

YAMs

Summer Midweek 2009



Week Three:

How can God forgive us every time we sin?
Does he forgive even if we do it on purpose?



covenant chapel

Question: How can God forgive us every time we sin? Does he forgive even if we do it on purpose?

The Short Answer

Since Jesus has already paid for sin and earned perfection for those who trust in his death and resurrection (Hebrews 10:10,14), that means God can and does forgive us every time we sin. His nature and his grace move him to forgive.

First, God forgives us every time we sin because his nature is patient, loving and he desires to save repentant sinners. Second, grace, by its nature, increases as we sin more so God is able to forgive all sin. The one sin God cannot forgive is unbelief – failing to trust in Jesus’ death and resurrection for salvation – because apart from belief in Jesus, we are separated from God’s forgiving grace.

Since almost all sin is purposeful, God does forgive when we sin on purpose. But again, this forgiveness is only for those who are genuine believers – those who trust Jesus for salvation and whose hearts have been transformed to desire Jesus above all else. Unrepentant people who seek to use grace as a license to sin, or who deliberately persist in sin after rejecting the truth of the gospel are not forgiven.

The Long Answer

First, as the person who asked this question assumes, God does forgive all sin for those who trust in Jesus’ death and resurrection for salvation from sin.

Hebrews 10:10, 14 – And by that [God’s] will, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

In other words, by his death and resurrection, Jesus has paid for all sin – past, present and future – and has fully earned the perfection of his followers. This perfection is not fully realized until Jesus comes again, but throughout our lives, followers of Jesus experience sanctification – the process of being made perfect, becoming more and more like Jesus.

Since Jesus has already paid for sin and earned perfection for those who trust in his death and resurrection, that means God can and does forgive us every time we sin. But how can a just, holy and perfect God forgive that much?

It is the nature of God

As we begin, we have to consider the nature of God or we won't be able to understand why he would forgive at all. God is patient, God is loving and God desires to forgive sin.

Despite all of the references to the wrath and judgment of God in the Old Testament, many other OT passages make it obvious that God is slow to anger and full of love (Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:7; Psalm 86:5; Psalm 86:15; Psalm 103:8; Psalm 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2, Nahum 1:3). For example, Nehemiah in speaking about the Israelites during the Exodus from Egypt said:

Nehemiah 9:7 - They [Israel] refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them.

Not only is God slow to anger and rich in love, but he takes joy in forgiving sin:

Micah 7:18-19 - Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

And what's more, God takes no joy in judging the wicked. Because he is just and holy and perfect, he *cannot* leave sin unpunished. He must and he will punish sin. But God does not delight in it:

Ezekiel 33:11 - 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'

This is the heart of God – saving repentant sinners. Throughout the Bible, it is clear that forgiving sin still requires punishment – and specifically the shedding of blood (Hebrews 9:22). This is why God instituted a system of animal sacrifices as a foreshadowing of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus.

Jesus on the cross is the most obvious example of God's loving nature and desire to forgive sin. Because it was out of his perfect love and desire to forgive that God sent Jesus to bear sin's punishment for us (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 5:8). If God did not want to forgive sin, he would never have sent Jesus to die in our place.

Finally, the promise of Scripture is that if we acknowledge our sin, confess it, and repent, we will have forgiveness:

1 John 1:9 - If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Confession is agreeing with God about our sinful state and our sins of commission – doing things we're not supposed to do – and our sins of omission – not doing things we're supposed to do. To repent is to turn away from that sin, to turn back toward God, and to, as Jesus says, "sin no more" (John 5:14). We'll revisit this idea of repentance when we answer the second question about God forgiving sin that's done on purpose.

God forgives us every time we sin because his nature is patient, loving and he desires to save repentant sinners.

It is the nature of Grace

Second, God can forgive us every time we sin because that is the nature of grace. We've talked about this the past two weeks, but the main idea is that we are forgiven and saved from sin only by God's grace and not by anything of our own doing:

Ephesians 2:8-9 – For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast

This grace of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus provides forgiveness for our sin even though we don't deserve it. And so, the beautiful and crazy thing is that as more sin occurs, the more and more grace exists to cover it. Paul says it like this:

Romans 5:20 – Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.

Grace, by its nature, grows as we sin more. It has to if we are to be saved. God has to give us more grace. Why?

Because we all sin in thoughts, motivations, words and actions. If God forgave only up to a certain point, there would be only two results – we'd all have unforgiven sin and spend eternity in Hell, or we'd have to seek another way to forgive the rest of the sin.

By definition, grace rules out the second option. In seeking another way, we'd be doing something by our own effort, which is not grace. And moreover, we are clearly taught that we are unable to save ourselves by our own effort, so really both of these options would result in all of us spending eternity in Hell.

But God's nature of love compels him to save people from sin and death and Hell, and so he gives more and more grace. God is able to forgive us every time we sin because his grace is big enough to cover over any and all sin in our lives.

This brings up an important point. There is sin that God cannot forgive – unbelief; or, failure to trust Jesus for our salvation. If we fail to trust Jesus' death and resurrection for our salvation, God's saving grace does not apply to us. We remain under the law, not under grace. And as we talked about last week, if we are still under law, then there's no way for us to be declared righteous before God.

God's grace is his provision for the forgiveness of sin. Therefore those who reject the gospel of God's grace remain unforgiven, subject to God's wrath, and separated from him forever.

(Side Note: This concept is related to the only other sin that cannot be forgiven – blaspheming the work of the Holy Spirit. In Mark 3, Jesus says that all sin will be forgiven except for those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit – that those people will never be forgiven. Jesus is referring here to continually and persistently resisting the work of the Holy Spirit, even attributing that work to Satan. The person who hardens his heart against the Holy Spirit resists the message of the gospel and therefore remains outside of God's grace – his provision for the forgiveness of sin.)

So as we answer this week's question, let's make a careful distinction. God does forgive all sin – past, present and future – but only for those who repent and trust Jesus' death and resurrection for salvation. If God forgave all or any sin apart from Jesus, he would cease to be a just, holy and perfect God.

But for those who do repent and trust Jesus, God's nature and the nature of God's grace cause God to forgive all of our sin.

What if we sin on purpose?

The next logical question would then be, "Does God still forgive if we sin on purpose?"

To answer this question, we need to first examine the motives behind asking it. Many people ask this question with the intent to sin. "If God does forgive me when I sin on purpose," they reason, "I may as well sin whenever I want, since God will forgive it anyway."

This was a huge concern for the religious Jewish people whom Paul shared the gospel with. Because Christians teach that grace increases as sin increases, the Jews argued that the gospel's concept of grace would give people a license to sin freely.

Paul anticipated this question, and immediately after writing about grace abounding as sin increases, Paul addresses it:

Romans 6:1-2 – What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

Paul's emphatic "By no means!" clearly shows that grace is not a license to sin. On the contrary, he goes on to argue that people who truly believe in Jesus have crucified their sinful nature with Christ and are now dead to sin (Galatians 5:24). In their deepest desires, such people no longer want to sin.

So people who ask this question with the intent of sinning don't get it. If their desire is to sin more than it is to follow Jesus, they have not been truly transformed by Christ.

Satan loves to use this lie to deceive people. He takes the beautiful concept of grace and appeals to our sinful nature to use it to sin. To which the author of Hebrews issues a severe warning:

Hebrews 10:26 – For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

Bold statement. But it seems clear that those who know the truth and continue in deliberate sin are not forgiven, but are instead judged in their sin. But why? Doesn't that contradict what we've just said about God forgiving us every time we sin?

Actually, no. Remember, our actions and our desires are reflections of the heart. So deliberate, ongoing sin after receiving knowledge of the truth of the gospel is pretty obvious evidence that the heart has not been transformed to follow Jesus.

And remember too what we've already discussed – that the one sin God cannot forgive is unbelief, or failure to trust the gospel for salvation. Deliberate, ongoing sin is evidence that a person remains unrepentant and has rejected the gospel.

Furthermore, anyone who would attempt to manipulate the gospel of grace in this way is not a genuine follower of Jesus. Therefore, people who would ask this question with the intent to sin don't believe and, as the author of Hebrews says, receive judgment instead of forgiveness.

But what about the people who ask this question sincerely? No doubt genuine followers of Jesus sin intentionally. There are many Christians who struggle with ongoing, sinful addictions to alcohol, drugs, pornography, lying, etc. And I would argue that every Christian has, at one time or another, deliberately sinned – despite the fact that they knew it was wrong.

Part of that is the nature of sin itself. Unintentional sin is rare, if it exists at all. God has revealed enough of himself to all men so that everyone is without excuse (Romans 1:20). So sin then, by definition, is opposing the will and glory of God, which all men know at least in part.

Bottom line: when we sin, it will almost always be on purpose. Sometimes it will be thought out in advance; other times it will be instantaneous. Either way, chances are it's on purpose.

But despite that, genuine followers of Jesus are forgiven for their sin. Amazingly enough, God's grace is big enough to cover sin we commit intentionally.

So what's the difference between those genuine believers who receive forgiveness and everyone else who does not? The deepest desire of the heart. The genuine follower of Jesus, out of their transformed heart, will desire Jesus – his glory and his will – above all else. The unrepentant, untransformed person will not.

Consider the difference between two men in the midst of the ongoing sin of pornography. (We can probably all agree that looking at pornography is an intentional sin.) An unrepentant, untransformed person will feel no remorse, no conviction and no desire for repentance while committing this sin. Instead, their deepest desire is to satisfy their own desires, and glorify themselves.

Contrast that with a genuine follower of Jesus with a transformed heart. Though they struggle with a habitual sin, each and every time they do immediately feel conviction, desire to repent and return to following Jesus.

It is a huge and important distinction. The genuine follower of Jesus, in his deepest desires, does not want to sin. He wants to please Jesus. But his sinful nature is constantly warring against the Holy Spirit inside him, so that even though his deepest desire is for Jesus, there are times when he still sins. As Paul says:

Romans 7:15 – For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want [to please Jesus], but I do the very thing I hate [to sin].

Though they may not fully experience it, transformed followers of Jesus are dead to sin. They no longer desire it. Since sanctification – becoming perfect like Jesus – is a process, they will still sin. But God's grace and forgiveness is given to them, regardless of how much or in what way they sin. But because they are transformed, they do not use the forgiveness and grace of God as rationale to sin.

To conclude, if you are asking yourself which type of person you are, examine your heart. Consider what the deepest desire of your heart really is. If you ask this

week's question with concern and sincerity, you are most likely desiring to please Jesus with your life. But if you ask to see what you can get away with, give serious consideration to whether you have actually understood and believed the gospel of Jesus Christ.

By his nature and grace, God offers complete and total forgiveness for those who trust Jesus' death and resurrection for salvation and are transformed by his power.

Learn More

From the Bible:

Romans 6-7

Galatians

Hebrews 9-10

From Books:

***What's So Amazing about Grace* – Phillip Yancey**

***When I Don't Desire God* – John Piper**

From the Web:

Francis Chan - Cornerstone Simi Podcast

http://www.cornerstonesimi.com/special/media_player.html

"Grace" series – 10.14.07 – 11.25.07