

2nd Opinion: To follow Jesus, you can't follow yourself

February 13, 2014

After the worship service, someone asked me: "Does God really forgive us? Even past sins? Even past sins we've done again?"

My first thought: "Have we really done that bad a job explaining forgiveness?" My second thought: "I've got to correct this."

I explained that yes, God does indeed forgive us.



Eric Black When we confess our sins to God, God is faithful and forgives us (1 John 1:9). Hezekiah said God loved him so much God put all of Hezekiah's sins behind his back (Isaiah 38:17). Imagine God putting your sins behind God's back. And forgetting them. They're out of sight. As far as the east is from the west—God removes our sins that far from us (Psalm 103:12).

Does God forgive us? Yes, yes and again yes!

The problem isn't with God. The problem is with us, either because we won't ask or because we can't believe it's that easy.

I went home that Sunday afternoon thinking, "I have to do something about this forgiveness question." For the next Sunday's sermon, I already had chosen Matthew 16:24: "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Whoever wants to

be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'”

I thought, “How am I supposed to get ‘forgiveness’ out of that?” I didn’t want to change the passage, and I didn’t want to preach on anything but forgiveness.

Peter’s denial

Then I read the whole passage: “From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’

“Jesus turned and said to Peter: ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.’

“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?’”

In broader context, I realized Jesus was responding to Peter’s impulsiveness. Peter often spoke or acted first and sorted it out later.

When Jesus told his disciples he would be killed, Peter shot first. He couldn’t accept Jesus for who Jesus was and what Jesus came to do. He wanted Jesus to be someone else, and Jesus was quick to correct Peter.

Betrayal forgiven

And then I saw it. Jesus was responding to Peter, who three times denied knowing his very good friend Jesus yet was forgiven this betrayal.

I realized Peter's denial that fateful night was the culmination of a habit of denying Jesus:

- When Jesus called Peter to follow him, Peter said he wasn't worthy, essentially saying Jesus didn't know what he was doing.
- When Peter walked on the water, he took his eyes off Jesus and sank, essentially saying Jesus wasn't trustworthy.
- When Jesus tried to wash Peter's feet, Peter pulled away, essentially saying Jesus wouldn't do such a nasty thing.
- When the men came to arrest Jesus, Peter cut off one guy's ear, essentially saying Jesus couldn't defend himself.

Yes, denying Jesus was a way of life for Peter.

After Jesus rose from death, he met his disciples and ate fish with them. He forgave Peter. He didn't forgive Peter for one measly night of denial. No, he forgave Peter for years of denial. He forgave Peter for years of hanging on to his own desires and plans while pushing Jesus' aside.

How many times?

Yes, Jesus forgave Peter, who had asked Jesus, "How many times must I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Seven times?" (Matthew 18:21-35) No, Peter, many more times than that.

We want forgiveness on our terms, not God's. We want forgiveness explainable, justifiable, believable. But when we approach forgiveness this way, we are like Peter, we "do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." We simply can't believe God would or could

forgive us—of everything, perhaps because we find it so unreasonable to do that for others, or perhaps because we can't accept what we don't earn. That's not a problem with God. The problem is inside us.

When we can't take God at God's word concerning how things are, instead of denying ourselves, we hold on to ourselves and try to shape God in our own image, conforming God to our wants, desires and plans.

Accept God on God's terms

To be forgiven—and we realize we need to be forgiven—we must accept God on God's terms. To do that, we must deny ourselves. We must accept that God sent Jesus into this world so whoever will believe in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life. We must accept that Jesus purchased eternal life through his death, and we must accept that his death—and not our own works—obtained our forgiveness.

Does God really forgive us? Absolutely. And it cannot be earned. It can only be given. And to believe that, you “must deny (yourself) and take up (your) cross and follow (Jesus). For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for (Jesus) will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet (give up) their soul? ... What can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”

Indeed, what can be given beyond what's already been given?

The rest of Peter's story is that once he got over himself, accepted God's plan and accepted the bottomless grace and forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ, he became the leader of Christ's body—the church. He preached to a crowd of thousands one day, and 3,000 believed his message and gave themselves to Jesus.

What is the rest of your story?

-Eric Black is pastor of First Baptist Church in Covington.