

THE APOSTLES CREED

Session 6

I. "THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS"

A. At the heart of the Christian faith there is the conviction that while we were made for a relationship with God we have broken off this relationship to follow our own path through life. Our broken relationship with God is what we call sin. The problem with sin is that it makes it impossible for us to be fully human for we can only be fully human in relationship to God. The reason why the Gospel is Good News is that it announces the fact that God has made it possible for us to be reconciled to him and, thus, restored to our full humanity.

B. Genesis 3 gives us some insight into the nature of sin. The decision of the Man the Woman to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:3-6) reflects their desire to have wisdom apart from God which is, of course, impossible. The essence of sin is our desire to posit ourselves as an alternative center of creation. While we sometimes speak of "sins," it is better to speak first about sin as a condition from which sins.

C. Our broken relationship with God (sin) gives rise to patterns of living and thinking which go against the grain of creation and the grain of our genuine humanity (sins). Sin may lead to momentary satisfaction but it leads us away from God and ultimately robs us of final fulfillment. God intended that human beings should reflect something of his own goodness and beauty into the world but due to sin we only do this in a diminished and incomplete way.

D. Broken relationships are only restored through forgiveness and the Gospel announces that in Christ God has acted to both extend forgiveness to us and to reconcile us to himself. God does not forgive us because we repent and confess our sins; we are able to repent and confess our sins because God has already acted to reconcile us to himself through Christ and moves us to repentance through the Holy Spirit. Christianity only emphasizes the depth of sin because it helps us to see the depth of God's mercy and grace. It is important to have a radical notion of grace: "Grace is the gift of the triune God's love, mercy and help which he freely gives to us who, because of our sin, deserve only condemnation" (TBC, 137).

E. Christ's death and resurrection bring about an objective reconciliation between us and God (TBC, 135) while the Holy Spirit works within us so that we can accept what God has done. Through Christ and the Holy Spirit, God reconciles us to himself, forgives our sin and adopts us as his children.

F. In a very real sense, the whole of the Christian life is simply a response to what God has done for us in Christ and continues to do within us through the Holy Spirit (TBC, 136). Christ practiced forgiveness and offered himself completely to God and his pattern of life should become our pattern and can become our pattern through grace (John 13:34).

G. It is important to note that when we speak about the forgiveness of sin we are not speaking simply about pardon but also about our being freed from the effects of sin and being renewed after the image of God (Colossians 3:9-10). This helps us to see that grace is essential for the whole of the Christian life. Grace awakens us to the presence of sin in our lives. Grace imparts to us the desire to be freed from sin. Grace grants us the will to turn from our sin and turn toward Christ. Grace gives us the strength to persist in turning from sin and to grow in holiness (TBC, 139). Self-examination is an essential Christian practice in that we need to aware of our persistent serious sins, to confess them and to resist them.

H. In accepting God's forgiveness of our sin, we also receive both the power and the obligation to practice forgiveness. We practice forgiveness not in order to be "nice" but as a witness to God's grace. In his teaching on forgiveness, Jesus makes it clear that disciples should practice forgiveness because in doing so they come to resemble God (Matthew 5:43-48).

I. For Christians, the confession of sin should be a daily discipline. One of the ways that we come to knowledge of the depths of God's love is by realizing just how much we have been forgiven. We are unlikely to appreciate God's grace if we are unaware of how deeply we need it. To the extent that we attempt to evade our own sinfulness or to downplay its significance, we diminish our sense of God's forgiveness. Daily confession is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

J. The reality of God's forgiveness is the foundation of our hope. Because God's forgiveness is real and because grace does have the power to free us from sin, even in the midst of broken lives we may have hope and be confident in the fact that sin does not simply define who we are.

K. One of the things which makes the Gospel good news is the fact that it announces that sin need not determine our future. The Gospel announces the reign of grace in our lives, a reign which supplants the reign of sin.

II. "THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY"

A. The last two affirmations of the Apostles' Creed deal with the ultimate hope of the Christian faith. The Good News of the Gospel applies to both this life and the next. To be a Christian is to live a life of confident trust in God. This confident trust (itself made possible by grace) is the source of our hope that God's good purposes for us and for creation will finally triumph. The Christian hope does not offer us a series of predictions about the future but an assurance of the ultimate outcome of history: the assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39).

B. The resurrection of the dead expresses one aspect of the Christian hope. As Paul makes clear, the resurrection of the dead is an essential part of the Gospel. He says that "Christ has been raised, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (I Corinthians 15:20). In saying this he means that Christ's resurrection from the dead makes our resurrection from the dead possible.

C. In thinking about what resurrection means, we need to keep at least two things in mind. First, we need to remember that when we speak of the resurrection of the body we are speaking about the whole person. Human beings are a composite of a body and a soul and the Christian hope is not that the soul will be freed from the body but that God will restore us to eternal life as whole persons. Second, we need to remember that for creatures eternal life can only come as a gift. Eternal life is a gift which only God can give. Without the resurrection of Jesus, eternal life would not be a possibility for us.

D. While we do not have a comprehensive understanding of what the resurrection of the body will mean, we do know that God will transform our present bodies, subject to infirmity, sin and death, so that they resemble Christ's "glorious body" (Philippians 3:21). Without going into speculation, we may say that the resurrection of the body will involve the restoration of our humanity, the restoration of our relationship with God, the restoration of our relationship with other people and the restoration of our relationship with creation.

E. The resurrection of the body has significant implications for the way that we live now. Since human life is fundamentally embodied and since God intends to raise our bodies from death, we arrive at a fundamental principle of Christian life: "So glorify God in your body" (I Corinthians 6:20). We are to treat ourselves, other people and creation as both gifts from God and as having an eternal meaning because they play a part in the purposes of God.

III. "AND LIFE EVERLASTING"

A. "Resurrection of the body" and "life everlasting" are intended to make the same affirmation but to do so in slightly different ways. God will raise us to new embodied life and this life will be eternal, that is beyond sin and beyond death. Eternal life is not life that simply "lasts forever" but is life completely fulfilled in the Presence of

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION:

- What is sin and how does it affect us?
- How does God forgive us and how do we receive this forgiveness? (Note Item I. C.-F.)
- Why should the confession of sin be a daily discipline for Christians?
- Why is Jesus' resurrection significant? What does resurrection mean?
- How should faith in the resurrection influence the way in which we live now?
- What does "life everlasting" mean? Why must it be understood to have a "social" character?