

# “Can God Forgive Me?”

All people need forgiveness. In our relationships with others, every one of us has experienced times when we hurt someone else by something we did or did not do. At those times, when our behavior has caused pain in another person’s heart, we need to be forgiven, to be released from the anger or the punishment that our actions deserve.

The same is true in our relationship to the God who made heaven and earth . . . and us! We may resist or even deny that relationship, but that does not change the fact that we are children of God. The apostle Paul once stood before a gathering of Greek philosophers and said, “For in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children’” (Acts 17:28).

On another occasion, in writing to the Christians in first-century Rome, he explained that we are all sinners: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Today, it is common for people to deal with their sin problem in a number of counter-productive ways:

- Some *deny* the One against whom they have sinned, thinking that they can eliminate their guilt by eliminating God.
- Some *justify* their sin, trying to explain it away by blaming it on genetics, family, or society. They think that saying, “My body [or ‘my parents’ or ‘my culture’] made me do it” frees them from guilt.
- Some *laugh* at sin and scoff at the notion that we have any moral responsibility. (This is evident in many television shows and movies.)
- Some attempt to *numb* the pain of their sin, hoping to stay busy enough, entertained enough, or drunk enough to make them-

selves oblivious to the desperate need they have for forgiveness.

Obviously, these foolish approaches to sin are futile and leave people still in need of forgiveness.

## CAN GOD FORGIVE OUR SIN?

The gospel is the good news that God is willing to forgive our sins because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The Bible repeats this message over and over again:

. . . repentance for forgiveness of sins [was to] be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:47).

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men (Titus 2:11).

And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed (1 Peter 2:24).

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

Some have a problem with this wonderful news. You may doubt that it is true in *your* case. Perhaps you have little trouble believing that God can forgive other people, yet you cannot allow yourself to believe that He can truly forgive you. You may think that because God knows your heart—your secret thoughts, your troubling doubts, and your hidden fantasies—there is no way He will forgive you. However, the Bible makes it very clear that all of this is the devil’s lie. God is waiting and ready to forgive *you!*

## GOD FORGAVE THEM

Perhaps the best way to see that God can forgive you is to look at the way God has for-

given others. We will look at several surprising examples of forgiveness in the Scriptures.

### **The Samaritan Woman (John 4:1–42)**

Jesus stopped by a well one day and met a woman who had come to draw water. In that time and place, Jews and Samaritans disdained each other and women were ignored in spiritual matters. Nevertheless, Jesus entered into a deeply spiritual conversation with a woman who had been married five times and was currently living with someone else's husband! By the end of this encounter, the woman had found much more than the physical water she had come to draw at the well: She had found the "living water" of God's love and forgiveness in Jesus.

### **Zaccheus (Luke 19:1–10)**

One of Jesus' final stops on His trip to Jerusalem, where He would die on the cross, was in the city of Jericho. There, surrounded by adoring crowds, Jesus looked up in a tree and called out the name of Zaccheus, a chief tax collector. Without a doubt, Zaccheus was the most hated man in Jericho. The Jews despised those who collaborated with the Romans and squeezed tax money out of their own countrymen. In Zaccheus' wealth they saw their own poverty. By calling this little man out of a tree and going home to eat with him that day, Jesus demonstrated to everyone in Jericho the scope of God's love. If God was willing to forgive the most hated man in Jericho, then God must surely be willing to forgive them!

### **Peter (John 18:15–27; 21:1–23)**

The apostle Peter was proud, impetuous, and over-confident. He boldly bragged that even if everyone else left Jesus when trouble came, he could be counted on to remain (John 13:37). However, when Jesus was carried off for trial on the night before His crucifixion, Peter followed at a distance. Later in the evening, as he waited in the courtyard near the place where Jesus was being questioned and abused, Peter was asked three different times if he was with Jesus. Each time, he denied that he had any connection with Him. Surely, such a cowardly failure could never be forgiven.

On the contrary, following the death and the

resurrection of Jesus, we see the touching story of Jesus' conversation with Peter. Several of the disciples were fishing at the Sea of Tiberias one day, when Jesus appeared to them on the seashore. After the men had eaten a breakfast of bread and fish, Jesus turned to Peter and asked him three times, "Do you love Me?" When Peter, deeply wounded by his own guilt and shame, answered, "Yes," Jesus responded, "Tend My sheep." It was a way of saying, "You are forgiven, and I have a job for you."

### **The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32)**

In Luke 15, when Jesus was being criticized for the way He welcomed sinners and even ate with them (vv. 1, 2), He told His detractors a story to illustrate how God views those who desperately need forgiveness. It was a parable about a young man who demanded to receive his inheritance early so he could spend it as he wished. When his father consented to grant his request, the boy went far away and "squandered his estate with loose living" (v. 13). In doing this, the young man rejected his father, his people, his training, and his God. Finally, his money ran out. Then his party was over. Survival became his greatest concern. Desperate to eat, he got a job feeding pigs—animals the Jews regarded as "unclean." At times he was so hungry that he even envied the swine for the food they were eating.

Eventually, the boy came to his senses and returned home. Not knowing how he would be received, he practiced a speech as he walked: "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men" (vv. 18b, 19).

However, he received the greatest surprise of his life. As he neared his home, his father saw him coming. The older man ran out to meet his son, throwing his arms around him and kissing him. He called to his servants and said,

Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found (vv. 22b–24a).

In this beautiful story of forgiveness, Jesus was

showing us the way God longs to forgive us when we “come back home.”

### **The Apostle Paul (1 Timothy 1:12–16)**

Paul was his own best sermon illustration of forgiveness. If anyone doubted that God could forgive him, Paul could simply point to himself. Earlier in life he had persecuted Christians “to the death” (Acts 22:4) and had said horrible things about Jesus. Later, after God confronted him on the road to Damascus, Paul was taught the gospel and became a Christian himself. However, Paul never forgot how much he had been forgiven. Near the end of his life, he wrote the following words to a young friend: “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” (1 Timothy 1:15).

The apostle Paul says to us all, in effect, “If God can forgive *me*, He can certainly forgive *you!*”

## **WE DO NOT DESERVE FORGIVENESS**

Are you convinced that God is willing and ready to forgive you? If not, especially after looking at all these examples, perhaps it is because you are still thinking you have to deserve forgiveness before you can be forgiven. This is probably to be expected. After all, that is often the way it is in human relationships. However, with God it is different. He simply forgives—not because we deserve His forgiveness, but because it is His nature to want to forgive us.

But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:4, 5).

You and I are sinners. Our guilt before God is real; but God stands ready, waiting, and longing to forgive us!  
Bruce McLarty

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