

FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND COME SHORT OF THE IMAGE OF GOD!

Romans 3:22b-23

Our text for today reads simply, “*For there is **no distinction**, since **all** have sinned and come short of the image of God.*” The specific distinction that Paul is referring to is racial and religious—there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek. Today we think in terms of white, black, yellow, red and brown; in terms of Christian, Jewish and Muslim. Paul advocates for unity and equality in the midst and the awareness of diversity when he writes, “*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” Friends, there is no distinction when it comes to God’s love and God’s forgiveness—for **all** have sinned!

Sin! I do not find the topic of sin to be a very pleasant one. It is sin that divides us from God and from each other. And it is sin that leads many into unhealthy life styles and choices. Even though I find sin to be an unpleasant topic it is an important one when we truly understand its scriptural meaning.

Sin means missing the mark, missing the intended goal. Sin is a general term not a specific one; however, many try to make it specific by listing acts of sin. Scriptural sin is singular not plural. Paul writes, “For all have **sinned**...” not “for all have committed **sins**.”

Growing up as a Baptist I was taught that sin is drinking, smoking, dancing and long hair on guys. Teaching these things to young people as sin is teaching one’s moral values; it is not teaching the scriptural concept of sin—missing the mark.

What is missing the mark? Well first we must ask, what is the mark? “*For all have sinned and come short, missed the mark, of the **image of God**.*” That is it my friends, missing the mark is falling short of living God’s image, of having the image of God reflected in one’s life.

Last week we examined where Paul wrote that to be in the image of God is to be clothed in Christ; in the characteristics of Christ which consist of **compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness and love**. So where did the Baptists come up with dancing as sin? They mixed their moralistic values with their faith and they came up with a watered down almost meaningless understanding of sin. They did not want me or my friends to dance or wear long wear; yet, in those days many of them fought to keep “*the dirty niggers*” out of their church! You tell me who it was that was caught up in the evil power of sin, you tell me who it was that missed the mark, that fell short of the image of God—long haired boys or men clothed in white robes and hoods

Sin my friends can be understood as uncompassionate behavior, meanness, arrogance, feeling and acting superior, impatience, an unwillingness to forgive,

and being unloving. These are the opposites of being clothed in Christ. These are the characteristics that cause one to fall short of the image of God—to sin!

Now the truth of the matter is, all of us, everyone, each one, each person, at times has and will fall short of the image of God. There are times that we, the chosen and beloved of God, do not reflect very well the image of God! “*For all have sinned, and have missed the mark, have fallen short of the image of God.*” But thanks be to God that God always reflects the image of God, that God is consistent and constant. God forgives! When we miss the mark God forgives! And the hope is that we, God’s chosen and beloved, will catch the divine spirit of forgiveness, and that we too will forgive! It was Alexander Pope who penned, “*To err is human, to forgive divine.*” When we forgive we are reflecting the divine, the image of God within. Listen as I read a portion of last week’s text. **(Read Colossians 3:12-14)**

“... *Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you forgive.*” Powerful words! Moving words! C.S. Lewis wrote, “*We all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we actually have to practice it!*”

My friends, I have been on both sides of human forgiveness. I have needed to be forgiven. And I have needed to forgive. Forgiveness is probably the most difficult of all the clothes of Christ that we are called to wear. I am not unusual. You too have been on both sides of forgiveness. You have needed to be forgiven, and you have needed to forgive.

There are many reasons and excuses that we give to exempt ourselves from forgiving. Such as, they deliberately hurt me, they meant to do what they did, they specifically did not invite me, and they left me out so they are now off of my list. We seem to believe that intent is a reason to not forgive. But what about God? This is where we have to be honest. What about the times that we have intentionally sinned against God and others, that we have missed the mark? That we have intentionally hurt God? That we have intentionally hurt others? Intentionally left God out? God does not withhold forgiveness due to intention—if so none of us would be divinely forgiven. So in our human relationships intention to hurt or wound does not justify a lack of forgiveness. Again, quoting C.S. Lewis, “*To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.*”

Another excuse that is often used to justify not forgiving focuses on trust. We might say or think, “*How can I forgive them because I cannot trust them again?*” Friends, forgiveness and trust are not the same thing. If we fail to forgive we are holding something over another’s head and we are harboring bitterness in our hearts. In Paul’s words we are not reflecting the image of God. C.S. Lewis also speaks to this issue when he writes, “*Forgiving a person does not mean you must necessarily believe them again. Forgiveness **does mean** that you must make every*

effort to kill within your own heart every trace of resentment, every wish to humiliate or hurt or to pay them back.” Forgiveness means there is no revenge. If we seek revenge we are wearing rags, and we are not clothed in Christ, and therefore we are not reflecting the image of God.

Still, another reason that is offered to rationalize not forgiving is, “*But I cannot forget what they did!*” Friends, it may take time to forget. But the road to forgetting begins with forgiveness; for as long as we harbor bitterness in our hearts we are not reflecting the image of God. Therefore we are missing the mark—sinning. The prophet Jeremiah understood God to say, “*I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.*”

Another thing that is often said to justify not forgiving is, “*Well they will have to prove themselves to me first.*” Or, “*They have not yet asked to be forgiven.*” At this point, it is important for us to recall why we are to forgive—because God has forgiven us! Friends, God chooses to forgive us out of love and grace—not because we deserve it. God does not withhold forgiveness from us because we have not yet proven ourselves to God. And since we are to reflect the image of God, our forgiving others cannot require that they must first prove themselves worthy of human forgiveness. If we want to implement this as a requirement of forgiveness then so must we implement it when it comes to God forgiving us! The poet, George Herbert, cuts to the quick when he writes, “*He or she that cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which they also must pass...for every one has need to be forgiven.*”

This issue of forgiveness is a difficult one. And for certain it is not the human thing to do—it is a divine thing! So in order for us to forgive we must catch the divine spirit. We must desire to reflect the image of God. We must begin to strip off the rags of grudge-holding, resentment, bitterness and revenge. Because in reality these things get us no where. They only stand in the way of reconciliation. They are unhealthy for us in everyway—physically, emotionally, relationally, and most certainly spiritually. And friends, where would we be if God was a grudge-holder? Where would we be if God held onto resentment? Where would we be if God were bitter? Where would we be if God waited for us to deserve forgiveness?

“*For all have sinned, and come short of the image of God.*” None of us are exempt from needing to be forgiven by God. “*...Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you forgive.*” But Pastor, “*I have already forgiven them so many times.*” Peter once asked Jesus, “*How many times should I forgive someone who sins against me?*” Jesus’ reply is a hard one but if we ever embrace its meaning we will have caught the divine spirit and we will more fully be reflecting the image of God. Jesus responded, “*You are to forgive them seventy times seven.*” Infinitely!

(Distribute the Prayer of Forgiveness.)

PRAYER OF FORGIVENESS

Loving and forgiving God I confess that I have not forgiven others as you have forgiven me. I confess that I do not always reflect your image. I desire to be clothed in Christ and I now forgive these people:

_____ (list specific names). I confess my bitterness and judgment towards them. Forgive me God and cleanse me from my sin; from how I have missed the mark. Please help me to thoroughly entrust these people into your hands. I pray that your will be done in my life and in their lives. Help me God to no longer think on the wrongs done to me, but instead to focus my thoughts on you and your forgiveness of me and them. I ask for the healing of the painful memories and wounds I have concerning what was done to me and said about me. And also, help my wounds and pain to be a lesson for me in how I am to treat others. Thank you for forgiving me for being unforgiving. Help me to more and more reflect your image; help me to catch the divine spirit. I pray this prayer of forgiveness and healing in the name of the Living Christ. Amen.