we know we can, because you said it's true.

[44 : 41] You are a God who cannot lie. And Father, if there is someone here today, a boy or a girl, man or woman who is really struggling with these issues, perhaps even filled with anxiety over their relationship to you or their lack of knowledge of it, we pray even now that in this closing moment you will simply allow them the privilege of saying, Lord Jesus, I really want you to be my Savior.

And I acknowledge my need for you. I know I cannot be what is required of me, but you have made a way for me, so that in Christ I can have all that you require, and that's what I want.

Here's my heart, and my will, and my mind, and my everything. I just want to give myself to you, I want to trust you, and I want you to take this life of mine, and do with it whatever is pleasing in your sight, and I'll be happy to cooperate.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for being the Savior that you are. In his wonderful name we pray. Amen.