

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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A FORGIVING GOD IN AN UNFORGIVING WORLD

Psalm 130:1-8

INTRODUCTION

Our Scripture reading today from Psalm 130 is one of seven “penitential psalms,” one of seven prayers of repentance or confession found in the Book of Psalms. The others are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51 (which is David’s famous prayer of confession), 102 and 143.

As the opening words of Psalm 130 suggest, it is a cry “out of the depths” of distress, a cry from the depths of a soul in anguish, because of the painful awareness and heavy weight – too burdensome to carry – of the psalm writer’s sin and guilt before God.

In this cry out of the depths we come face to face with a question that cuts to the heart of the human condition – the condition of *our* hearts. But we also discover a wonderfully liberating answer to our problem, an answer that prompts us to worship God with everything we are, everything we have, everything we know, and everything we could ever be, because of God’s all-surpassing power and goodness to us.

Let’s look together at God’s Word from Psalm 130.

A FORGIVING GOD

I was a recent seminary graduate back in 1983, preparing to preach my first sermon at the church in Downingtown, Pennsylvania, to which I had been called as an Assistant Pastor. I asked my father-in-law, an ordained Presbyterian elder, what I should preach about. He answered in one word: “Sin.”

“What should I say about it?” I asked him.

He said: “Tell them you’re against it!”

I want to tell you this morning, in case you don’t know it, that I’m against sin. But far more important, far weightier than my opposition to sin, is the fact that *God* is against it. I want to talk with you about sin today, but it is vitally important for us to understand that what God is against is not the final or ultimate word. I want you to see not only that God is against sin (which He is), but that God is for us. He is for you and me. He is a God of mercy and grace as well as holiness and justice. And He has done something about the problem of sin in our lives.

In an often unforgiving world where too many people refuse to forgive the wrongs which have been done to them or the hurts they have experienced, where too often people nurse grudges and feed resentment and desire not reconciliation but revenge, we have a

forgiving God who takes delight in setting us free from the burden of our sin and guilt, a God who takes pleasure in extending forgiveness to repentant sinners, a God who took the initiative Himself to do something about our sin.

Before we can fully appreciate what God has done, we need to understand the problem. Before the good news of the gospel can make sense to us, before we can appreciate just how good it really is, we need to come to terms with the bad news and take it to heart.

THE BAD NEWS

The bad news is that we are all sinners. Every one of us. There are no exceptions. We're all in the same boat. Paul pronounces the verdict in Romans 3:23: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Not just a few of us, or some of us, or even most of us. Not just the worst of us. Not just people outside the church. Not just murderers or rapists or adulterers. Not just child abusers or thieves or addicts or idolaters or (you fill in the blank), but all of us. It is a big tent, and every one of us is in it.

Do you remember what the Bible says in 1 John 1:8? "If we claim to be without sin (if we say there is no sin in us), we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

We do not deceive God. We may be able to fool other people sometimes. And we may even be able to fool ourselves. But God isn't fooled. He knows the score. He sees our hearts. He knows the truth about each one of us. And the truth is that all of us are in the wrong before God, and we are helpless without His forgiveness. Why? Because we are all sinners, each of us in our own way, and we fall short of the standard of God's glory.

The writer of Psalm 130 understood that. He took an honest look at his own life and measured himself against the standard of a holy God, and he said: "Uh-oh! I'm in trouble. Big time!"

That is essentially what Isaiah said when he had a vision of God's holiness in Isaiah 6. Isaiah saw the Lord in His majesty and glory, in the awesome beauty of His holiness, and he said: "Woe is me! I am ruined! I'm as good as dead, because God is holy and I am not. There is no way I can stand before a righteous and holy God, for my heart is stained with sin." (See Isaiah 6:5).

If the Lord keeps track of all our sins, who can possibly stand before Him? If sin is the final verdict on our lives, who stands a chance? It can be a terribly depressing question – *if* sin is the final word.

WHAT SIN IS

Do you know what sin is? The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 14) defines sin this way: "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God." It is

failing to live up to the fullness of God's standard, or going outside the boundaries God has established for heart and life.

There are three words we encounter in the Bible for sin. Each of them gives us a picture from a slightly different angle.

The first is the word *sin* itself. The New Testament word in Greek is *hamartia*, which refers to "missing the mark." It is a term taken from the sport of archery, where the archer, with bow and arrow, takes aim at a target, but fails to hit the bull's eye.

In life, the target, if you will – the standard or the bull's eye – is moral perfection. While some people may get closer to the bull's eye than do others in the pursuit of moral and spiritual purity, everybody misses the mark. Everybody falls short. Nobody – not Barry Bonds, not Henry Aaron, not Babe Ruth – hits every pitch out of the park. Nobody hits every note perfectly. Nobody gets a perfect "10" every time. Nobody handles every situation, every test, every problem, every challenge, or every temptation perfectly. We all blow it. We all fall short.

Along the same lines as missing the mark is the idea of being in debt. In the Lord's Prayer we pray: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." The debt we owe is perfect obedience and ceaseless praise, and the One to whom we owe it is God, because He *is* God.

To the extent that we miss the mark and fail to live up to God's standard – and the strange thing is that the more you grow in grace and godliness, the more you move toward spiritual maturity in Christ, the more acutely you become aware of how short you fall – we are all debtors to God and unable to pay what we owe.

The second biblical word is the word *transgression*, which carries with it the idea of crossing over a line, or overstepping a boundary, or trespassing in a NO TRESPASSING zone.

If you're out for a walk, or if you're out hunting, and you come to an area that is clearly marked "NO TRESPASSING," you know you're supposed to stay out. If you ignore the posted sign and go on in, you are guilty of a transgression, because you have stepped over the line and gone outside the law.

That is what a transgression is. It is crossing over the line in violation of God's law. It is stepping outside the boundaries God has established for life. It is an act of disobedience against God, because you are doing something when God has said: "Don't!"

Ignorance is not an excuse. Some years ago, I was on my way to my sister's house in the Pittsburgh area, and I was on an unfamiliar stretch of expressway on the North Side of the city, when I got caught in a speed trap. I realize that has probably never happened to any of you! When I protested to the police officer – very politely, of course – who stopped me, that I hadn't seen any 35 MPH signs, he didn't seem to be impressed. He

gave me a ticket anyway. The next time I was on that highway, I looked for speed limit signs. And do you know what I discovered? There were four of them within about a mile of where I was pulled over for speeding!

I had transgressed the law. I had crossed over the line and violated the standard. And my ignorance didn't excuse me.

The third biblical word is the word *iniquity*, which has the sense of any deviation from God's path, whether it is intentional or inadvertent. It has to do with getting off track and going in a different direction than the one God has marked out for us.

Whether it is a deviation from God's path, a transgression of God's law, or missing the mark despite our best efforts and intentions, whether it involves doing things we ought not to do or failing to do what we ought to have done, the bottom line is that sin is a big deal. And the consequence of sin is separation from a just and holy God. The consequence of sin is guilt. And alienation from God.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT SIN

So what can we do about the fact of sin in our lives and the guilt that comes with it? We can deny it. We can refuse to admit it. We can act as though it doesn't exist. We can adamantly deny that we have done anything wrong or that there is anything wrong with us. That is one strategy. And there is no shortage of people who go to their deaths stubbornly insisting that they are without fault.

A second strategy is to rationalize our sin. We can acknowledge our sins or failures, but excuse ourselves by blaming our sin on extenuating circumstances. We can point the finger at our parents and put the blame on our dysfunctional family. We can blame it on society. We can say: "It's society's fault that I am what I am. It's society's fault that I did what I did (or do what I do). Society let me down." We can blame the government, or the shortcomings of our education, or even the church. We can try to pass the buck and hold someone else responsible. We can rationalize it by saying: "I did it, but it's not my fault."

A third strategy is to relativize our sin. We can simply point out that everybody is doing it, whatever "it" is, and so we aren't so bad. Rather than facing the truth squarely and dealing with it, we look for people who are worse than we are and then compare ourselves to them, so we end up looking pretty good. That is a third way to deal with our sin.

A fourth strategy for dealing with sin is to redefine it. Simply change the definition. Redraw the boundary lines. We can "define deviancy downward" (in the words of Daniel Patrick Moynihan) so that what was once universally understood to be bad or wrong is now recognized as acceptable or even good. We can change the standard of right and wrong so that our behavior is no longer considered wrong. We can set aside or reinterpret those parts of the Bible that impinge on our desires or lifestyle choices in

order to justify our behavior. This way we can feel better about ourselves. And it is much easier to measure up.

You can try any of these strategies. And maybe you have. But none of them works, because none of them is honest. The only way that works is to be honest with God and honest with yourself, to admit your sin, to confess it to God, to repent of it – which means to renounce it and turn away from it – and to seek the forgiveness of God.

That is exactly what David did. In Psalm 32, one of the other penitential psalms, David said:

When I kept silent (about my sin),
my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me.
My strength was sapped as in the heat of summer (verses 3-4).

How is that for an apt description of what we have been experiencing lately in the summer heat and humidity?

David's sin, you see, was eating away at him. It was tearing him apart on the inside. He couldn't get away from it.

Eugene Peterson says it this way:

When I kept it all inside,
my bones turned to powder, my words became daylong groans.
The pressure never let up,
all the juices of my life dried up.

So what did David do? He said:

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 (verse 5).

"How blessed," he said, "how happy are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered" (Psalm 32:1).

The writer of Psalm 130 knew that blessedness, too, in his own experience. We have his testimony in Psalm 130:4: "With (God) there is forgiveness." Forgiveness, as Peterson says in *The Message*, is God's habit. It is the Lord's habit to forgive. And that, says the writer of Psalm 130, is why God is worshipped. It is why God is feared. It is why His people treat Him with reverence and honor, which is what it means to "fear the Lord." It is not a cowering fear toward a capricious or vindictive deity, but an attitude of reverence, respect and gratitude for a holy and forgiving God.

THE GOOD NEWS

Make sure you don't miss this: Sin is nothing to trifle with. Sin of any kind is a serious matter. It is a big deal. But here is some very good news: With God there is forgiveness. And it is available to you today. If there is not forgiveness with God, there is no hope for me, and no hope for you. But there is hope when we turn to God in humble repentance and cry for mercy, because God is full of forgiveness. And He is more ready to forgive than we are, very often, to ask for it.

If the Lord kept a record of our sins and held us accountable to pay for them ourselves, who could possibly stand? Nobody. But with God there is forgiveness.

In verses 7 and 8, the writer of Psalm 130 urges the people of Israel – God's people – to:

...Put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love,
and with Him is full redemption.
He Himself will redeem (His people) from all their sins.

This promise of redemption – generous redemption (TM), abundant redemption (NKJV), plenteous redemption (RSV), full redemption – is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ our Savior. Because of what Jesus did for us in His death on the cross, forgiveness is available to all who come to Him in true repentance and faith. In Him and through His saving work for us, the burden of our sin is lifted. The debt has been paid. It is taken care of. And it is true for everyone who will be honest with God, repent of the sin in their lives – whatever it is – and trust Christ to take care of it.

Not only this, but here is an amazing truth: What God forgives, He also forgets. When we are forgiven by God, the slate is wiped clean. A young girl and her grandmother were looking up at the sky watching a skywriting airplane. The girl was puzzled when the words began to disappear, but after a moment she said: "Maybe Jesus has an eraser!" The good news is that Jesus does have an eraser, and in His forgiving love He is able to wipe away completely the guilt of our sin. The slate is wiped clean. Our sins are covered over and washed away. They are blotted out. And the record is gone. They are thrown into the sea of forgetfulness, to be remembered no more. As the Lord Himself has said in Jeremiah 31:34: "Their sins I will remember no more" (cf. Hebrews 10:17). Incredible as it may sound, it is true: The all-knowing God of the universe promises to forget!

The message of the gospel is not that we are perfect or ever can be in this life. And it is not that we are OK in our sinfulness, as though our sin does not matter. The good news is that even though I'm not OK and you're not OK, we *are* forgiven – or we can be. And when you have been justified by God's grace through faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ, when you have been declared righteous and clean in God's sight on the basis of Christ's redeeming work for you, then you can say in your own experience: "God treats me just as if I had never sinned." That is what justification means.

I don't know what baggage you may have brought with you to church today. I don't know what burden of guilt some of you may be carrying. I don't know what mess you may have made of your life or someone else's life. I don't know the secret sins you may be struggling with. But I do know this: Whatever it is, God can handle it. He stands ready to take away our guilt and give us a fresh start. If you think your sins are too great for God to forgive, then your God is too small. The truth, as it says in Psalm 130, is that "with the LORD is unfailing love and ... full redemption" (130:7).

So let me simply ask you today:

How is it with you?

Do you know God in the abundance of His mercy and grace and forgiving love?

The question is not: Do you know *about* God and His mercy?

It is: Do you know *Him*?

Have you experienced in your own life the freedom and peace and joy of knowing that your sins are forgiven and your guilt removed?

You can experience it, as David did, by turning to the Lord with a heart of repentance and confession and trust. You can experience it by coming to the foot of the cross where Jesus died to take away your sins, and meeting Him there.

Sin is a serious matter. It is nothing to mess around with or to take lightly. But with God there is forgiveness. Forgiveness that cost God the life of His Son. Forgiveness for me and you. Therefore, God is to be treated with honor and reverence and gratitude and praise.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.