

Accepting God's Forgiveness

Believing in God's
Love for You



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Do you feel inadequate?
Are you worried and afraid?
Does God seem like a dark cloud to you?
Do your past failures trouble you in the present?
Are you always trying to do more or be better?

You may not realize it, but your biggest problem is that you don't really believe in God's forgiveness.

A young man named Harry said to me, "When I think about God, he doesn't seem to be my forgiving Father, but rather my condemning Judge. I don't think God's love includes me. I'm twenty-seven years old, and I feel as if my life has been a total waste. How could God love someone like me?"

What was Harry's problem?

Did his self-condemnation stem from a childhood dominated by a remote and authoritarian father? Were his negative feelings made even worse by the strict discipline of the school system he attended? It would be easy to conclude that guilt and failure had been instilled in Harry by the authority figures in his childhood.

But are those the only reasons that he struggled with guilt and a sense of failure? When I talked with him, Harry said, "It isn't just a matter of *feeling* guilty. I think I really *am* guilty. I have made a lot of bad choices and have so many regrets. I feel like my life

has been a waste. Even though I know I should love my parents, I can't stand to be around them. What's wrong with me?"

Harry was asking a psychologically and morally profound question. Instinctively he knew that there is a close connection between behavior and conscience. Like Harry, all of us know what it is to be troubled; to have a restless inner life; to be haunted by the feeling that we were made for something better and have not quite attained to it. Regrets for past mistakes—a betrayal of a friend, an undone task, an angry outburst, a jealous thought, the inability to love someone close to us, all these and more—leave us troubled. What bothers each of us might be different, but we are all troubled by something. For some, their negative feelings are so strong that their entire life seems to be nothing but a profound alienation from God and people. Seneca, the Roman philosopher, knew of this haunting of the conscience. "Sin can be well-guarded," he wrote, "but free from anxiety it cannot be."

Why Is the Conscience So Sensitive?

Many believe that our moral sense is only a product of training and culture. But this view does not adequately explain how the conscience arose in the first

place, why its voice is so compelling, why people in every culture have a sense of right and wrong, and why there is nothing like it among animals. The Bible offers the only viable alternative explanation: our conscience, our innate sense of right and wrong, was given to us by God. Men and women were created “in the image of God,” modeled after God who is perfectly holy and just (Genesis 1:26–27). Each of us has a God-given sense of right and wrong. It is this moral sense or conscience that makes us “like God” and different from the most complex animals.

This wonderful difference, however, also leads to anxiety and fear. You can compromise your conscience by doing things contrary to its standards, but you will find that your conscience will not finally compromise with you. It is God’s point of contact to show us our need for him—it’s the conscience that helps us recognize our sins, take responsibility for them, and remind us that our deepest need is God’s forgiveness. But often we try to quiet our conscience (and the anxieties that come with an uneasy conscience) using our own strategies. These strategies don’t help to take away our fears and sense of not measuring up; instead they complicate our lives. Consider some of the inadequate strategies we use for dealing with our real guilt.

Inadequate Strategies for Dealing with Real Guilt

1. Confession without Faith

This was vividly illustrated for me on a plane trip to Amsterdam. My seatmate was telling me the story of his turbulent life with drinking, drugs, and sex, and at the same time arguing loudly against my quiet suggestion that he was made by God for something better. The conversation went on for most of the flight.

Finally a woman in the seat ahead of him turned, introduced herself to me as Susan, and thanked me for what she had learned from overhearing our conversation. Then she added, "I am a religious person, and I feel compelled to confess my sins to you. By listening to you, I've realized that there are things I have never confessed to anyone and I must do so now." Ignoring my surprised protests, she leaned back and quietly began a long, detailed confession. "Never before have I been able to confess these sins," she concluded. "Now I have a sense of relief that I have never had before."

"I'm glad you feel better," I responded, "but soon, I fear, all your sins will be back bothering you again, many of them the very ones you confessed here."

Now it was Susan's turn to be startled. "The problem is," I continued, "that you seem to have no *faith*

foundation for confessing your sins. You really do not seem to believe in the forgiveness of sins. You are very much aware of them, but your awareness is centered more on people and their evaluation of your life and behavior. You are hungry for human approval and relief from a troubled conscience, but are you concerned to get right with God?”

Susan’s approach to handling her guilt reminded me of many in our world—people whose confessions to one another, even public confessions on television talk shows, give them momentary relief, but don’t release them from the real guilt they carry every day. They talk about their failures, but no one repents of real guilt toward God. Like Joseph K. in Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, people today go about trying to get someone else to assure them that all is well. At the same time their inward moral sense is telling them the opposite: namely, that all is wrong with them. There might be momentary relief in public confession of failure, but real guilt has broken our relationship with God. And it’s our relationship with God that must first be addressed to gain true relief from the burden of guilt and failures we carry.

2. Trying Harder

Some of us cope with our guilt differently. We try to use religious activity and “doing the right thing” to

deal with the sins that trouble us. But we're still left with the nagging sense that we haven't done enough or tried hard enough. So we use attempts to obey the Ten Commandments—or at least the ones we believe in—as a *ladder* to get to heaven. We might acknowledge the need for God to assist us, but we basically trust in our own self-effort and hard work to get us near to God.

We look down on those who, in our opinion, are doing worse at keeping our rules than we are. And we try to quiet our consciences with the assurance that we are better than those around us. But God has made us in his image to be like him—to love him and others perfectly from the heart (Luke 10:27).

The Ten Commandments are simply an expression of love. As God's rules, they show us that human guilt doesn't stem from our upbringing or feelings of low self-esteem. Instead, they show us that we really *are* guilty because we have failed to love God and people as we were made to do. God gave us these rules to teach us what love looks like in all areas of life—and to drive us to seek his forgiving grace as we realize how we fail to love God and people. The truth is, we are not “half-sinners” with a few small failures that can be fixed by trying harder. Instead we are “whole sinners,” and our need for grace is total.

What we have done, in attempting to mute our conscience, is deny our need for God's grace, and hope that the guilt we feel can be relieved by our efforts (perhaps with God's secondary assistance) to balance the record. But our real guilt is not carried away by these strategies. And we are left with an unsettled conscience whose pangs are often intense. Here is how the prophet Isaiah describes us—people haunted by real guilt that shrivels up our inner life:

All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
(Isaiah 64:6)

God's Provision for Your Complete Forgiveness

Despite his atheism, even Freud recognized the limitations of human solutions to the problem of guilt. Writing to Pastor Oskar Pfister, he discussed Christ's "psychologically profound" statement to the sick man of Mark 2—"Your sins are forgiven. . . . Get up, take your mat and go home." Freud wrote, "If the sick man had asked: 'How knowest thou that my sins are forgiven?' the answer could only have been: 'I, the Son of God,

forgive thee.' In other words, a call for unlimited transference. And now, just suppose I said to a patient: 'I, Sigmund Freud, forgive thee thy sins.' What a fool I should make of myself."¹

Freud's reduction of Christ's atoning power to the psychoanalytical process of transference does not diminish for us the truth he mentioned: Christ is the *only* one with power to forgive our sins. Our attempts to absolve ourselves and others of wrongdoing have no lasting value in dealing with a troubled conscience. Harry and Susan needed something better than their own efforts to deal with the anxiety and fear that was the undercurrent to their lives.

As our 747 made the descent to the Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, I said to Susan, "God's answer to a troubled conscience is different than confessing your sins to another human. He establishes permanent peace with himself by the gift of his Son." I went on to explain, "Those who seek a cleansed conscience through their own efforts face a *never-ending* task. We are never as obedient as we think we are. Our confessions can never be complete. And the problem is that our *nervous doing* can never be finished because we are broken by sin and not able to love God and others. Your efforts will never free your conscience from your real guilt.

"God has a better way—his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a perfect life of love for God and people; he died

on the cross, not for any wrongs that he did, but to pay the price for the sins of his people. Then he rose from the dead—God’s guarantee that his sacrifice for our sins is accepted. When you turn to Christ in faith and repentance, his righteousness becomes your own. In Christ you are forgiven and made new. Make the completed work of Christ your foundation for the assurance of your forgiveness, and *you have a powerful reason for believing your sins are forgiven*. God is perfectly satisfied with you because of Christ’s sacrifice of his own precious blood.”

A Powerful Reason for Believing Your Sins Are Forgiven

It is *only* the blood of Christ that can cleanse the conscience. Look at the following scriptures:

- “We have now been justified by his blood” (Romans 5:9).
- “We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (Ephesians 1:7).
- “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” (Hebrews 9:14).

- “The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7 NASB).
- “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Revelation 1:5).

In these passages “blood” represents the perfect life of Jesus offered by his Father in an ultimate sacrifice on the cross to pay for all of the sins of believers. Sadly, neither Freud nor Kafka saw the crucial significance of this atonement. As a result Freud privately concluded that there was little final hope for most of mankind. He wrote to Pfister, “Most people are trash.” It is obvious from Kafka’s brilliant fiction that he was even more pessimistic about the possibility of human beings experiencing forgiveness and peace of conscience. His characters all end up either dying “like a dog” as in *The Trial* or perpetually suspended in a state of guilt from which there is no prospect of deliverance.

But the blood of Christ brings a perfect deliverance to human beings trapped by their failures and living in despair. Christ, the perfect God-man, died once and for all, and now there is nothing left for you to do to earn your *complete forgiveness*. It is a free gift! It only needs to be accepted by faith into your repentant heart. You cannot atone for a single one of your sins. God’s love has done it all in the self-giving of his Son. Death is the penalty of sin (Romans 6:23), and Christ’s death has

taken away the full penalty for those who receive him by faith (Romans 3:25).

The main thing is to believe that *God is satisfied* by this sacrifice offered for you on a cross almost twenty centuries ago. How can you know this? Because of Jesus' bodily resurrection. His resurrection was the Father's signal that sin had been fully atoned for and nothing remained to be done to bring peace between God and man. Afterward, the triumphant Lord ascended to heaven and now sits at the Father's right hand as our advocate, presenting not the merits of our feeble "good works" but his own perfect work. The biblical words which picture this completed sacrifice are unusually powerful: "justification," "reconciliation," "propitiation," "forgiveness," "acceptance," and "access." Surely nothing we might do can improve this achievement!

John Bunyan, renowned author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, had great trouble believing in the forgiveness of his sins. His difficulty was that they seemed so great, especially because God is so holy and hates sin. Nothing could bring peace to his conscience. He confessed his sins endlessly with only the most temporary relief. Then one day while walking across a field, he seemed to hear a voice from God speaking in his soul, "Thy righteousness is in heaven" and he "saw with the eyes of his soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand." Happily, Bunyan's startling

new insight terminated his preoccupation with his sins. He shifted his mental focus from what he could do to put himself right with God to what Christ had done to put him right with God. Moreover, Bunyan saw that his acceptance with God did not depend upon his good or bad behavior—or even upon his feelings about himself, but upon Christ alone. Christ was his “righteousness,” and that righteousness was unchangeably secured for him in heaven.

But how can people like Harry and Susan be sure that Christ and his righteousness is theirs?

Three Who Were Completely Forgiven

The answer is that by faith you enter into a personal relationship with the risen Christ. What kind of faith? Not just a general faith in God's care over the world and ourselves, but a personal faith in Christ. This is not a complicated process. You simply put all of your weight, all of your trust onto Jesus. Here are a few examples of people I know who simply trusted in Jesus and then experienced his forgiveness.

The first person I want to tell you about is my daughter Barbara. She was twenty-five years old when she put faith in the Lord. A graduate student at Stanford University, she was loaded down with guilt and had an overriding sense of powerlessness in her life. She had left our home at eighteen, announced she wasn't a Christian,

lived with one man after another, and became involved with drugs.

Eventually she went to work as a waitress, supported herself through the local university and graduated with honors, winning a fellowship to work on her doctorate at Stanford. She thought that reforming herself would solve her problems. But instead she said to me, “The one thing I lacked was peace. Even though I got my life back together and was working hard, my sins and failures still bothered me. When I was living a wild life, I acted like nothing mattered, but deep down I was bothered—and I still am. Then I remembered you telling me that I needed to rely on Jesus’ death on the cross for forgiveness. So one day, as I was thinking over something wrong I had done, I asked Jesus to forgive me. That was the beginning of my faith. I trusted that Jesus had paid for all of my sins, so there was nothing more for me to do—no trying to make up for them, no need to keep going over them. When guilt troubles me now, I just turn my mind again to what Jesus did for me at the cross.”²

The second example is supplied by a middle-aged businessman, Len Brownson. An insurance salesman, he was the epitome of success and acceptable moral behavior. Len told me, “I thought I was a good person, keeping the laws and being responsible in the community. I was also religious, attending church faithfully, giving

my money to good causes, and even trying 'to witness for Christ.' But one day I heard a sermon about being 'poor in spirit.' It made me realize that I was not as good as I thought. I began to examine my motives. I discovered that I struggled with envy and that I loved money and didn't even know it. There was no room for Christ in my life. I was too filled with self to have any room for believing in him. For the first time, I saw how much I needed Christ's forgiveness. I asked him to forgive me and trusted that his death took away my sins. What a difference he's made in my life!"

The third example is Mary, a young woman who grew up with parents who argued, fought, and criticized her. Her mother loaded her down with guilt and constantly accused her, while her father distanced himself from Mary and their family problems. After the family broke up, an emotionally battered daughter was left to make her own way into the adult world.

Mary sums it up: "I was so anxious and nervous as a person that I could not carry on a simple conversation with another adult. I froze up and the words would not come out, or they came out in short machine-gun-like bursts that left me feeling embarrassed.

"It was difficult for me to believe because God seemed to me like a big, dark gray cloud in the back of a church, and who could believe in such a God? But then I learned that God loved me and gave his Son to die for

me. It was ridiculously simple. All I needed was to trust him, and I did that. After that when I was full of fear and anxiety I would just go to God and confess to him my failures and then ask him to help me love people. He is doing that. It's a long process, but there is now peace in my life—a peace that I never had before.”

This simple faith is like the “I do” of marriage that unites one person to another person. Such a childlike faith has an astonishing power to unite us to the living Christ and his perfect righteousness. The essence of this faith is dependent trust—trust in Jesus, reliance on him, dependence on him. You confidently *depend* on Jesus alone for forgiveness and acceptance with God. But this faith is not your effort to reform yourself. It is not developing new religious feelings or trying harder to become moral and decent. Instead it is rejecting anything but Christ—reliance upon your own good works, intense religious emotions, baptism, church-going or anything else. Your hope must be placed completely in Christ without trying to build a good record (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:21). He alone is your justification “through faith in his blood” (Romans 3:25).

Decision Point

Now you are faced with a critical decision point in your life. Perhaps until now you have assumed that you are a decent person. You believe in the Ten Commandments.

At the very least you have confidence in your own ultimate sincerity. You say to yourself, "Possibly I have not been for God the way I should have been, but at least I have not been against him."

But now Jesus, the Son of God, speaks to you with the voice of supreme authority. His claim is compelling. He says that you are either for him or against him (Matthew 12:30). He means that you are either sold out all the way for him or you are his enemy. You cannot be neutral. Here is a fundamentally new insight into the nature of sin as a *rejection* of God. Could it be that there is in you a deep pattern of wanting your own way rather than God's? That sin for you is simply wanting to control your own life, not wanting God to control your life, and not wanting God to interfere with your agenda?

Admit

To get right with God, *admit* that Jesus' assessment is accurate. You have been *against* God. You have wanted final control of your life in your own hands, not his. Admit you have lived for yourself, not God. That is why your inner life has been prey to feelings of guilt and haunting anxieties. You have defended and excused yourself. You have ignored God. Perhaps you have even built a fine public reputation by religious activity. But all of this cannot earn your forgiveness. Your only hope is to go to God and admit that you are

helpless to save yourself and you are helpless to love God and others. God made you in his image, but you are hopelessly broken.

Accept and Receive

But you can be fully acquitted and declared righteous because of God's *principle of substitution*. According to the Bible, a righteous man can die in the place of an evil man as a voluntary act. That is precisely what Jesus did for us. He obeyed God perfectly as your great Substitute, your suffering Friend dying your death (John 3:16–17). Both Kafka and Freud heard about this ultimate solution to the problem of guilt. They were intrigued by its compelling love and authority, yet they both rejected it. Kafka said that he was not ready to accept a free pardon of grace. Freud said such acceptance would destroy his psychoanalytic system. But millions of other people have received him as their own Savior and experienced release from condemnation.

However, please don't trivialize his death for you by accepting Christ in a routine, casual way. You must admit that you have been wrong in God's eyes, and then embrace him as your Savior with all your heart.

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6).

Admit that you are "ungodly" and then listen! Hear Jesus, the Son of God, say,

*YOU ARE FORGIVEN FOREVER; YOU
ARE ACCEPTED UNCONDITIONALLY
THROUGH FAITH IN ME.*

We bring to him only our unlimited need, and he brings to us his unlimited forgiveness. Don't try to do anything to earn this forgiveness. Simply trust yourself to him. Through faith in Christ, our sins have been credited forever to Christ's account and his righteousness to ours (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Healthy Self-Esteem and a Life of Love

You receive this assured forgiveness from God at the beginning of your new life in Christ and it becomes a permanent platform of believing confidence for healthy self-esteem. Released from guilt, each day you can build a sincere relationship of love with God and with people. You will see God and others from a new standpoint, a new angle of joy—namely, that of a forgiven son or daughter of God. Christ has paid for your guilt, and divine wrath has been forever removed from your life. Such faith will release in you obedient love for all your human relationships. It may not always be easy, but one of the privileges of your new life is to forgive others the way you have been forgiven—freely from the heart!

Of all the acts of believing, faith in the forgiveness of sins is the most daring. I do know that Harry has

dared to believe in the forgiveness of all his sins through Christ. He in turn has forgiven his parents and now shows by his life that he loves them from the heart.

Can you also now dare to believe in the forgiveness of your sins? Now is the time to shift your confidence from yourself to Jesus—dare to believe that God loves you and will forgive you through Christ. Simply open your heart to him and trust that Christ died for you. Our God of love will receive you on the sole basis of Christ's merits through faith. You can depend on him and live a life where every morning you can remember that your sins are no longer counted against you, and you can live a life of freedom and love. The meaning of life is not to be found in living for others' approval, in trying harder, or in doing more. Instead it is found in your new relationship with the God of the universe who accepts and loves you for Jesus' sake.

Here is Jesus' invitation to you, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28–30). Accept Jesus' invitation every morning. Come to him for rest from your burden of guilt; dare to believe you are forgiven; and you will be freed from self-preoccupation to love God and people.

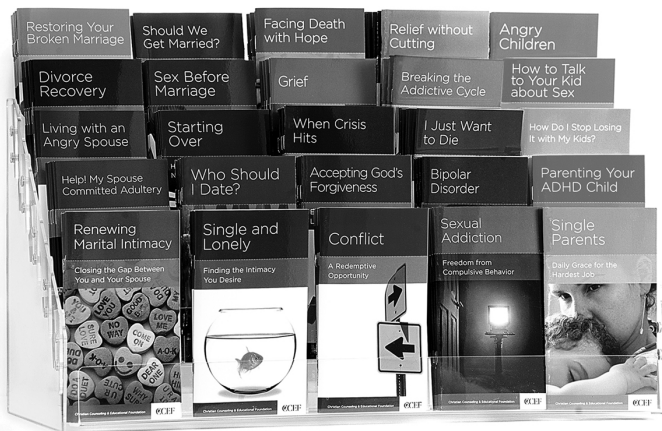
Endnotes

1. Quoted by Peter Homans, *Theology after Freud* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril Co., 1970), 78.

2. For the complete story of how God changed Jack and Barbara, read the book they coauthored, *Come Back, Barbara* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1988).

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