

# Our First Theology Lesson

## Jesus Loves Me

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*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (ROMANS 8:35-39)*

Do you remember your first theology lesson? Do not believe that because you have not been to Bible college or seminary that you have not studied theology. Anytime you learn something about God you have a theology lesson. I can even tell you what your first theology lesson is likely to have been. The lesson many of us learned first is still taught all over the world in hundreds of different languages. It goes like this: "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so."

Why was this the first song so many of us were taught? Because it is simple? Surely, that is part of the answer. But I suspect there is more cause than simplicity alone. We teach the song of Jesus' love to young children because its promises are so important to us. The understanding that Jesus loves me is the core of what each Christian must believe. Young hearts and minds must learn to grasp this elemental promise in the earliest moments of faith, because so much of what awaits them in life will threaten to rob them of the assurance of God's love. Personal sin, difficult circumstances, and the spiritual forces of Satan unite to war against the assurance of Jesus' love in all believers' hearts in all ages.

We are certain the assurance of Jesus' love will be challenged. The reason we are so certain is that our own assurance of Christ's love is challenged daily. Some now reading this article may doubt Jesus' love. Since first making a faith commitment, the ecstasy of your early experience in Christ may have waned. You may be less changed than you believe God can accept. The Christian life may be more difficult than you anticipated. People you trusted may be less holy than you expected. In the midst of these observations, you may wonder if God's love is real.

Even if you are not asking similar questions now, remember that all Christians are susceptible to such doubt. You do something, or something painful happens, and a voice in you whispers, "Does Jesus really love me?" It is not a question of which you need to be ashamed. God knows our assurance of His love can be shaken. So even in this most sophisticated of New Testament books, where the apostle Paul is weaving theological arguments and historical facts from all of Scripture, God has him return to this simple theme at the center of

the epistle. You can almost hear God whisper to the apostle, saying, "Now, Paul, this is rather difficult for my people to understand and there is more they need to know. So, lest they get discouraged, remind them one more time Jesus loves them, and nothing can change that."

Accordingly, at the heart of his letter, Paul writes that nothing can separate true believers from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Whatever is going on in your life, whatever has happened, whatever will occur, Paul says this assurance is yours to claim as a believer: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

Paul assures us of the comprehensive promise of God's love by first addressing doubts which originate inside us. Guilt over personal sin can shake our confidence that God loves us. So Paul begins by saying we must believe the love of Jesus is greater than all our sin.

Paul reminds believers that our sin does not set God against us. God is now for us, because he did not spare his own Son but gave Jesus as a sacrifice to suffer for our sins (vv. 31-32). The penalty for sin that we deserve God put on His own Son. When we confess our sin we bear its guilt no longer. Our sin cannot separate us from God, because God takes the guilt away. We are assured of the love of God despite our sin, because in Christ's sacrifice God shows His love overcomes our sin.

The cross shows how much He loves us and how He can keep loving us. Because Christ's sacrifice purchased God's pardon, personal sin does not deny us God's love. Having drawn that sword of truth, Paul now cuts two directions against the internal threats to our faith which originate in conscience. The apostle attacks the challenges of past sin and present sin which war against our assurance of God's love through human guilt.

With an emphasis that seems almost harsh, Paul continues to drive home the point that our sin does not deny us God's acceptance. The apostle asks who can condemn us if God has justified us by setting aside the charges against us (v. 33). Paul's argument reflects a legal standard we yet recognize. If the highest judge of the land has already pardoned someone for a past crime, then that person cannot again be charged for the wrong. If the highest judge of the universe has pardoned your sin, then your conscience should not condemn you.

It is actually incredibly presumptuous to ignore the pardon of divine justice and assume guilt even if that guilt comes from our own hearts. Paul speaks this forcefully because he knows our hearts often echo guilt more loudly than grace. Our past sins haunt us. Guilt for past wrongs may grab us so quickly and may strike so unexpectedly that its assault may surprise even the most seasoned believer. We may be going about some daily routine, and suddenly an ad in a newspaper or a song on the radio reminds us of something in the past, and an old guilt grabs us again. Perhaps we see a look in our own child's eyes that brings us face to face with ourselves; a sin we thought was dead years ago suddenly stares out at us in the look of a little one who reflects what we do not want to see in ourselves.

Though we have confessed that sin and prayed for God's forgiveness, somehow now repentance does not seem to be enough. The reminder makes the guilt fresh. Trials we experience right now may seem to witness against our proving we are guilty again, dirty again, and unlikely to be children of God.

Intervening years are no guarantee our hearts will not resurrect a dead guilt. I have preached in many churches where hearts have made past sin come to life again. I have preached on abortion and witnessed hearts torn as both women and men face their participation in the horror. I have preached on immorality and watched silent tears confess a hidden past. I have preached on Christian family principles and seen parents' heads drop in shame while sitting next to wayward children.

I do not regret the words that convict of sin. There is no more rewarding time in ministry than when God's people see their sin and seek Him. I rejoice to see God heal broken hearts with the truths of His Word. But I cease to rejoice when my words cause God's forgiveness to be doubted or re-create guilt for sin that has long since been confessed. I recognize as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that it is my duty to seek to convict of sin, but that is never my end goal. My task as a servant of Jesus is not merely to convict of sin but to convince of grace.

Our constant message for God's people must be, "Gather all the guilt that is yours—nothing more and nothing less—take it to the cross of Jesus and lay it down. Then do not pick it up again. It is not yours anymore."

Of course, people may experience continuing guilt for incomplete repentance. The human heart is complex enough that serious sin may require more than formula prayers and simple maxims before full forgiveness is felt or warranted. Sin can twist itself into the deepest recesses of the human conscience where it cannot be purged by a person merely mouthing words of contrition.

Repentance that leads to grace requires us to bare our souls before God's holy love with honest sorrow and the humble desire that God's Spirit would reveal and forgive any further darkness to which our sinful consciences are blind. Such sincere repentance may require much soul searching and personal reflection. For this reason we should examine ourselves for dimensions of sin we've not previously recognized so that we can fully know the joy of forgiveness.

But no human heart is so discerning of the depth of its own sin and the righteousness of God that the promise of full forgiveness should be made contingent upon human perceptions. We are forgiven because of our plea for grace and our acknowledgment that we can never fathom the depth of our need, not because we have completely identified the sin that God alone can fully see.

God's grace does not depend on our inadequate capabilities to comprehend fully the depth of our sins. While we more fully appreciate and experience grace to the extent that we understand our need of it, we should not portray God's forgiveness as relying upon the degree of guilt we can make ourselves feel. The goal of pastors and of all caring believers must be to lead others out of guilt, not into guilt. Just as it is never right to convince a Christian that God's pardon for what was truly confessed is questionable, it is detrimental to the Gospel to gear a ministry toward making Christians perpetually wonder if they have repented enough or felt enough shame to gain God's pardon.

But what if the sin is not past? What if, though we believe God forgives past sin, today's sin eats at our hearts and consciences? Christians often discover it is far easier to appreciate God's pardoning the wrong they did when they knew no better, than to experience forgiveness of their present sin when they now know very well what God requires.

Tempers, temptations, and our tongues can rule us despite past confessions. Current fault makes us feel worthless not only because we know better but often because we recognize this is not the first time we have been weak in this way. We hate the sin that characterizes our lives and wonder if a holy God feels the same about us.

By causing us to question our relationship with God, present guilt may actually propel Christians into deeper sin. Doubts of God's continuing care make it easy to think, "What's the use of trying to stop? God doesn't love me anyway. Since I'm already lost, why fight it?" Paul battles such resignation that would lead to greater sin by assuring us that God's love covers wrong that we commit today as well as yesterday.

The apostle reminds us that Christ's past acts of death and resurrection are not the end of His work in our behalf. Paul says Jesus intercedes for us at God's right hand now (v. 34). Jesus never stops interceding for us. There is only one reason Jesus would stay at God's right hand to keep asking for our forgiveness today: He knows we need forgiveness today.

The Lord does not just forgive. He delights to do so. It brings God joy to show mercy, because by forgiving us He answers the intercessions of His own Son who speaks on our behalf. Therefore, if our minds and hearts continue to condemn us after genuine confession, we should realize that condemnation is not of God. God sent his Son to die for our sin, not to keep our guilt alive.

In the light of Christ's sacrifice for our sin, the apostle asks, "Who is he that condemns" (Rom. 8:34)? Believers know the answer. The Bible says that Satan is the accuser of God's children (Rev. 12:10). He is the one who whispers in our consciences that our sin is so terrible Jesus cannot love us now. Satan is the one who brings our guilt to mind again and again to burden us so that we cannot serve God effectively. God wants us to remember His mercy whenever we consider our sin.

My wife says she sometimes pictures in her mind a locked file cabinet which holds all her past sins that Jesus has put away. Occasionally there is another sin to add to the files, but she says that in her mind she only will open that file with a key labeled mercy. Even though Satan sometimes tempts her to rifle through those files of memory, she has resolved never to open any drawer to the past or file away any sin in the present unless mercy opens the cabinet.

The God who delights in mercy invites all of us to do the same. Satan parades the sin in your mind to rob your heart of the assurance of God's love and to sap your life of the strength that comes from knowing God will not reject you. Do not stand for it! Jesus died to pay the price for your sin. He rose to defeat the power of sin over you. Now he intercedes for you at the right hand of God to make sure that God's care will never fail you. So when Satan creeps into your conscience to condemn you or when your own heart echoes guilt more loudly than grace, look to the cross where your sins were cancelled and say, "Yes, it's all true and you know not the half of it, but I have to deal with the one who delights in showing mercy. Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so."

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