

## **“Forgiven (Even Before You Had Chosen to Sin)”**

Ephesians 1:3-14

# 4 in our series on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians

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### **Introduction**

Today we’re continuing our sermon series from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. This is our fourth sermon on the second sentence in the letter. It’s the longest sentence in the Bible. It includes all things and God, and it’s rather hard to talk about, particularly in public. So I just need some reassurance. I need a kiss from my wife. She’s incredible; she’s like my life and my light and everything good. And she’s beautiful, a picture of grace.

[Susan kisses Peter, and Peter pulls out his wallet and pays her. She shakes her head, says “No, thank you,” returns the money, and leaves the stage.]

Mom, did you see that? This is my mom. She gave birth to me. In college she stayed up all night typing my papers. Mom, can I give you a hug?

[Peter hugs his mom and then tries to give her cash from his wallet. She rejects the money.]

### **Prayer**

Father, help us to preach and to understand the Gospel. In Jesus’ name, amen.

### **Sermon**

Ephesians 1:3-7:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...*

That’s what we talked about in our first sermon. He blessed us.

*...even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world...*

That’s what we talked about in our second sermon. He chose us in Him before the foundation of the cosmos.

*...that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.*

That was our third sermon. He chose us to choose to live to the praise of His glorious grace. And how does He do that?

*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace...*

“Forgiveness according to the riches of His grace.” Forgiveness depends on His grace not your choice or your repentance, sorrow, or remorse. “Forgiveness of trespasses according to the riches of His grace.” How rich is God in grace? Sort of rich? Pretty rich? What’s the limit of God’s grace? Where does it run out?

Is it enough for a “level six sin” but not a “level seven sin”?

Is it enough to forgive you ten times but not eleven?

Is it enough to forgive you for ninety-two years of sinning, but at ninety-three God says, “Enough is enough! You used up my grace. I have no more blood, no more grace, no more patience. So now I’ll torture you endlessly in Hell, *not* to the praise of my glorious grace!”?

How rich is God in grace? And remember, we’re to live “to the praise of His glorious grace.” So is that *some* grace, like level six grace and not level seven grace? So...[singing] “Glory...level six glory...be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost.”

Ephesians 1:7-14:

*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

In Greek, “all” means “all.” There are some words that are very hard to translate out of Greek, words that get translated as “eternal” or “ever” or “age” or “hell” or “judgment” or “condemnation.” But “all” is a very simply concept. All is all.

If God unites all things in Christ, it sure sounds like all is forgiven in Christ. And this was and is the plan for the fullness of time, from the foundation of the cosmos.

*In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will...*

“Works” is *energeo* in Greek, meaning: “effectively makes all things, does all things, accomplishes all things.” If He accomplishes all things according to the council of His will, what do we accomplish according to the council of our own will? Well...His will, or nothing. We agree with His will, or we will nothing, even if we think it’s something. So...

- 1.) His will is creation.
- 2.) But to will what He does not will is uncreation, desecration. It is to will nothing.

To will what He does not will is sin.

But what does God will? Well, regarding us, from the foundation of the world, we know what He wills: “Let us make man [male and female] in our image.” If He wills it, what happens? *It* happens. Is your will stronger than God’s will? If your answer is yes, who the Hell do you think you are? Seriously, who do you think you are? His adversary? Do you think you’ll win? Even if you killed Him, crucified Him, do you think you’ll win against (verse 11) “the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will”?

*...so that we who were the first to hope in Christ...*

If we’re first fruits, maybe there are later fruits and last fruits.

*...might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed*

*with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.*

Ephesians 3:1-14. That's quite a sentence. And I'd like to focus on the middle of that sentence in the context of the whole sentence. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses (our sins)." In Him. And we're chosen in Him before the foundation of the world, and all things will be united in Him.

A friend of mine tells about a young evangelist he watched evangelizing people in the airport. The evangelist stood in front of an elderly, black man sitting nearby. He cleared his throat and said, "Excuse me, sir, but are you saved?" Softly the old man said, "I am." The evangelist said, "Can you tell me exactly when you were saved?" The old guy said, "Not exactly. It was about 2,000 years ago...but I just found out about it recently."

That's a pretty good answer. Paul might push it back even further, for you were chosen in Christ from the foundation of the world.

Remember when we talked about Flatland, about how two-dimensional creatures can't comprehend three dimensions? Then we talked about the dimension of time and how God sees all your life in an eternal moment. God is light, and time is relative to light. So if you travel at the speed of light, all time is present to you.

Space and time (chronological time) are created realities. So if you were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the cosmos, before the Big Bang, that means God chose to forgive you in Christ at least 14 billion years ago (as we measure time). He chose to forgive you 14 billion years before you chose to sin. And He hasn't forgiven *some* of your sin; He has forgiven *all* of it. It was all nailed to the cross in Christ Jesus, and that was the decision, the plan, from before the foundation of the world.

So it's not like you could commit some sin tomorrow that would call off the deal. It's not like you could commit some sin and God Almighty would say, "Oh my goodness, I didn't see that one coming. I forgot that one! I'm going to have to start over. I hope Jesus will die for that one too."

It's not like He's disappointed. *I'm* disappointed. *I'm* the one who has false expectations. But God expects far more failure from me than I expect from myself. God is not disillusioned with me, because He never had any illusions about me.

"Oh my goodness, I can't believe Adam and Eve ate from the tree!"

"I can't believe Israel nailed the Messiah to that tree!"

"I can't believe Peter Hiett sinned! Never in a thousand years would I have imagined he'd do that! I'm so disappointed."

No. From the foundation of the world He chose to forgive my sin, all my sin, all your sin, and it's not just in Ephesians.

- Colossians 1:20 – "Through Christ, God reconciles all things to Himself, making peace by the blood of His cross."
- Colossians 2:13 – "God made us alive together with Christ, having forgiven us all our trespasses."
- Isaiah 53:6 – "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

- John 1:29 – “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”
- 1 John 2:2 – “He is the propitiation (the atoning sacrifice) for our sins, and not for ours only, but the sins of the whole world.”
- The Revelation even refers to Jesus as “the lamb slain from the foundation of the world.”

I think Scripture is saying all your sins have been forgiven: past, present, and future.

Now, I know that Jesus said, “If you don’t forgive, you won’t be forgiven.” So, unforgiveness is the unforgivable sin. You can’t harbor unforgiveness in Heaven; you can’t wish people to Hell and go to Heaven. And yet Paul writes, “All your sins are forgiven,” which logically implies, “You will forgive as you are forgiven.”

It’s like there’s a realm or a kingdom of forgiveness that is real and eternal and true. And there’s a kingdom of unforgiveness that is an illusion, a lie. It’s temporal and passing away; it’s nothing.

So in reality, you truly are forgiven. You don’t owe God anything that hasn’t already been paid. And if you think you do, you’re trapped in an illusion, a lie, a darkness, a nothingness where you punish yourself, trying to pay imaginary debts and demanding imaginary debts be paid by others. But forgiveness has happened at the edge of time and eternity. It happened at the cross, and that’s why we’re told to proclaim it.

We don’t bargain with the forgiveness of sins. We don’t sell the forgiveness of sins or make threats about it as if folks could pay for it. Acts 13:38 says we “proclaim it.”

So now I’m going to proclaim it, preach it, the Gospel, “the forgiveness of sins.”

1. Think of the worst, most embarrassing sin you’ve ever committed. Got it? In the name of Jesus, you are forgiven. You cannot make up for it, you cannot fix it, you cannot pay for it. It’s already been paid for.
2. Think of a sin you’re afraid you might commit in the future. In the name of Jesus, if you commit it, you are forgiven.

In Matthew 12:31, Jesus said, “Every sin will be forgiven people except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.” Now, if you are afraid of committing blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, I don’t think you are committing blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. To desire God’s grace is to have God’s grace.

See, if you’re forgiven money you’ve borrowed from a bank, it means that you don’t have to give it back. You keep it. But if you borrow God’s glory, you *will* have to give it back. God’s glory is grace. So if you live for the praise of your own glory, you will live to the praise of His glory, “His glorious grace.”

You *will* bend the knee and worship.  
 You *will* know that He is Creator and He is good.  
 You *will* be made in His image.  
 You *will* acknowledge that you are forgiven.

Jesus was speaking to Pharisees, and Pharisees refuse to acknowledge grace. But eventually all will give glory to grace. God is grace. The unforgivable sin is unforgivable not

because grace runs out, but because God is grace and never runs out. The unforgivable sin is unforgiveness.

And now...

3. Think of the worst sin someone has committed against you. In the name of Jesus, they are forgiven.
4. Think of the worst sin someone could commit against you. If they commit it, in the name of Jesus, they are forgiven.

Now, how do you feel?

My guess is that in the first instance (#1), you felt really good...but maybe a little offended when I said, "You cannot pay." In the second instance (#2, forgiven for sins you haven't yet committed), my guess is that it felt good...but you started to worry. You thought, "If I'm not threatened with punishment or promised a reward, I'm afraid I won't choose the good." But that only reveals that you don't love the good, which means you've only used the good to obtain something you've judged to be better than the good.

Maybe choosing the good *is* the good.

Maybe the good is its own reward, and *not* choosing the good is its own punishment.

Maybe you fear not choosing the good, for you haven't truly met the good and have never chosen the good.

Well, anyway, forgiveness made you anxious, anxious that you might lose control of you.

By the third instance (#3), you were angry. "How can God forgive them? They sinned against me!"

In Psalm 51, after David murdered Uriah and committed adultery with Bathsheba, he writes, "Oh Lord, against you and you only have I sinned." When you sin against another sinner, it's like stealing from a thief, lying to a liar, or murdering a murderer. "Against you only have I sinned," writes David.

Or maybe after #3 you thought, "That's not fair! People should pay, and people should get what they deserve." Well, what does anyone deserve? What could they deserve it with? And what could they pay with? What could one give that hasn't been given?

By the fourth instance (#4), my guess is you were angry and terrified...terrified of what might happen to you if you lived like this. I mean, if someone took your cloak, you wouldn't prosecute; you'd give them your coat as well. If someone struck you on one cheek, you'd turn the other to them. If you lived like this, you'd get yourself crucified. You might as well pick up a cross and carry it around.

Maybe you were terrified of what might happen to you, or terrified that this trivializes sin. But the forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus does not trivialize sin. It does just the opposite. Someone pays. Our sin cost God His own blood. The life is in the blood. When we sin, we take His life. And when He forgives, He forgives His life. God pays for sin with His life. And the blood of Christ is *not* trivial. Nothing is less trivial than the blood of Christ.

Well, at the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus, perhaps you were terrified that God does not take sin seriously and thus terrified of sins that might be

committed against you, and frankly terrified that nothing will change, that this world will never change.

If God doesn't change this world through threats of punishment and promises of rewards, how will it ever change?

If God doesn't lead us to repentance with a fear of Hell and a lust for Heaven, how will He lead us to repentance? What is it that leads us to repentance?

If God doesn't punish us for spilling His own blood, how's He going to keep us from spilling more blood?

Unless, of course, there is power in the blood. [Peter sings] "Power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the Lamb..."

Well, I doubt you followed all of that. I just want to point out to you that the proclamation of forgiveness is like judgment: It fills us with this outrageous hope and abject terror. Psalm 130:3-4: "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared."

Maybe the thing we fear most is the very thing we most desperately desire. We fear perfect love, and perfect love casts out fear. Maybe forgiveness is the very holiness of God, the judgment of God, the will of God, the decision of God, the very life blood of God. We long for it and are utterly terrified by it. For in its presence we are utterly undone. This entire world is utterly undone—consumed, in fact—by the eternal, fiery substance of God.

Well now, I have one last question for you. I asked you about believing your sins were forgiven, and I asked you about believing others' sins were forgiven. Is it easier to believe *your* sins are forgiven or that another's sins are forgiven? Is it easier to forgive *yourself* or to forgive others?

Clearly it's easier to excuse yourself than to excuse others. Psychological tests bear that out. In one study, 70% of high school students ranked themselves "above average" in leadership ability, 60% rated themselves in the top 10% in their ability to get along with others, and 0% rated themselves below average. One survey revealed that 94% of college faculty (these are people who understand math) perceived themselves as better than their colleagues.

Clearly we're very good at excusing ourselves. We excuse mistakes, but we must forgive sins. It's precisely when something becomes "inexcusable" that it becomes "forgivable." Or at least what we mean by forgivable: a sin to be forgiven. People say, "I can't forgive that! It's inexcusable!" It is forgivable and it is sin; sins are forgiven, not excused.

So, we're very good at excusing ourselves...but forgiving ourselves? Not so much.

Three days ago, on Thursday, I went to lunch with my best friend. He drove, and three other friends were with us. At a blind intersection he came to a complete stop, looked both ways, and then pulled into the intersection. Suddenly something hit the front of the car with a violent impact, and I saw a body flying through the air and a motorcycle careening across the street. The body landed on the other side of the intersection.

As I jumped out, I noticed it was a two-way stop. The motorcycle must have been coming pretty fast, and none of us saw him until it was too late. It could have been any of us driving. But the motorcycle had the right of way.

We ran to the man moaning on the curb, and a crowd gathered. The ambulance came and took him away. It appears the fellow escaped with just a broken leg.

I began to comfort my friend Andrew, and I immediately wanted him to know God's grace...not just that he was excused but also that he was *forgiven* of anything he'd done wrong.

You know, people have confessed just about every sin to me: abortions, murders, just about every sexual sin imaginable.... And I've looked them in the eye and said, "In the name of Jesus, under the authority of His blood, you are forgiven." And I really believe that.

It doesn't mean that they shouldn't be reported to the police. It doesn't mean that civil authority shouldn't lock them up. It means that they are not in any way indebted to God for their sin. It means that they can't pay for their sin, because Jesus Christ has already paid for their sin with His blood. It's incredibly powerful; it makes demons flee and gives birth to life.

And I have incredible confidence that they are, in fact, completely forgiven.

St. Paul, who wrote Ephesians, called himself "the chief of sinners," because he persecuted the Church. Jesus appeared to Him and said, "Paul, you're persecuting me." Paul knew that he crucified the Christ...took His life. Yet Jesus gave His life, and Paul knew he was forgiven. Through St. Paul, God wrote the Bible and changed the world! It's the power of the blood, the power of forgiveness. And I *believe* it...for others.

But I want to confess, I really struggle believing it for myself. I want to confess that the moment I felt the motorcycle hit the car and saw the body flying through the air, I had this thought: "I'm glad it was Andrew driving. I can forgive Andrew, but I don't know if I could forgive myself." In other words, the blood of Jesus is good enough for Andrew, but it's not good enough for me. Why do I think it's not good enough for me? Because I'm so God-damned proud! (I choose my words carefully, because my pride gets damned.) Why do people say, "I can't be forgiven"? It's because they think they are more powerful than God.

Why do you forgive others easily and have such a hard time forgiving yourself? It's not humility; it's pride. To believe you're forgiven is to die—to die to yourself, your ego, your pride. It is to die to a lie in which you are imprisoned. And this is the lie, that you can justify yourself, that you can create yourself and *must* create yourself in the image of God with your knowledge of good and evil.

So we're great at excusing ourselves and horrid at believing we're forgiven, because we believe that we *can pay*. And religious types like me, Pharisees like Paul, experts in the knowledge of good and evil...we're often the worst.

A few months ago on a Tuesday after my weekend, I asked Susan to come pray with me. I felt awful. The last five years have been really tough. I've seen a lot of pain, and I've felt like a failure. And I don't know what has been my fault and what has not been my fault, but I think I'm always looking for blame. And this day I was feeling a ton of shame and guilt. So I prayed with Susan, confessing my sins: a movie I felt guilty about watching, one too many glasses of wine I felt guilty about drinking...and Susan said, "I just heard Jesus say this: 'Peter, why do you always feel like you have to pay?'"

See, maybe the very epitome of sin is that we come to this tree called the cross—we come to this table where Jesus says, "This is my body, given to you; this is my blood, my life, poured out for you"—and we try to pay. [Peter puts cash and a credit card on the communion table.] When we try to pay for the sacrament of the covenant of love, it's called prostitution. No wonder Jesus weeps.

When I try to pay for love and grace, it means I've judged grace as *not* grace. And I don't know grace. So instead of believing I'm forgiven my sin, I try to pay for my sin with sorrow and remorse and driven-ness and long hours and lots of anxiety and guilt. I try to pay for forgiveness, which means I don't believe I'm forgiven.

Hey, do you know what that word "forgive" or "forgiveness" means in the Bible? In Greek, *aphiemi* is the verb, and *aphesis* is the noun. It literally means "to let" or "let go" or "release." So it really doesn't even matter if I know exactly what's a mistake and what's a sin. It doesn't matter that I'm not able to judge my world or myself. I can just let it be. Let it be.

Do you remember what God said in the beginning? "Let there be light." "Let." Who's He talking to? "Let there be light, let there be an expanse, let there be land and plants and sun moon and stars and fish and animals, and let us create man." Let us, let us, let us.... Who's he talking to? Maybe Himself (Trinity), maybe Jesus, maybe you. "Let us create."

Do you let the Creator create, or must you accomplish all things according to the council of your will, as if you were the creator? You know, if God is the Creator and you are His creation, then everything is grace and you can't pay for anything! Biblically speaking, everything is forgiven you, and you must *let it be*. You must let it be or exist in an illusion—a lie—an outer darkness, exist in a void or become a void.

Everything is forgiven you  
and even *you* are forgiven you.

At creation God spoke His will—His word—into the void. Maybe evil is like the great absence—the void, and sin is like the void *in me* that I create *in me* when I will what God does not will. Sin is like a void in me, an empty place in me...like a womb in me. And God speaks His will, His word, His grace into me like a seed of faith in me, good will in me. And I can only let it be.

Do you remember when the angel came to Mother Mary? He said, "Fear not, you have found [stumbled upon] grace from God. You will conceive and bear a son named *God is salvation*, Jesus, Son of David." And Mary said, "Let it be."

In Psalm 51:4, after David had gone into Bathsheba, he wrote, "Against you and you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment." God's judgment is grace, and His Word is Jesus. And into David's sin, and within Bathsheba's womb, Jesus—the Prince of Peace—was crucified. Jesus, son of Mary, and great-great-great-great-grandson of David and Bathsheba, was born out of their sin.

Evil is a void, and sin in me is a bad will in me. It is a void in me. And so...

- I try to fill the void with more void.
- I try to fix myself with myself.
- I try to fix my bad will with my bad will, and I call that religion.
- I try to fix my sin with more sin.
- I try to save myself from my sin with my sin (with myself), and that is sin.

Ultimately, I have to...let it be. Let my sin be. If I think that I save myself from my sin, I can't be saved from my sin. For my sin is thinking I am the savior. Ultimately I have to let my sin be...

Which is to let my Savior be,  
Which is to let me—the true me—be,  
Which is to let the new creation be,  
Which is to let Heaven be.

You cannot pay for Heaven; you can only let it be. In other words, you are saved by grace through faith, and even that faith is grace. It's God's good will born into the womb of your bad will. It's Jesus born in your manger and rising in your tomb. It's His blood in your body. St. Paul wrote, "It's no longer I who live but Christ in me." And it happens at this table and this tree.

### **Communion**

So I want you to think of the worst sin you can remember committing, the sin you're most terrified you'll commit, or the sin you keep committing and just can't seem to stop committing. Jesus took the bread, and He broke it saying, "This is my Body given to you. Take and eat." And He took the cup saying, "This is the new covenant in my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins." And now repeat these words after me: "Let it be."

Now, I suspect some of you may still be troubled. You're worried that if I tell people that they're forgiven much (and they believe me), they will feel free to sin, to "will what God does not will." And God is love, and He wills that we would love. You're worried that forgiven much, we'll all sin much. Isn't that ironic? For Jesus said, "The one forgive much, loves much." All I'm saying is: You, my friend, are forgiven much. You are being made in the image of love. Repeat after me, "Let it be."

### **Benediction**

Heaven is a gift of grace. Reality is grace. So we must learn to love grace, receive the kingdom, and learn grace at the foot of the cross...learn that we can't pay. "The one forgiven much loves much." Here's the Gospel: You have been forgiven much!