

## **HOW CAN GOD FORGIVE ME WHEN I KEEP ON SINNING?**

### **Romans 7:18-25a**

**I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am? Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!**

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, our patient and forgiving Savior, dear friends:

Have you ever discovered the amazing fact that your friends and neighbors expect you to be perfect? Did you realize that many Americans live under the misconception that a sincere Christian that goes to church and prays doesn't sin? Did you know that when unbelievers observe us sinning they often conclude that we must be hypocrites? Did you realize that some people are afraid of attending a church because they think that all of the people in church are perfect, and they would never be able to "fit in?"

Those misconceptions about Christians are very common. In fact, some people who feel guilty because they have a poor relationship with God and don't attend church, will carefully watch us, and when they see us sin (they are hardly ever disappointed), they appease their consciences by thinking that we are no better than they are, but that we are pretending to be "religious" and "good."

Of course, you realize that Christians still sin. If you stopped sinning when you started coming to church, a pastor would soon be out of work. But, of course, we all know that will never be the case, don't we?

We know that we do sin every day. That sin and the knowledge of it is a heavy burden on our consciences. Though we are Christians, we still feel

guilty for we know we are guilty of sinning every day. The person who doesn't realize that fact is in trouble spiritually.

In the early days of our country an evangelist was preaching at an outdoor meeting. A flippant young man interrupted him and mockingly said: *"You talk about the burden of sin. I've never felt it. How heavy is it?"* While some people assembled laughed and others sat in stunned silence, the startled preacher paused momentarily and then replied, *"Tell me, if you laid a hundred-pound weight on a corpse, would it feel the load?"* The youth sneered: *"No, of course not, because it's dead."* To which the preacher answered, *"And that soul is dead too that feels no load of sin."*

A keen awareness of our own sinfulness is good, for it shows that we are in touch with reality - the reality of the human nature. Yet, when we realize that we sin every day, the question arises, **"How can God forgive me when I keep on sinning?"** It may not be so difficult to consider that God is willing to forgive us the first time we blow it. But what about after we have repented, after we have promised never to repeat that disgrace (that kind of lie, that lustful look, that frivolent purchase we can't afford, that compromise), and we do it again ... and again ... and again? How can God forgive us after so long? Will he?

The question is a good one. The answer is found in God's Word - his message about human nature and divine grace.

## **1. HUMAN NATURE IS SINFUL.**

The words of our text were not written by some criminal or no-good. They were written by an apostle of Jesus Christ. Yes, St. Paul also had to admit that his life was far from perfect. He loved his Savior and wanted to be the kind of man that Jesus wanted him to be, but he always fell short. He wanted to change his bad habits and to put away all sin, but he found that they clung to him like mud on a shoe. There was nothing wrong with his faith or with his Savior. The problem in his life was a sinful nature. It was the sinful nature which he had inherited from his parents and they from theirs, all the way back to Adam and Eve. Sin was part of his life, and it would trouble him until the day when God would free him from his sinful nature and perfect him in heaven.

The same thing is true of each of us. We've tried to live like Christians should, but realize that our record is filled with moral failures, mistakes, and

repeated sin. Sin is a fact of life for us. It troubles us, and we are daily falling into its ways. Can God still love us? Can he still forgive us?

## **2. DIVINE GRACE IS SUFFICIENT.**

It has always been a source of comfort to me that Paul addressed his New Testament letters to people whom he called "**saints.**" If you look at the opening verses of his various epistles, you will see that he wrote them to the "saints" at Corinth, to the "saints" at Ephesus, and so on. How could he call these people "saints?" Many of those people were guilty of causing strife and dissension, envy and petty bickering, they were dishonest. They cursed. They sinned in all the ways that we do today. Yet, they are addressed as "saints.", Why?

The reason is simple. They were saints not because they were living like saints, but because God declared them to be saints on the basis of Christ's forgiving work. The Savior had come to shoulder all their guilt and to pay the awesome price of all of their sin at Calvary. The payment which Jesus made for their sin was absolutely complete and perfect. Now, in place of their sin, Christ had given them the record of his perfect life which he had lived on their behalf. Because of Jesus Christ, God declared them to be saints.

The same is true of you and me. We know that our life has not been very "saint-like." We know that we do not deserve God's mercy. We know that we deserve nothing but hell, but Christ has died for our sins. For the sake of Jesus Christ, God has forgiven our sins. We are saints because of him.

Our conscience sometimes tries to condemn us because we continue to sin. When it does, imagine a conversation with your conscience that might go something like this:

*Conscience: You have sinned!*

*Believer: How have I sinned?*

*Conscience: You have broken all of God's commandments. You have not always placed God first. You have not always kept God's name holy. You have not always respected God's Word. You have often been unfair to your parents. You have hated, lusted, cheated, lied, slandered, coveted. You've been greedy, selfish...*

*Believer: All right! I'm guilty, I know it. I'd be a fool if I tried to deny it.*

*Conscience: And you know what God says about people who do such things: "The wages of sin is death."*

*Believer: Yes, I know that I deserve God's anger and punishment.*

*Conscience: Therefore you are going to hell!*

*Believer: Ah, but that's where you're WRONG! In his mercy*

*God has sent a Savior for me. My Savior has assumed my guilt. My Savior has paid my penalty. He died on the cross for me. Because of him, God has forgiven me and made me his own dear child. Be quiet, conscience. I have work to do!*

This is the answer to the question for today. Yes, our sin is great and we have a record of many failures. But God's grace is even greater. It is sufficient to cover all of our sins. In it we find our comfort and peace.

One more thought: Although all of the above is true, we dare never presume upon God's grace. One summer a future pastor worked on an experimental farm. Every Monday two of his co-workers would tell about their weekend escapades. One morning he said to one of them who was Roman Catholic, *"When you go to confession, do you tell the priest the same things you tell us?"* With a little hesitation, he said, *"Yes, I tell him that I have had immoral thoughts and that I did immoral deeds."* At that point he asked him if he planned to go out the next weekend and do the same things he had done the previous weekends. *"Probably,"* he said. Then he asked him, *"Do you really think that God forgives the sins that you confess when you plan to go right out and repeat them again?"* The young man put down his sandwich, and looked at me puzzled and said, *"Man alive, what do you do for fun anyway?"*

That young man was presuming upon God's grace. He made God's grace and forgiveness cheap. He turned it into his own personal license to sin. Others do this. People deliberately plan to sin, thinking that it is no big deal since God will forgive them for it afterwards anyway.

It doesn't work that way. No one has a right to presume God's mercy. St. Paul raised this very point when he wrote in the letter to the Romans, after having clearly taught that we are forgiven by God's grace. Paul asked, **"What then? Shall we continue to sin, so that we may get more mercy? God forbid!"** As his redeemed people, God wants us to live a new life. He wants us to follow his guidance, even when it isn't easy or pleasant. Let's never presume upon God's grace. But let's not despair of it either. Let's trust it and treasure it and thank God for it, and live in it. Amen.