

Lord's Day 12c
24 January 2010

Beloved, to imagine that the church as a communion of the saints is perfect, without sin is idealistic. We swiftly know by experience that the fellowship of the saints is tainted with many faults. That even the holiest member of the church has but a small beginning of the new obedience that God requires. And so they have many faults, which they carry to the church with them. And we can see clearly that in order for the communion of the saints to work for the glory of God, it urgently needs to learn the forgiveness of sins. That we need to learn to forgive one another of their sins in order that the will saints will work harmoniously as one body of Christ, seeking the spiritual edification of one another so that the body of Christ will be holy and blameless.

The truth of the forgiveness of sins is a central truth in the blessings of salvation. Because it is only through the forgiveness of our sins, that all the other blessings of justification, sanctification, adoption and glorification flow to us. And the confession of the forgiveness of sins comes to true expression in the communion of the saints. This is the instruction we receive in Lord's Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism, Question 56, What believest thou concerning "the forgiveness of sins"? Answer: That God, for the sake of Christ's satisfaction will no more remember my sins, neither my corrupt nature, against which I have to struggle all my life long but will graciously impute to me the righteousness of Christ, that I may never be condemned before the tribunal of God.

We confess, "I believe the forgiveness of sins". First, the central significant. Secondly, in relation to the church.

First, the central significance. The meaning of the forgiveness of sins is "that God will no more remember my sins, neither my corrupt nature, against which I have to struggle all my life long". This means that as long as we are in this life, and in "the body of this death" our sins rise up against us, and unless something is done about them it will form a great barrier between my relationship between God and us. And when we were outside of Christ, we were born sinners and we were in our corrupt nature and we continue to sin everyday. And in that state, it is impossible that any blessings of grace and salvation should be bestowed upon us. And being conscious of the sins that we have committed, and having our defiled and corrupt nature, we lost any confidence to approach God to plead for his favour, for our sin is guilt, and so we were worthy of death and the wrath of God. God is holy and righteous and He cannot have any fellowship with the sinner in his corruption nor will he acquit the guilty. And so, we must know that as long as were in that state before God, we can neither receive nor expect even the smallest token of his favour and this state must be changed, before we can hope for salvation.

And this fundamental and radical change is effected by the forgiveness of our sins, This does not mean that God forgets that we are sinners for this is impossible, neither does it mean that he does not remember our sins in His wrath and condemnation. Instead, he does not count the sins against us, and that He does not see us as mere sinners, but as redeemed sinners, that we are have been perfectly justified, whose sins have been blotted out, and that He has fully satisfied for all our sins. Now, we must not understand that there is a change in God, as if He formerly remembered our sins

against us, but now he holds them against us more: that He formerly condemns us, but now condemns us no longer. In truth, there is a change not in God but in us so that through faith, He translates us from the state from the state of condemnation to that of forgiveness. This implies that always was forgiveness with Him and He eternally holds His people whom He chose in Christ before the foundation of the world, as redeemed sinners. And only when we lay hold upon this marvelous mystery and amazing wonder by faith, we have confidence in God as our redeemer and we appropriate the forgiveness of sins. This act of the forgiveness of our sins is a revelation of God's abundant mercy, according to which He heaped the guilt of our sins on His only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and in Him realised His righteousness.

This act of God's mercy is eternal in which God ordained his Son to be the Head of the Church, so that He represented them in the hour of judgment and bore their sins., for in God's eternal counsel, Christ is the firstborn of every creature, and as the Head of His Church, as the firstborn from the dead. And so, there eternally is forgiveness with God. And thus as Romans 8.1 tells us, there is therefore, now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus and Colossians 1.4, teaches us that we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sin. What is the ultimate foundation of all spiritual blessing? It is the sovereign, good pleasure of God. This is the teaching found in Eph. 1.3-7, which reads, 3 Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly *places* in Christ: 4 According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: 5 Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. 7 In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace. For without the sovereign election, there is neither atonement nor forgiveness. Except for this eternal forgiveness in God, there is no remission of sin in time. In time, this act of mercy, where our sins are blotted out is realised through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. This death of Christ is vicarious satisfaction, and so, it is the actual blotting out of our sins because it is the perfect satisfaction of God's justice. This is the ground of a perfect and everlasting righteousness it is the infinitely precious death of the Son of God in the flesh. And God set His own seal this atoning work of Christ by raising Christ from the dead. By this, Christ declared that, by His death, sin is blotted out, and perfect righteousness is obtained for all that are in Him. And this righteousness He imputes to us and so, in Him, we are not guilty sinners, but redeemed and righteous. And upon this eternal mercy of God, according to which there is and always the forgiveness with God, we lay hold by faith, worked in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, and through the Word of the gospel. And finally the church which consists of individual believers take this confession upon their lips, saying, "I believe the forgiveness of sins".

This forgiveness of sins finds its relation to the instituted church. In the midst of the church and in the communion of the saints, the believer lays hold upon the blessing of the forgiveness of sins and makes this confession. That outside of the holy catholic church there are no spiritual benefits: namely, the forgiveness of sins cannot be received: no preaching of God's Word, no administration of the sacraments and no communion of the saints. And if, for some reason, the believer serves himself, the first

effect of this error is always that he lacks the joy of forgiveness. And for a time, he lives in hatred against some of his brethren and has an unforgiving spirit, and seeks the friendship of the world, lives in sins and may sever his relationship with the saints. And in this state of separation from the body of believers, he forfeits the forgiveness of sins. And so, beloved, for this very reason we must not forsake the church and separate ourselves from her. And in the midst of the communion of the saints, and when our brethren sins against us, it is our calling to forgive them. This is what our Lord taught us to pray, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”. We cannot pray to God to forgive our sins without praying that we forgive our brethren who have sinned against us. Both are intimately connected and cannot be separated.

In Matthew 18, we read of Peter asking our Lord, “how often shall my brother sins against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?” Peter must have thought that to forgive a brother seven times is being very generous and will surely obtain the approval of our Lord. But to Peter’s surprise, our Lord said, not till seven times, but seventy times seven, which does not mean that we stop forgiveness when he has sinned against us four hundred and ninety times, but as long as your brother confesses his sins, we are to forgive him. And our Lord told the well-known parable of the unmerciful servant in order to impress upon his disciples, that as soon as they ceased to forgive one another, they also forfeit the blessing of the forgiveness for themselves. The unmerciful servant in that parable must not be interpreted as representing the ungodly who never seek and received the forgiveness of sins. Our Lord in this parable was not addressing the ungodly, but Peter, the disciples and the people of God. Instead, we must explain this unmerciful servant as a picture of the unforgiving child of God. Notice that this servant broke the tie of fellowship with his brother, his fellow servant, and thus severed himself from the communion of the saints. For his fellow servant humbly begged for his mercy, but he refused to show mercy and remained stubborn. The result is that he forfeits the blessing of forgiveness. Now, this cannot mean the child of God loses the righteousness which he has in Christ, and which God once imputed to him, for there is no falling away from grace. But, the parable certainly teaches that the child of God who refuses to forgive his brother lives outside the sphere of the communion of the saint and faces condemnation as long as he refuses to forgive his brother. And it is to his disciples and to the people of God in general, that the Lord addresses the closing words of this parable, “so likewise shall my heavenly father do also unto you, if ye from your heart forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses, Matthew 18.35.

And we must be true to our confessions that we believe the forgiveness of sins. I address you who do not know the Lord. Are you one who has not experienced the forgiveness of sins in your heart? God forgives those who will come and confess their sins and forsake them, for the Scriptures say in Rom. 10.9 – 13, That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. 10 For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed. 12 For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. 13 For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. I address you that will not forgive those who have sinned against you. Perhaps, it is your colleague, boss or some friend or relative, who have ill-treated you, abused you. Or have you have once said, “I will not forgive him for criticising my children”?

Or you said that you will not forgive your husband for what he has done for you. And if you truly believe the forgiveness of sins, you will forgive him. But, you say, how can I forgive him? It is a hard thing for me to do. Pastor, you do not what my husband is like and what he did to me or what my colleague did to me. Though I may not fully understand everything that you have to endure, but the Lord says that you are to forgive him. In Luke 17.3, 4, 3 Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. 4 And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him. But, how can I forgive him? Forgive him for the sake of Christ. Christ forgave you of the huge and unpayable debt that you owe to God by your sins, should you not forgive him?" Christ forgave you at the cross when he died for you and forgave you of your debts, will you not forgive him? He set for you an example of forgiveness, will not forgive him? Beloved, forgive.

And we can see the clear relationship between our living in the communion of the saints and the joy of forgiveness. It is never in our own power to receive the forgiveness of sins. The fact that we are sorry for our sins, repent and seek forgiveness and obtain forgiveness is only due to the work of Christ himself. By Christ's Spirit and grace, He works the true sorrow after God in our hearts. By that Spirit, He brings us to repentance, leads us to the cross and assures us of redemption, even the forgiveness of sins in his blood. It is to the Spirit of Christ that we continuously depend in order to receive the forgiveness of our sins. He is the Spirit of the body, which is the Church. For there is one Lord, and one Spirit, and that one Spirit, and that one Spirit dwells in the one body. He does not dwell in you or in me individually, apart from the body as a whole. And so, outside of that body the Spirit does not bestow the blessings of salvation upon us. If therefore, through some sin, you separate yourself from the body, and does not live in the communion of the saints, you immediately forfeit the forgiveness of sins. And as you lose the fellowship of the saints, you forfeit all the blessings and joy of salvation: the remission of sin, which is basic for all other benefits. And we cannot refrain from declaring that the forgiveness of our sins is a great comfort to God's people, which comes in the way of confession and repentance. Today, the Lord says to you, "be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you". "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud your transgressions" "I will forgive your iniquity, and I will remember you sin no more", and He imputes to us the righteousness of Christ. And this will cause us to sing, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered". Amen