

Tell Yourself

“This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” (1 John 3:19-20)

“The gracious forgiveness of all your sins! Hear it rightly. Take it absolutely literally—the forgiveness of all your sins. Divinely understood, you ought to be able to go away from the altar as a newborn baby, upon whom nothing weighs heavily, thus even lighter of heart, provided much has weighed upon your heart” (Soren Kierkegaard, 1813-1855).

“Divinely understood, you ought to be able to go away from the altar as a newborn baby. . . .” Ah, when that is true, life is so good and sweet. There is, however, a phrase in that quote that is tricky to get past with ease. Know what the phrase is? “. . . you ought to be . . .” It is not that I disagree with it. There is just a huge difference between what ought to be and what is. In other words, knowing God has forgiven me is one thing. Telling myself that I am forgiven is another matter all together. Going away from the altar as a newborn baby is great, but first you have to get there . . . to the altar. That was Leah’s struggle.

I was in my office when she called, her voice filled with despair in the midst of deep sobbing and tears. We arranged to meet within the hour, upstairs in the sanctuary. When I went up to meet her, I found her in the very back of the church. In fact, she was as far back as one can be from the front of the sanctuary and the altar without actually being outside. I invited her to come inside. She told me that she did not feel worthy to go

any closer. I did not insist. We stood there in the entrance of the church and talked. Leah’s journey had been a very rough one. Let her words that she shared as a testimony in a worship service tell you her story:

“Seven years ago my life changed forever. I began experiencing extensive fears and worries which became debilitating and included controlling “what if” thoughts and unrealistic danger. I over-examined daily thoughts and actions. I repeated them constantly in my mind. I was paranoid. Due to denial and fear of judgment, I avoided getting help, fearing how the outcome would affect me as a mother, as an employee and as a potential employee if I left my present job—and how would others judge me as a person in today’s world? As a consequence, I allowed anxiety to control my life, and eventually depression set in. I needed to make an immediate choice in my life. The symptoms were causing severe confusion to my children and threatening my marriage. I needed to make a commitment to get the help for myself and for my family.”

Leah knew what it was like to be afraid of people. Standing now in the back of the church, her question was, “Do I have to be afraid of God?” This had become the battle within. She had come to the conclusion that she had this disease because of God’s dislike

for her. Believing she was unworthy of His love, she had thrown out every Bible in the house. Her actions only fed the feeling of unworthiness. It became a vicious cycle. It was not the illness keeping her away but the deep feeling of unworthiness.

Does God want us to approach His altar? Many of us would immediately say, “Of course,” but there is a wide gap between saying it and believing it, especially when you find it difficult to forgive yourself. There are so many things that can lead us to believe we are not worthy or wanted. It could be years of a destructive addiction. Maybe it is an injury we caused to someone by what we said or did. Is there anything inside of you that makes you feel unworthy or unwanted? Anything that holds you back from coming closer?

Leah was diagnosed with Obsession Compulsion Disorder. It had driven her to a point of despair. The paranoia was at its worst, with her believing that God had it out against her. It had confused her family. It was destroying her marriage. She was not being honest with her husband. The walls were going up at home and between her and God. It wasn't the disease that was keeping her at a distance. It was what she had done and said that left her feeling distant from everyone. She not only wondered if those whom she loved could forgive her, but she was uncertain how to forgive herself. Complicating all of this was the confusion between true and false guilt. Some of Leah's guilt was over things that she had truly messed up. Other parts of her guilt were over things she imagined, with no basis of truth to it, as it was a part of the paranoia. In either case, the problem was the same: “How do I forgive myself?” Does He want me to approach Him?

I did not say a lot to Leah. I just had the sense to say little and get out of the way with what God was already doing. I did direct her to Luke 15 (the story of the prodigal son). I briefly explained to her how the son returned home with a rehearsed speech in his mind in

order to get on his dad's good side again. At least it would be better to be in his father's house as a servant than the way he was living at present. On his way home, before he could get words out of his mouth, his dad was running toward him. Normally it would be reversed, with the father waiting for his son to come to him. Then there is the shame of this father running. This was an action that was sure to invite the disrespect of the village upon the father. The father did not care. His son was coming home. Before the son could offer anything, the father was restoring the dignity of his son with the ring, the robe and the sandals.

I reminded Leah that the Father in this parable is Jesus. This is what He has done for you and me. This is what He is doing today. He is running toward you. The shame you feel, He has taken upon Himself on the Cross. Now He wants to restore your dignity and worth by means of His cleansing grace. We are not worthy. Not Leah. Not you. Not me. None of us are worthy. But, oh my, are we wanted! Do you see Him running toward you!?

I invited Leah to spend some time alone with God, pondering the words of Luke 15. I also invited her to go closer to the altar should she wish. God would enjoy and welcome that. I then left her alone to ponder the One running toward her.

Forgiveness. It is one thing to know that God has forgiven us. It is sometimes very hard to forgive someone who has hurt us. Maybe hardest of all is being able to forgive ourselves.

What is it that stands in the way of forgiving oneself? I have found three common stumbling blocks. The first is “performance-based forgiveness”—the belief that I must do enough in order to deserve His mercy. I know in my mind that it is by His grace, but so ingrained in my sinful nature is the thought that I am in control. I am the one who must contribute toward my good. It is more than my not being able to accept something for

free. It is that I have a hard time admitting that I am helpless without God making the first move.

The second thing that stands in the way of forgiving oneself often times revolves around understanding the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt is when I say, “I have done something bad.” Shame is when I say, “I am bad.” God deals with both of these on the Cross.

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (Romans 5:1-2).

I have been justified. God has declared me just. He has removed my guilt. It is as if I did nothing wrong. But what of my remembrance of what I have done? What do I do with my shame? He has declared me just. He holds nothing against me. Does He, however, want to fellowship with me? From Leah’s perspective—can we be friends? Can I come near to Him again?

“Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Romans 5:9-10).

Justification is a legal term. Reconciliation is a relational term. It is very personal. If I get a speeding ticket, I want to be justified. I am not really concerned if the officer and I are reconciled (that is unless he is a friend of mine). At the Cross, God reconciles me to Himself. The friendship is restored. He wants to have me close.

The third thing that stands in the way of forgiving oneself is our hesitancy to turn around and take a look at Him. This is the essence of repentance. The defiance of sin is nothing less than our turning our back on God.

When God leads us to repentance, it involves a change of mind and a turning around. We see things differently. That is what happened with the prodigal son. That is what God was inviting Leah to do. Turn around and look at my face—the face of Jesus as He comes running to you.

“Repent, then and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord” (Acts 3:19).

Here is how Leah’s testimony continues:

“I got professional help and started on medication. I was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Without help, I was told, I would not improve. I was not able to take control of my fears by myself. I could only do this with Christ’s help. Admitting to others my paranoid fears was the hardest part. I feared telling anyone, partly due to paranoia and partly due to societal judgments. I was inspired through prayer, patience, encouragement and spiritual guidance to allow God to handle my fears. As I got to know God and who He is and that He is with me at all times, I realized that I had the courage to fight the paranoia. Two thoughts were of help to me. The first is a quote from Billy Graham: ‘Anxiety is the natural result when our lives are centered on anything short of God.’ The other thought is from Deuteronomy 1:17: *“Do not show partiality in judgment; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God.”*

“Judgment belongs to God,” and, in Christ, He has declared you and me not guilty. Before you tell anyone about the love of God . . . before you proclaim to the world what you have learned about Jesus . . . tell yourself that He has forgiven you—of *all* your sins.

Martin Luther was once asked if he felt his sins were forgiven. He replied, “No, I don’t *feel* that they are forgiven; I *know* that they are, because God says so in His Word.”

There is a huge difference between *knowing* and *feeling*. I do not always *feel* forgiven, but I trust His Word—His Word that tells me it is so.

Spend a few moments to meditate on His Word. Let Him speak to you. If you are bothered by your remembrance of past sins, let His Word remind you that He has forgotten them.

“The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgression from us. As a father has compassion on his children so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:8-14).

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me . . . You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God you will not despise” (Psalm 51:10-11, 16-17).

“This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything” (1 John 3:20).

“God is greater than our hearts.” He knows the guilt and the shame that can so often haunt you. Set your heart at rest. Be at peace, not in your promises to do better but in

His promise that is carried out on the Cross. I like the way Charles Stanley has put it:

“There we have it. Christ is God’s solution for dealing with sin. Only through Christ can we find forgiveness. But once it has been found, it is a settled issue—past sin, present sin, and future sin. The details of what we have done, why we did it, and how many times we did it are irrelevant. Sin is sin; lost is lost; paid is paid; forgiven is forgiven. Either we have it, or we don’t. Are there sins from your past that continue to hang over you like a dark cloud? When you pray, does something inside you cause you to doubt that God is going to listen to you because of your past? Do you feel that your potential for the kingdom of God has been destroyed because of your past disobedience? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you have not yet come to grips with God’s solution to your sin. You are still holding on to a way of thinking that will keep you in bondage the rest of your life. You have set yourself up to live a defeated life in which you never reach your potential for the kingdom of God” (p. 56).

“Divinely understood, you ought to be able to go away from the altar as a newborn baby, upon whom nothing weighs heavily . . .” Getting to the altar was not an easy journey for Leah. She did get there, however. After I left, she eventually entered the church and made her way up to the altar. As she did, I imagine that the angels in heaven rejoiced and “high-fived” each other. Leah was home. When she left the altar, it was the beginning of a new journey and “upon her heart nothing weighed too heavily.”

That moment freed her from her bondage to fear. God, who works all things together had used her disease to draw her closer to Him. Now others are blessed and being invited to come to His altar through her witness and service within the Kingdom. I know of few greater joys than that of

witnessing the power of the transformed life.

Do you find it difficult to approach the altar? Tell yourself this day: “God has forgiven me. I am justified. I am reconciled.” Tell yourself, “Sin is sin; lost is lost; paid is paid; and forgiven is forgiven” and “I am not worthy, but I am wanted. I am wanted and loved by God, and the blood of Jesus makes me worthy to come close to Him.

Prayer: I am justified. I am reconciled. I am welcomed in your presence. You want me to come close to you—not because of anything I have done. I deserve none of this. It is all because of you, Jesus. You have taken my shame and guilt upon yourself. Now you welcome me to draw close to you with nothing weighing too heavily on me. All praise be to you, O Christ. **Amen.**

Challenge: Look for a moment this day in an email or a note or a conversation to pass the baton of faith onto those close to you.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 103

From the Book of Concord: “From Peter they also quote this statement [1 Peter 4:8], ‘Love covers a multitude of sins.’ It is evident that Peter is also speaking about love toward the neighbor because he connects this passage to the text that commands love for one another. Indeed, it could not have entered the mind of any apostle to say that our love overcomes sin and death; or that love is an atoning sacrifice on account of which God is reconciled apart from Christ the mediator; or that love is righteousness without Christ the mediator. For even if there were such a love, it would be a righteousness of the law rather than of the gospel, because the latter promises us reconciliation and righteousness when we believe that on account of Christ as the propitiator, the Father is gracious to us, and that the merits of Christ are bestowed upon us. Therefore a little earlier Peter urges [1 Peter 2:4, 5] us to come to Christ so that we might be built upon Christ. And he adds [1 Peter 2:6], ‘Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’ Our love does not free us from shame when God judges and accuses us. But faith in Christ does free us in the midst of these fears because we know that on account of Christ we are forgiven” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification, p. 156.238-239).