

## Faithful and Just to Forgive

I John 1:9

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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

- A. Introduction: The title of today's message is "Faithful and Just to Forgive." That's taken from our text, an often quoted verse, I John 1:9 which reads, "***If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.***" My interest in studying this was inspired by a devotional I recently read from an old Gospel commentator on this verse. And in particular, I was struck by the certain assurance of salvation that can be gleaned from this one verse when rightly understood in both its immediate context and in the broader context of the whole of scripture. You may have noticed the emphasis I gave on that conjunction "and" in citing the title. God is faithful and just to forgive. And I hope I can adequately relate to you how sure and certain eternal salvation is to those who confess their sins as it is to be understood in this verse, to those whose sins have been truly remitted / paid for / forgiven by the doing and dying of Jesus Christ as their Substitute and Surety.
- B. The evidential "If": Before I get to the meat of the message, I think it's important to first address a common scriptural misinterpretation of this verse that leads people to expect to be forgiven as a result of something other than exclusively the death of Christ – specifically the mistake of believing God forgives a sinner of his sins because of their confession of their sins.
1. Now the problem lies in the fact that the word "if" is often used in conjunction with a condition as in "if you do this, then the following will result because of what you did." And so many misinterpret this verse to mean that God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse from all unrighteousness if we will meet the presumed condition of confessing our sins. So consequently, many mistakenly believe that sinners are forgiven because of or as a result of their confession.
  2. And that is supported by the many preachers who tell their listeners that God will give them all the blessings of salvation (including the forgiveness of sins) if they will just <fill in the blanks> (e.g. – believe, say this sinner's prayer in confession of their sins, invite Him into their hearts, walk this aisle or be baptized to confess Christ before men, or simply admit they fall short and in that sense thereby confess their sins, etc.)
  3. But listen – no matter how often you may have heard or continue to hear those suggestions that your salvation and its multi-faceted blessings (including the forgiveness of sins) is conditioned (at least in some way or to some degree) on you, the sinner, know that that is not God's Gospel of grace.

Do not be deceived. It is a deadly presumption to imagine that a holy God will forgive you a sinner based on your confession of anything because as a sinner, all that proceeds from you is tainted by your sin. In Ephesians 1:6 Paul stated how God has made His people “...**accepted in the beloved.**” <Jesus Christ. And he continues in verse 7 saying, the beloved>“**In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace;**” To believe you’ve been forgiven of your sins because you’ve made some confession is not forgiveness through His blood and that would not be according to the riches of His grace.

4. So, how are we to understand that phrase, “If we confess our sins...”? Well, consider how the word “if” is not always used to set forth a condition to be met in order to achieve a result. The word “if” is also commonly used to cite evidence or as an indicator (as if to say “if this describes you, then you can know that the following is true of you”). For example, what if I said, “If you’re breathing, you’re alive?” A reasonable person would not construe that to mean you could go to the morgue and approach a lifeless corpse and instruct that dead body to breathe so that it could thereby make itself alive. No, but a paramedic might well check an unconscious person to see if he or she is still breathing in order to determine if they are still among the living. Their breathing would be an indicator or evidence of life – not the cause of it. Well, from the whole of scripture we can know that 1 John 1:9 isn’t suggesting that by confessing your sins, you thereby can procure the blessing of forgiveness of sins for yourself. No, if you confess your sins, then you are identified among those forgiven in Christ. Actually, the immediate context of I John 1 makes this clear when in verse 7, just prior to verse 9 it reads, “***But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.***”
5. So the confession of sins by the pardoned is not the cause of their pardon. Like me, you may have heard “confession” defined as agreeing with God concerning our sin. And that definition seems appropriate when you consider that all of the saints, chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world – all of these who were in time redeemed by His blood, are also in their lifetimes brought into the knowledge of the light of the gospel as they are given spiritual life and drawn to Christ under the gospel of God’s grace. And thereby they discover the necessity and the reality that it is the blood of Christ alone that “cleanseth us from all sin” (as I John 1:7 asserts). Their blood-bought, Holy Spirit-inspired confession has them all, without fail, eventually agreeing with God concerning their sin and the truth that (as we sing) nothing but the blood of Jesus can wash away their sins!

C. Confession of Sin: So, let's briefly discuss what this confession of our sins involves. The word translated "sin" here in I John 1 is from the same Greek word so translated in Romans 3:23, "**For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;**" and in Romans 6:23a, "**For the wages of sin is death...**" It simply means missing the mark and the mark we miss is the perfect righteousness of Christ. That's the righteousness that Christ established by which all men shall be judged according to Acts 17:31. That is, our righteousness must equal the merit of Christ's perfect obedience unto death whereby all of God's revealed will (the precept of His law if you would) was complied with perfectly in deed and thought. And that perfect, continual compliance with the revealed will of God has never been achieved by anyone in any age other than by the sinless, incarnate Son of God. And if lawbreakers (sinners such as we) are to be found righteous (clear of guilt) in God's sight, then the law's penalty also must be extracted – the wages of sin is death. We must somehow come to possess the merit of His doing and dying.

And the only way sinners such as we all are, can possess that righteousness is by God's gracious merciful imputation of it to us. As we so often quote from 2 Corinthians 5:21, "**For he** <God the Father> **hath made him** <God the Son> **to be sin for us,** <He, the Son> **who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.**" All whom God is faithful and just to forgive and cleanse from their unrighteousness had the demerit of all their sins imputed or reckoned to the account of Christ who in the eternal covenant of grace (as Surety) essentially said to the Father, "Lay them on my account – I'll pay the debt due unto your holy justice for all the sins of all those you've given to me." And this verse further teaches us that for all those for whom He died, God has graciously imputed or reckoned to them the merit of His perfect obedience unto death – His perfect satisfaction to God's justice in both precept and penalty – His righteousness.

In John 16, we're told of the work of the Holy Spirit which takes place in the conversion of a born-again sinner. Specifically, we're told how they are convinced by the Holy Spirit of sin, righteousness, and judgment. So if confession is agreeing with God about our sin – our missing the mark of His perfect righteousness – the righteousness required for acceptance before a holy God, then that's what one who truly confesses his or her sin has come to see. They are taught of God through the preached Gospel that they must have the very righteousness of God (revealed in that Gospel) put to their account. And to be so convinced of sin is to agree with God that "**Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.**" (Romans 3:20). As God's children come to Christ by God-given faith and repentance, they see the extent of the law and the perfection that must be rendered under it so as to agree with God about how even their best efforts and deeds fall far short of the standard by which all are judged – His impeccable righteousness.

Now any who have been so convinced so as to no longer dare to approach a holy God for acceptance based upon anything that proceeds from themselves (including the most sincere sorrow they might muster over their sins) but rather who now look to Christ alone for their righteousness, are in agreement with God concerning their sins. And each and every one that God the Father gave to God the Son in that everlasting covenant of grace, shall without fail so come to confess their sins before God – against whom all sin is committed. In John 6:37, Christ assured us of that saying, ***“All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.”***

So if that confession of sins (in agreement with God) has been experienced by you, then there is the first solid reason for drawing comfort / for gleaning a greater sense of eternal assurance and security from this verse. Christ told the unbelieving Jews in John 10:26 that they believed not because they weren't of His sheep – those given to Him by the Father. He didn't come to die for them. Like these unbelievers, the natural man cannot place all his trust and hope for salvation in Christ and Him alone. But Christ says His sheep will – they will in time come to Him for all salvation in confession of their sins – in acknowledgment of their utter inability to contribute anything toward saving themselves. They need God's mercy in Christ. They must have Christ and His righteousness imputed for in being convinced by the Spirit of sin, righteousness, and judgment – nothing else will do. So all who are graciously drawn by God to so confess their sin, are thereby identified as being among those whom God is faithful and just to forgive them their sins and cleanse them from all unrighteousness.

D. God is Faithful to Forgive: Now let's consider first how God is faithful to forgive their sins and cleanse them from all unrighteousness.

1. The Bible sets forth the unfailing faithfulness of God. In Lamentations 3, beginning in verse 21 Jeremiah wrote, ***“This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. <sup>22</sup>It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. <sup>23</sup>They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. <sup>24</sup>The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.”*** Those who have been convinced of sin so as to confess their sins are they who see themselves as sinners deserving to be utterly consumed by a holy and just God –deserving utter destruction if judged according to their very best deeds and efforts. I know that many expect to be saved because they believe they struck a deal with God and fulfilled what was required in order for them to be saved.

They will recall a profession of faith, perhaps a baptism, or a spiritual event in their lives in which they sincerely dedicated themselves to their god as they perceived him to be. And on that basis, the basis of their presumed faithfulness – their free will choice to follow Jesus, what they did – they expect to be saved. No doubt, that is the sincere hope of many. But that is not a good hope but rather a tragically false one. According to this passage, their being spared the wrath of God is owing to the mercy of God, because His compassions fail not, because of His unfailing faithfulness – not theirs.

Earlier I read Romans 3:20, but look with me again at that as well as the verses that follow. ***“Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. <sup>21</sup>But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; <including the Prophet Jeremiah who penned Lamentations> <sup>22</sup>Even the righteousness of God which is by faith <or faithfulness> of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe:...*”** (Romans 3:20-22a). It’s all owing to the righteousness which Christ was faithful to establish in His obedience unto death. And so, by the mercy of God in Christ, His elect shall never be consumed. All of their earthly belongings may be consumed, (and a lot can be lost in a hurricane as our part of the country has just witnessed), their bodies may be consumed in a tragic accident or wasted away by disease. And ultimately they all shall be consumed by physical death, but not their immortal souls. For it is well with the souls of those chosen in Christ, their Surety and Substitute – chosen to be blessed in Him with an eternal salvation – an inheritance in heaven’s never-ending glory.

2. Just as Lamentations 3:22 tells us that it is of the Lord’s mercy that we are not consumed, owing to His unfailing faithfulness, God says in Malachi 3:6, ***“For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.”*** Here too, we see that elect sinners (spiritual Israel / these sons of Jacob) are spared the eternal wrath of God because of who He is – because He is the unchanging, immutable, perfectly faithful “LORD” – the word Lord there being the same as in the passage in Lamentations, Yahweh or Jehovah who saves.
3. His compassions fail not for He is the eternal God. His love is an everlasting love. His compassions are new every morning. They are constant and perpetual. He faithfully keeps us and chastises us and as in the case of Jeremiah here, He so orders our lives to insure that our hearts are not only drawn to Him in initial faith and repentance, but He will always recall to our minds the blessings we have in Him – the good hope of salvation according to His mercy and grace, according to His faithfulness – not our own.

4. Assurance is drawn from our knowing God, including His attributes of faithfulness and immutability. And for those who misplace their hope in their own presumed faithfulness to meet some condition in order to be saved rather than relying exclusively on His great faithfulness), know this – the god you worship is not the Lord – not Jehovah who saves for He, the true and living God, is one who does not react in response to what you the sinner does or does not do. He does not save any sinner because that sinner believes. The sinner who believes does so because he has been saved. God does not forgive any sinner because that sinner confesses his or her sin. The sinner who confesses their sin does so because they have been forgiven through His blood.
5. Think with me. If God reacted to the sinner and changed His mind about that sinner’s eternal destiny because that sinner believed (or whatever), then what would such a mutable, reactionary god do when that same, less than perfectly faithful sinner, had a moment of doubt? Would not such a god react to that doubt and change his mind again about that sinner’s eternal destiny? No – our God is not a mutable, reactionary and therefore an untrustworthy and unfaithful god. God brings those He saves to repent of these God-dishonoring notions, causing us instead to look to Christ alone for all of our salvation.
6. In knowing that our triune God is faithful – faithful to His covenant promise to save a people that were given to God the Son, who was faithful to come some 2,000 years ago and live and die in their place, redeeming each and every one of them on the cross, establishing for them the very righteousness they needed for eternal acceptance, faithful in each successive generation to bring each and every one of them to Himself, providentially ordering their lives to put them under the sound of His Word of regeneration (this Gospel) and giving them spiritual life and faith that would have them, in repentance, confess their sins and place all their trust in Him, and the God who will be faithful to raise them up into heaven’s eternal glory – in knowing God’s faithfulness in this way, it humbles those whom He saves, causing them to know of their great need for His mercy so as to not get what they would otherwise deserve.

They see that it truly is of the Lord’s mercies that they are not consumed by His just wrath against sin – that wrath instead having been poured out on their Substitute who died in their place for their sins. Seeing their great need for Him, their plea is like that of the tax collector in Luke 18, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” His faithfulness to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness would have us pleading that we be included among those objects of His eternal mercy and grace. And thankfully, to be reduced to such a mercy beggar gives evidence that we are among the eternally blessed of God.

E. God is Just to Forgive: But what about God's justice. God is not only faithful to forgive sins, but He is also just – faithful and just!

1. "Just" – that is a powerful word that carries with it a great, glorious, and comforting truth whereby we see the wisdom and glory of God in the Gospel. How can God be just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness? ***"He is faithful and just to forgive...."*** "Just?" Many will speak of God's love, mercy and grace in pardoning sinners; but how can God be just to do so? Doesn't God's justice demand the punishment of sin? Doesn't God tell us that the soul that sinneth shall surely die and that God shall by no means clear the guilty in accordance with His strict and inflexible justice? Think of the strict justice of God as set forth in the Bible. As the Psalmist David wrote, ***"If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?"*** (Psalm 130:3). And yet His justice demands that those sins not be overlooked. The Bible teaches that God is the judge of the earth and He must do right. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah tells us of God's wrath against sin. The world being destroyed by the flood was a manifestation of God's just wrath. The torment of hell itself declares the awful vengeance of God against the sins of multitudes! God will not simply overlook sin. Vengeance will be the Lord's against all sin. Because God is immutable and faithful to who He is as a just God, not one sin shall go unpunished. And we all have sinned.
2. So how then can God be not only faithful but also just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness? Here's how: the faithful Lord of glory became a Surety and Substitute for those whom his Father gave to him. He came to this earth in their place. He endured the just punishment that was due to them. For them he fulfilled the whole law by his doings and by his sufferings. For them he bled, and for them he died. For them he rose again, and for them He ascended up to the right hand of the Father where He ever lives interceding for them. And now justice demands pardon for those in whose place He stood, and enters in its righteous plea.
3. God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Do you see in these 2 attributes of God being engaged to put our sins away – do you apprehend this doubling down (so to speak) so as to give us the absolute certain assurance of salvation because of Who God is – faithful and just? That word translated "forgive" comes from the same Greek word that is elsewhere translated as "remit" or "remission." When the debt has been paid or remitted, the debt is forgiven!

4. The old writer I referred to earlier wrote this: "...see the difference. Mercy begs, justice demands: mercy says, "I ask it as a boon <or as benefit>";" mercy, as a part of God's character, looks down with pity and compassion on the mourning criminal <the lawbreaker, the sinner>; but justice says, <in referring to the sinner's forgiveness> "It is his due; it is his right; it belongs to him; it is his because the Redeemer has discharged his debt, because the Surety has stood in his place, because the Savior has obeyed that law for him which he could not obey in his own person."" So for those who come to see how God can be both a just and merciful savior, who receive this blessed and glorious truth, as evidenced by their being convinced of sin so as to confess their sins, rejoice in knowing that "God is faithful," and not merely "faithful," but also "just to forgive them their sins."

F. Closing: Romans 3:26 sets forth how the very righteousness of God that is revealed in God's Gospel declares to us how God "...***might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.***" A just God and a Savior! Do you know Him in that way? Does the gospel you believe set forth a way of salvation whereby God is not simply merciful and faithful to save, but also just in doing so? In so believing, we have every reason to rejoice in the certainty of the full, free, and irrevocable pardon of all our sins. What a sure and certain salvation from One who is "Faithful and Just to Forgive."

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God's grace found in the only infallible source, God's word itself – the Bible.