

THE REMISSION OF SIN

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Introduction

Before looking at the subject at hand, there are some things we should consider for the sake of clarity. First is the fact that when Jesus Christ suffered on the cross for the sins of the world, it was on behalf of every human being that has ever lived, is now living, or will ever live. In other words, He died for the sins of every member of Adam's fallen race regardless of when they lived. This means that the first two thirds of II Corinthians 5:19 has a transdispensational application. "*That God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their sins unto them*" speaks of the incarnation of God's Son, Jesus Christ, the sinless life He lived, His once and for all sacrifice of Himself for mankind, and His resurrection. It is only through the blood of this once for all time and all people sacrifice that the forgiveness of sins and salvation is possible for any age or dispensation. Verse 18 and the last few words of verse 19 with verse 20 are specifically about the commission that Christ has given the Church of the Dispensation of Grace. I bring this up to point out that the "non-imputation of sins" and the "reconciling of the world" that was accomplished have to be understood in the light of their transdispensational nature. Those who would dispute this fact must find themselves a different cross, a different Savior, and the blood of some other sacrifice than those that are in view here. The historical account of Jesus Christ's life and ministry as found in the Gospel Records of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us of His sinless life, death, burial, and resurrection. Paul, in his letters, explains the great significance of His work on the cross in its relationship to all of mankind of all time and specifically tells us how it is applied today.

That Jesus Christ died once for all of mankind of all dispensations, times and ages, period (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 9:26,28; I Pet. 3:18) is important to understand because, while there are important dispensational distinctives to be considered, the Person of Jesus Christ and His redeeming work on the cross is the common denominator that ultimately gives value to and provides the hope for each dispensation. Therefore, whatever our conclusions are about the forgiveness, or remission of sins, the timing of any imputing or not imputing of sins, the reconciling of the world, and the redemption of man must be in accord with this truth or they are automatically invalidated.

Second is that the Apostle Paul, in his explanation of the Grace Gospel, starts at creation (Rom. 1:18-20) to show that all of mankind needs a Savior because of sin and brings us through history to God's abandonment of the nations at the Tower of Babel (Rom. 1:21-32). Then, after briefly dealing with the moralistic Gentiles (Rom. 2:1-16), he takes us on through God's past dealings with Israel and right into the present Dispensation of Grace, concluding that "*there is no difference*" between any Jew or Gentile regardless of when they lived or what their claim to righteousness is "*for all have sinned*" (Rom. 3:21-23). Sin is revealed to be man's basic problem. Since all are sinners, it was for all the world, the whole of humanity that Christ died for. Setting aside for now the distinctives of past and future dispensations concerning salvation, we want to focus on the great truth that was previously hidden, but has now been revealed through Paul, that today redemption is through personal faith in Christ alone by the means of His

shed blood. Each believer is identified with Christ and declared righteous in God's sight. He is forgiven of his sins because he has trusted in the fact that Christ's sacrifice for him is sufficient to satisfy (propitiate) God's righteous demand for justice (Rom. 3:24-26). The forgiveness of sins, justification, imputed righteousness, and redemption are all part of the salvation package. Each represents an important but different aspect of salvation and no one can have one without having them all. Personal salvation is an all or nothing deal. A person is either identified with Jesus Christ through faith and has received all that He has to offer, or they have nothing and remain spiritually bankrupt.

I know that these things are elementary, but I have brought them up because one person I spoke to about the subject of forgiveness seemed to think that the world God was not imputing sins to in II Corinthians 5:19 is only the world of the Dispensation of Grace. Their idea was that Paul's statement that "*sin is not imputed when there is no law*" in Romans 5:13 must logically mean that II Corinthians 5:19 can only be referring to those living in the Dispensation of Grace because we "*are not under Law*" like Israel was, but are "*under grace*" (Rom. 6:14). We will not go into a discussion of these verses here except to say that this application of these verses is obviously wrong, as it is contrary to Paul's assessment of the entire human race in Romans. Bringing two verses together in this way without due consideration of the context and subject matter each is found in is improper hermeneutics. That interpretation of these verses would mean that in II Corinthians chapter five, Paul is saying that Jesus Christ's redeeming work on the cross was only for the Gentiles living in the present Dispensation of Grace rather than being a once for all sacrifice on behalf of the whole world. This, of course, is wrong because the cross is central to all that Christ accomplished in His work of redemption on behalf of all of Adam's fallen race (Rom. 5:12).

Sins Remitted

In presenting the gospel, the statement "it is not a sin question, but the Son question," or something similar, is sometimes used. If the explanation of what this means is that it has already been determined that everyone is a sinner in need of forgiveness and that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has provided for that need through the cross, we would agree with it. In other words, His sacrifice of Himself on the cross was sufficient to pay for the sins of the whole world. But, there is a condition that individuals must meet to have that payment applied to their account so that they can have their sins personally forgiven. They must recognize that they are lost and in need of salvation from the penalty of sin and place their trust in Jesus Christ to forgive and save them through the agency of His death, burial and resurrection completely apart from any works or merit of their own.

However, to say, "it is not a sin question, but the Son question" because everyone's sins have already been forgiven is something else altogether. These distinctions are more than just semantics as it touches on one of the most important doctrines in Scripture, the believer's identity in Christ. We will give attention to this as we look at the subject of the remission of sins.

The term “*Remission of sins*” in the Bible speaks of sinners being delivered or released from the penalty due for the sins they have committed. Of course, this theme is central to the Grace Gospel Message as it is the proclamation that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world, has been raised from the dead and whosoever believes on Him will have their sins forgiven and will receive the gift of eternal life (Acts. 16:31; Rom. 3:21-26; I Cor. 15:3-4). This is what is often referred to as “being saved”. There are important dispensational aspects that are involved concerning this subject, and it can become rather involved when looking at the different dispensations. So, while we will touch on forgiveness in other dispensations at times, we will focus primarily on the terms of forgiveness and salvation as they relate to the present Dispensation of Grace that we are living in today.

In regard to this, the question of when one’s sins are actually forgiven sometimes comes up. It is generally accepted that each individual personally receives forgiveness of their sins at the time they trust Christ as their Savior. But, some think that since Christ paid the penalty for all sins on the cross then everyone’s sins are automatically forgiven and therefore the sins of individuals are not an issue now and never will be. Some go so far as to say that “anyone who goes to Hell will do so with their sins paid for and forgiven.” Their idea is that “Hell is not a punishment for sin, but rather the result of unbelief and failing to appropriate the righteousness of God.” The trouble with this thinking is that it is built on a half-truth that opens the door to serious error about both the forgiveness of sin and salvation.

What is true in this view is that Jesus Christ did indeed pay for the sins of the whole world when He shed His blood on Calvary. But, it is not true that the remission of sins was automatically reckoned to every individual at that time. No one will ever receive any of the benefits of Jesus Christ’s redemptive work on the cross apart from personal faith in Him. We will present the Scriptural truth of this statement later. But, first, we feel we should look at a slightly different view of this subject.

Christ’s Work of Reconciliation

Some look at the Apostle Paul’s statement “*that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them*” (II Cor. 5:19) and say that it means that as God does not impute people’s sins to them, sin is not an issue. While this view comes from a different angle, it is still essentially the same as saying everybody’s sins are automatically taken away or forgiven through the cross. Both ways of looking at it end with nobody having any sins to be held accountable for. But, “not imputing sins” is not the same as taking away, removing, or forgiving sins. The word translated “impute” here is *logizomai* and it carries the idea of “to reckon” or to “take into account”. It does not say that God will never reckon, or impute, the world’s sins to them, only that He isn’t doing so now. The Apostle Paul made it clear to the Athenians that God had overlooked sin in the past but that it wasn’t a free pass because God has “*appointed a day, in which He will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom He hath ordained*” (see Acts 17:30-31). There will most surely be a day of reckoning when all those who die in their sins will be judged accordingly by the Righteous Judge who is the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ Himself (see John 5:24-29; Rev. 20:4-5, 11-15). This will take place at the Great White Throne Judgment where everyone who has died in their sins will have his or her own day

in court. They will be found guilty, their sins will be reckoned, or imputed, to them, and they will be assessed the due penalty, which is the “*second death*.” They will then be assigned to the Lake of Fire where they will be separated from the life of God forever in a place of everlasting torment.

Reconciliation and Justification

Reconciliation is through Christ’s blood (Rom. 5: 10) and is therefore a work of God by which the enmity, or hostility, between Himself and mankind is removed (II Cor. 5:18-19). However, on the human side of reconciliation a response of faith is required before Christ’s redeeming work on the cross is applied to any individual. Since Christ’s sacrifice of Himself was sufficient for all of mankind, but is only applied to the individual through faith, Paul could say that “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself*” (II Cor. 5:19) and still insist that individuals needed to “*be reconciled to God*” (II Cor. 5:20).

Because Jesus Christ has provided the means of reconciliation through His death, burial, and resurrection, God has been merciful and laid aside, or withheld, His wrath towards sin (unrighteousness) so that men and women might have an opportunity to receive the reconciliation offered through Christ’s blood. However, this situation will not last forever as at the appointed time Jesus Christ “*will judge the world in righteousness*” (Acts 17:30-31; cf. John 5:21-29; Rev. 20:11-15

Because reconciliation is closely related to justification (God’s imputed righteousness to redeemed sinners), they are mentioned by Paul in conjunction with each other in Romans. Those who are “*justified by faith*” have “*peace with God*” (Rom. 5:1). To be justified is to be declared righteous. To have peace with God is to be reconciled to God. Both take place at the same time through faith in Christ.

Reconciliation is always a two-way proposition and therefore incomplete until the means, or terms, of reconciliation are accepted by both parties. In the case of man and God, God has accepted His Son’s sacrifice as sufficient to take away the sins of every member of Adam’s lost race, but it is conditioned on each individual personally accepting what God has provided to take away their sins in order to remove the enmity between them and God.

Reconciliation is not the same thing as either, but it runs parallel to both justification and redemption. In turn, all three are directly connected to the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins is the canceling of the debt owed for sins committed. Unless a person receives forgiveness of their sins, the enmity between them and God remains because it is sin that separates man from God. When one trusts Christ for salvation, they receive forgiveness, that is their sins are remitted, and the enmity is taken away “in Christ.”

Redemption is the direct result of an individual being forgiven of their sins through faith in Jesus Christ. Both redemption and forgiveness are conditioned on the believer being personally identified with Christ so that the benefits of His “cross work” can be reckoned to their account. Receiving the forgiveness of sins the believer is redeemed, or saved, from the bondage

of sin and its penalty of death (Eph. 1:7). At this time the believer goes through the “*washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit*” (Tit. 3:5) who indwells and seals him or her “in Christ” guaranteeing their future resurrection (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30); Rom. 8:23). The believer is baptized into Christ by the Holy Spirit at this time of washing and sealing as well (I Cor. 12:12-13). This is a spiritual baptism of identification by which the believer is totally identified with Jesus Christ in the Father’s sight. With his sins taken away through Christ’s blood and being identified with His Son, the believer is made “acceptable” (reconciled) to the Father in His “Beloved” Son (Eph. 1:6).

The point of all of this is that while the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, redemption, and justification are distinct from each other, they are at the same time all intertwined in such a way that a person cannot have one without having them all. And all of them are completely dependent on a person’s relationship with Christ. Everyone who is “in Christ” has them all and no one who is apart from Christ can claim any. Only those who have been identified with Christ through faith can receive any blessing of grace that He has made available through His own blood.

Passages from John and Hebrews are also pointed to as proof that all culpability for the sins of the world were taken completely away at the cross as Christ is “*the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29) and that “*He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself*” (Heb. 9:26). Of course, the principle of forgiveness and salvation for individuals is in view in both of these passages, but we believe that the direct reference is to the fulfillment of Israel’s prophetic future in relation to the New Covenant. This is a time when God’s chosen nation will finally be purged of all sin (see Heb. 8:6-10:12). In this passage, Christ’s sacrifice of Himself is shown to be acceptable to God and His blood sufficient to meet the requirements for the establishment of the New Covenant as it will be applied to Israel in the Millennial Kingdom and on into the eternal Kingdom that will follow. This is when sin will be finally and forever put away and its curse removed.

Another thing that has been pointed out to show that God forgives sins apart from personal faith is the Lord Jesus’ appeal from the cross for the Father to forgive His murderers (Lk. 23:34) even though they had no faith. Did the Father answer that prayer? I believe so, but what is in view here is Israel’s national sin of rejecting her Messiah, not the personal sins of those who crucified the Lord. Fifty-three days after the crucifixion on Pentecost, Peter charged Israel with the crime of murdering the Messiah, who was afterward raised from the dead (Acts 2:22-36). When the men of Israel were convicted in their hearts about their terrible deed, they asked Peter what they could do about their guilt. He told them “*Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.*” (Acts. 2:37-38; see also Acts 3:13-19). In His mercy, God did forgive Israel for the rejection of His Son, and the nation was given the opportunity to receive her promised Messiah at Pentecost, and the Apostles preached Christ in Jerusalem for at least a year after that.

Even though many individuals came to faith in Jesus Christ over the next year, the nation as a whole continued to follow their leaders in rejecting Him and God finally set the nation aside in unbelief. Every one who did come to Christ during that time had to be forgiven of their sins (Acts 2:38; 2:19; 5:31). While a transdispensational principle can be seen in the Lord Jesus’

prayer from the cross for the Father to forgive Israel that speaks of the forgiveness of sins offered to the world through His death, it particularly deals with Israel's national sin of murdering their Messiah. So, it cannot be used to substantiate the idea that any individual's sins are, or can be, forgiven apart from personal faith in Christ.

Only "in Christ"

To support our earlier statement that no one can receive any of the benefits of Christ's redemptive work apart from faith in Him, we will look at the blessings of Ephesians chapter one. We would like to point out that the numerous blessings of this chapter are only for those who have been accepted by God in His "*Beloved*", who is His own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of its importance, the Scriptural record here is filled with references to the fact that these blessings are bestowed through grace to those who are "*in Christ*" (Eph. 1:3). This speaks of the believer's identification with Jesus Christ by which he or she becomes "one with Christ" and is given a righteous standing before God.

When a person trusts the Lord Jesus for salvation they become one with Christ through a spiritual baptism that unites them with Him (I Cor. 12:12-13). Through this personal relationship, they are identified with Him in His death, burial, and resurrection (see Rom. 6:3-5; Gal. 2:20; Col. 2:10-13). It is through this identification of oneness with Jesus Christ that the believer is, by grace bestowed, made acceptable to the Father (Eph. 1:6). It is through this same identification with Christ that believers "***have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace***" (Eph. 1:7). A few verses later it is made clear that the blessings listed in this passage only come to those "*who first trusted in Christ*" (Eph. 1:11-12), and having "*believed*" were "*sealed with the Holy Spirit*" (Eph. 1:13-14). Obviously then, if these things are true, and they are, no individual is automatically forgiven of their sins because of Calvary. God only forgives the sin debt and redeems those who have trusted in His Son as Savior and been personally united with Him in His death, burial and resurrection and made acceptable to Him. This is so because without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins, and His blood is only applied to those who become partakers of His death through faith. Any teaching that allows for the forgiveness of sins apart from faith in the Savior is a serious departure from truth. We will look at some of the problems that this idea brings with it later, but first we will look at some passages that specifically deal with this subject.

The Greek word *aphesis* means to "dismiss" or "deliver" and is used in regard to the forgiveness of sins in Scripture. The word is used seventeen times in the Bible and is translated "remission" nine times, "forgiveness" six times, "deliverance" once and "liberty" once. In reference to sins, the terms "remission" and "forgiveness" mean the same thing; which is to be released from the penalty due for sins committed.

The Scriptures say that under the Kingdom program repentance is necessary for the remission, or forgiveness, of sins, both before and after the cross (see Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3; 24:46-47; Acts. 2:38; 5:31). Obviously, this could not be so if all individuals are automatically forgiven at the cross because there can be no conditional forgiveness of sins that have already been unconditionally forgiven.

During the transition from Law to Grace (from prophecy to mystery), faith, or belief, was required for the “*remission of sins*” (Acts 10:42-43). And, years later, when Paul was giving his testimony before King Agrippa, he explained that Jesus Christ had commissioned him to go to the Gentiles “*that they might receive forgiveness of sins*” (Acts 26:15-18). It is obvious that if the Gentiles, that is the people of the nations of the world, already had forgiveness of sins, they would not have to receive forgiveness through Paul’s message of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Obviously, they could not receive what they already have.

In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul lays out the reason man needs a Savior (see Rom. 1:18-3:20). He presents man’s evil doings as evidence and condemns all Gentiles and Jews alike as sinners, proclaiming that there is no difference in their standing before God as “*all have sinned*”(Rom. 3:21-23). Justification and redemption are freely offered to all sinners through Christ Jesus, but is only given to those who believe that His blood has satisfied their sin debt before God (see Rom. 3:24-25). That Christ was “*set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood*” speaks of the forgiveness of the sins that separate unrighteous sinners from a righteous God. Christ’s blood has satisfied (propitiated) the righteous demands of His holy nature, therefore God can remit the believer’s sins and declare him righteous in His sight (Rom. 3:26). Everything available to the lost sinner, including the forgiveness of sins, through Jesus Christ is contingent on the individual having believed in Him and His finished work on the cross (Rom. 3:21,25,26; 4:5; I Cor. 1:21; Acts 16:31). According to Ephesians chapter one, apart from being “in Christ”, there is no forgiveness of sins, no redemption, no inheritance, no promise of a resurrection, no position in heavenly places, and no life.

Problems to Consider

The idea that everyone’s sins are automatically forgiven through Christ’s sacrifice of Himself, but that those who do not trust in Him as Savior will still go to Hell for unbelief carries with it more problems than are readily apparent. After all, it is claimed, it doesn’t teach Universal Reconciliation but that unbelievers will in the end be condemned to the Lake of Fire and only those who place their faith in Christ will be saved. All that sounds good at first glance, but a closer look reveals that it creates numerous doctrinal problems and opens the door to Universalist teachings.

We are not saying that because someone believes this way that they are Universalists or that they themselves would ever believe in Universalism or promote it. But, if they are teaching this idea to others, there are two dangers involved. First, because Universalists teach essentially the same thing concerning the forgiveness of sins, it will make people more susceptible to their error. (Strangely, in spite of the fact that they say that everyone is automatically forgiven of their sins, some Universalists believe that those who do not trust in Christ will go to Hell to be purified, and then they will believe and finally be saved.)

And second, if those who are taught this carry out the thinking behind it to its logical conclusion, they are very likely to embrace Universalism. Its teachers may argue otherwise but they leave only one sin between their position and that of the Universalist, the sin of unbelief. They might describe it as the rejection of Jesus Christ as Savior, or say it is the failure or refusal

to accept the gift of eternal life, but it all boils down to the lack of faith, which is unbelief and unbelief is sin. It doesn't take much thought to see how someone could come to the conclusion that if by His death all sinners have automatically been forgiven of their sins, the sin of unbelief would be included. If rejecting Christ is not a sin, what else would it be?

The teaching that everybody's sins are already forgiven creates several other problems as well. Following are some of them. The verses listed after each statement reveal the error involved.

The Blood Without the Savior: They would have the benefit of being under the blood without having a Savior (Rom. 3:25; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14).

The Cross Without Faith: They would have the power of the cross applied without faith. (I Cor. 1:18-21).

Forgiveness Without Redemption: They would have the forgiveness of sins but would not be redeemed. (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14).

Sinlessness Without Justification: They would be declared sinless without being justified. (Rom. 3:21-26).

Reconciliation Without Salvation: They would be reconciled to God but not saved from His wrath. (Rom. 5:10-11).

Partaking of Christ's Death Without Identification: They would gain the advantage of having died with Christ without being identified with Him in His death. (Rom. 6:5-8).

Believers Would be Made Alive Without Ever Being Dead: If all sins are already forgiven (or not imputed to individuals) then lost people are not dead in their trespasses and sins before they are saved. Hence, they cannot be made alive nor pass from death unto life when they believe. (Eph. 2:1-6; Col. 2:13-15).

Other Considerations

Several other issues have to be taken into consideration as well when addressing this doctrine. We will look at some of them here by the means of rhetorical questions of which the answers will serve to expose the error involved.

If everybody is automatically forgiven of their sins, then can anybody really be classified as a sinner?

If everybody is already forgiven of their sins and sin is not an issue at all with God, does that mean that God doesn't care about any of the evil that is taking place in the world today?

If all sin is already paid for and taken away (or is not imputed to anyone's account), then on what basis could unbelief, or any other sin, ever be judged?

If their sins are already forgiven and people will only go to Hell for refusing to believe in Jesus Christ, then wouldn't those who have never heard of Him and had no opportunity to either trust in or reject Him be automatically saved?

If everyone's sins are forgiven and they will only go to Hell if they reject Jesus Christ and the gift of eternal life, then if a missionary went where no one had ever heard of Christ and preached the gospel, wouldn't he actually cause those who didn't believe when they were given the opportunity to be lost?

If everybody's sins are already forgiven, then why will those in the Tribulation have to forgive to be forgiven (Mat. 6:9-15; Lk. 11:2-4)?

If all the sins of all individuals were automatically forgiven by Christ's death, why will the Gentiles who survive the Tribulation be judged for their actions and some rewarded with eternal life and others sent to the Lake of Fire (Mat. 25:31-46)?

The Great White Throne Judgment

Of course, this teaching runs into a problem in Revelation chapter twenty where we are told that at the end of the Millennial Kingdom the unsaved dead will be raised and judged "*according to their works*" (see Rev. 20:11-15). Just simply reading this passage, most come away with the understanding that the lost will be judged for their sinful acts, or their sins, at this time. But, if this is what will take place, then everybody's sin cannot already have been forgiven because if that were the case no one would have any sin to be judged for.

This creates a huge dilemma for those who teach this. They attempt to get around it by offering an alternative explanation, saying that each individual's works will only be evaluated to see if that person had any righteous works to commend them to God or not. When none are found they will be cast into the Lake of Fire. But that is not what the passage says. To be judged according to their works means that they will be judged for their sinful actions. For their works, for what they have done, for their deeds, for their sins. That God has said, "*thou shalt not kill*" makes the act of murder a sin. Idolatry, adultery, stealing, fornication, lying, etc. are all sins worthy of judgment. The Greek word rendered "works" in this passage is *ergon*, which means something that is done or to be done, an action, or a deed. It can also mean a process of the product of an action or process. The word sin may not appear here, but the plain meaning of the passage is that the lost will be judged for their sinful works. This means that they will be judged at the Great White Throne for the sins they have committed. (Even a brief study of sin will reveal that sin is not an abstract concept, but refers to what people do. That is to say, it speaks of the works or deeds of men and women.)

The Lord Jesus said that the deeds, or works, of those who will not come to the Light are "*evil*" (see John 3:19; 7:7) and that unbelievers will "*die in their sins*" (John 8:21,24). These

truths simply cannot be explained away or denied. The lost will one day face the King of kings and Lord of lords and will be held accountable for their sinful deeds and their sentence will be according to what they have done.

There is much more that could be said on this issue, but I think that what has been presented here makes it clear that the idea that everybody has automatically been forgiven of their sins apart from faith in Christ and His shed blood creates a doctrinal nightmare. It is a teaching that crosses the line from being a peripheral issue to being a serious one. Very serious because it affects the very heart of the Grace Gospel, which is the forgiveness of sins and how a lost sinner receives it so they can be saved. This doctrine should be rejected, resisted, and renounced as serious error.