

# Who Forgives Sins?

2 Samuel 12:1-7a, Luke 7:36-50 (ESV)

February 20, 2005

“Who is this, who even forgives sins?” “Who is this, who... forgives sins?” “Who... forgives sins?” Therein lies the question. Forgiveness is a grand and wonderful thing. Forgiveness is the one good hope we have. Forgiveness is the only way we can make it in this life or the next. Deep down, we know that. It may be hard to face. It may be hard to admit. It may be hard to articulate. But deep down, we know that it is true. We cannot make it on our own.

“We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.”<sup>1</sup> And we cannot undo the past. What we might do in the future or even the present is not clear. But we cannot undo the past. We can and should make amends as best we can, but we cannot pay our debt. So we need forgiveness. We need forgiveness more than we need food. We need forgiveness more than we need water. We need forgiveness more than we need air. We need forgiveness in order to live today and tomorrow. We need forgiveness for this life and the next.

This is the situation, our situation, into which Jesus said to the woman of the city, “Your sins are forgiven.” Not condemned. Not forgotten. Not condoned. Not denied. Not celebrated. Not ignored. “Your sins are forgiven.” These are words of life. These are words of hope. These are words of health and restoration. These are words of new beginnings. These are heavenly words. These are divine words. These are words which no mere human has the authority to speak. “Your sins are forgiven.” No wonder that when Jesus spoke to her, those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” “Who is this, who... forgives sins?” “Who... forgives sins?” Therein lies the question.

We have two announcements of good news here. One is that sin is forgiven. The other is that Jesus forgives sin. In fact, the two are inseparable and indistinguishable. Without Jesus, there is no forgiveness. So, Jesus forgives sin. And therefore, sin is forgiven. Only in and by and through him is sin forgiven. Forgiveness appears first. It is the visible reality, the presenting phenomenon. It is what we see. But the identity of Jesus is the underlying and prior reality. So let us tend to it first.

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<sup>1</sup>*Book of Common Worship*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 87.

“Who is this, who even forgives sins?” “Who is this, who...forgives sins?” “Who...forgives sins?” Therein lies the question. Sin is an offense against God. We do many things to offend, hurt, and injure each other, but sin is an offense against God. As it is written in Psalm 51, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.”<sup>2</sup> And as the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks and answers, “What is sin? Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.”<sup>3</sup> So, sin is an offense against God. And in that sin is an offense against God, the forgiveness of sin is the prerogative of God alone. It belongs to God alone to forgive sin against him. It belongs to God alone to forgive sin. It belongs to God to forgive. We know that. Somehow, deep down, we know that. It belongs to God to forgive.

Somehow, deep down, the people who were at table with Jesus in the home of Simon the Pharisee knew that. That, in fact, is the point of their question. That is why they asked it. “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” “Who is this, who...forgives sins?” “Who...forgives sins?” Well, of course, God forgives sin. We know that. So, who is this? Who is Jesus? Is he a madman? Is he an charlatan? Or does he speak for God? Does he speak on behalf of God? Does he speak the word of God? Does he pronounce forgiveness on behalf of God? Does he speak as God? Could it be that Jesus is the long awaited Christ of God? Could it be that he is the Son of God? Could it be that he is God himself with us, among us, and for us? Therein lies the question.

There is no evidence that Jesus is a madman or a fool. Can anyone make a case for that? There is no evidence that he is a charlatan or a liar. Do you have any reason to believe that? The remaining possibility, the one raised by the questioners at the table, the one presented to us by the Gospel according to Luke, the one carried forward in the faith of the church, the one which means life to you and me, the one remaining possibility is that Jesus is the one who forgives sin, Jesus is the Christ of God, Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus is God himself with us, among us, and for us. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>2</sup>Psalm 51:1-4a (ESV).

<sup>3</sup>*The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Kentucky: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2002), “The Shorter Catechism,” question and answer 14, 7.014, p. 176.

This is the deep and underlying reality of today's reading and of the gospel. This is the prior truth. And this leads to the next, more visible truth. In that Jesus is God himself with us, among us, and for us, in that Jesus is the Son of God, and in that Jesus is the Christ of God, he is also the one who forgives sin, even our sin, yours and mine, yet today. Thanks be to God! This is the faint glimmer of realization that began to dawn on those at table with Jesus. This is the full gospel of salvation that shone forth on the woman of the city. "Your sins are forgiven." "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." That Jesus accepted her gives us the courage to realize that he accepts us. This is the good news that comes down from heaven and comes down through the centuries all the way to us today. "Your sins are forgiven." "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

What does it mean that sin is forgiven? What does it mean that our sin is forgiven? It is not condemned. It is not forgotten. It is not condoned. It is not denied. It is not celebrated. It is not ignored. It is forgiven. For sin to be forgiven means that God has absorbed the wrong, the injury, the offense, the insult, the pain, the brokenness, and the alienation into himself, into his being, into his heart. For sin to be forgiven means that God takes it upon himself to correct the damage we have done to our relationship with God, damage that is our doing, damage that is our responsibility, but damage that is beyond our ability to correct, to repair, or to undo. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

For sin to be forgiven means that God does not forget or ignore what we have done but instead he takes it so seriously that he takes its effects upon himself in order to shield us from them. For sin to be forgiven means not that sin does not matter but instead that sin matters so much that God has paid the terrible price which gives him the right to forgive our sin. And for sin to be forgiven means that God has done all of this, God has made all of this both real and obvious, in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, his Christ, our Lord and Savior, Jesus. Jesus forgives our sin. It is done.

Given that God in Jesus Christ forgives our sin, how are we to live? How are we to respond? What are we to do? Consider the extraordinary account of the woman in today's reading. "A woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he [Jesus] was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment." That caused no little consternation for the host. And it is certainly nothing that we can do.

How did Jesus understand it? "He said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I

came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much.” That is to say, she was grateful. She poured herself out in gratitude. There was a deep and uncontainable joy welling up from within her. She risked much to show her love for Jesus.

The point here is not that because of her great love her sins were forgiven. Not at all. That would not be forgiveness, and that would run against the whole rest of the Bible. The point here, instead, as is made clear by the parable which Jesus tells about debts and debtors, is that her great love is demonstrative of her forgiveness. Her great love is evidence of her forgiveness. Her great love is the result of her forgiveness. Her great love is the new life into which her forgiveness propelled her. Her great love points back unflinchingly to her prior great forgiveness of her admittedly great sin. She was made new and different. Her sin was forgiven. Her faith had saved her. She could go in peace.

This woman’s great love also points ahead to the pattern of the Christian life. No, we cannot anoint the feet of Jesus. But as she believed and was saved, so can we believe and be saved. We can love God, and we can love neighbor. We can love God in true and exuberant worship, and we can love neighbor in true and exuberant service. We can hear the good news of God, and we can share the good news of God. We can sing of our joy here, and we can share the joy with those around us, bringing visitors to church. As God pours out his grace upon us, we can respond with gratitude toward God and graciousness toward each other. Having been forgiven, we can be forgiving. We can worship God gladly, and we can serve neighbor gladly. And when we do, all the world will wonder what is happening. All the world will be shocked and even scandalized. All the world will ask what is going on.

“Who is this, who even forgives sins?” “Who is this, who...forgives sins?” “Who...forgives sins?” Therein lies the question. Forgiveness is a grand and wonderful thing. Forgiveness is the one good hope we have. Forgiveness is the only way we can make it in this life or the next. “Who...forgives sins?” Jesus is the one who forgives sin. Jesus is the Christ of God. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is God himself with us, among us, and for us.

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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