

# Unit 3



## God's Forgiveness

*Priceless, Costly and Free*

### TRUTH

#### by memory – 1 John 1:8-9 (ESV)

*"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup>If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

#### in Bible –

Last week you learned about the love that God demonstrates toward all people (known as *common grace*) and the love God demonstrates for His people (known as *special grace*). You saw that God's love for His people is His unconditional determination to bring about their eternal blessedness. He offers such a gift at His own initiative, and not in response to any supposed loveliness or worthiness of His people. Therefore, you need not be consumed by the quest to perform well enough to earn God's love. Instead you can rest securely in the enjoyment of God's love. As you do this, God's love will motivate you more and more to live in deep devotion to Jesus and to share His love with those who haven't yet experienced it.

This week you will focus on a specific expression of God's love: forgiveness of sin. God loves to forgive and His forgiveness is offered freely, though not without cost or condition. You will compare several passages of Scripture that focus either on awareness of sin or forgiveness of sin. You will see that fully experiencing and appreciating God's forgiveness depends upon having an appropriate understanding of the nature of sin as well as the depth and darkness of your own personal sins. You may find it beneficial to focus on these passages during your personal worship. If you are reading other passages for your personal worship, be sure to follow a plan such as **PRAISE** so that you apply the Scriptures to your life and respond to them in prayer.

**Exodus 33:12-34:7** – Previous to the events in this passage, Moses had already brought the Ten Commandments to Israel on stone tablets. But Moses smashed them when he saw that Israel was worshipping the golden calf. He did this as a sign that they had already broken faith with God’s covenant. Now, as Moses receives God’s covenant stipulations a second time, God reveals His name and nature as the God of sovereign grace, mercy, and justice.

What does the phrase, *“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion,”* (33:19) reveal about God’s nature?

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What does 34:6-7 reveal about God’s nature?

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How are God’s love and God’s forgiveness connected in these verses?

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What did God mean when He said, *“...forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty...”* (34:7) Isn’t this a contradiction?

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**Psalm 32:1-5** – In this passage, David writes about the physical, psychological, and spiritual effects of concealing sin and confessing sin.

What was David's life experience when he tried to conceal his sin from God?

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What was his experience when he confessed his sin to God?

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Why would David try to conceal his sin rather than confess it? Think about your own life. What makes you avoid or neglect confession of specific sins?

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**Luke 5:1-11** – In this passage, Peter's spiritual eyes are opened to a new and disturbing reality about Jesus and about his own life.

What was revealed about Jesus in this miracle story that made Peter say to Jesus, *"Go away from me...?"* (5:8)

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What was revealed to Peter about himself? Was Peter over-reacting? As far as we know, he was a good law-abiding Jew. Was he really all that bad?

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**1 John 1:5-2:2** – The Apostle John wrote this letter to oppose false teachings about sin that were infiltrating the Church. These doctrines arose from Greek Gnostic philosophy that claimed that special spiritual enlightenment could be received via a spiritual experience. When one received this supposed experience, the regular rules about sin and righteousness no longer applied. In this passage, John uses a series of “if...then” statements to respond to the various claims of Gnostic philosophy.

Find the five “if...then” statements in these verses and write them down below.

If we say/claim... \_\_\_\_\_

then... \_\_\_\_\_

If we walk... \_\_\_\_\_

then... \_\_\_\_\_

If we say/claim... \_\_\_\_\_

then... \_\_\_\_\_

If we confess... \_\_\_\_\_

then... \_\_\_\_\_

If we say/claim... \_\_\_\_\_

then... \_\_\_\_\_

Look at the three verses that begin with the phrase, “*If we claim...*” From these, see if you can deduce the three Gnostic-inspired teachings about sin that John is trying to refute.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

What is required in order to receive forgiveness of sins? Explain your answer.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What attitude toward sin did John want his readers to have?

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## to summarize –

Perhaps it cannot be overstated that one of the most ferocious predators of personal wholeness, holiness and happiness is guilt. Guilt can contribute to a variety of physical, spiritual and psychological ailments. And when guilt is the root cause of these troubles, medication, meditation and counseling can only treat the symptoms. A far more powerful remedy is needed to treat the cause. In Psalm 32:3-4 you read David's lament about the painful effects guilt had caused in his life, *"...my bones wasted away... Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped."* These words express the bondage that David experienced due to the guilt of his sins. What restored him to wholeness? The answer is found in verse 5, *"Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD' — and you forgave the guilt of my sin."* Like David, forgiveness is the priceless spiritual commodity we all need to make us whole.

As you studied Exodus this week, you read that God is a God of mercy. He delights to forgive because forgiveness is an expression of His covenant love for His people. In Exodus 34:6-7a, God revealed to Moses that He is, *"...merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..."* This was incredibly good news for Israel since they had just committed the grievous sin of idolatry when their covenant with God was still only a few days old. It was as if a newlywed had committed adultery while on the honeymoon. Israel needed to know that God forgives sin.

Yet they also needed to know that God does not take sin lightly. He doesn't shrug it off as "no big deal". His justice must be served. Since the dawn of human history God had revealed time and again that sin must be accounted for, and the penalty for sin must be paid. He reaffirmed this by telling Moses that He would, *"...by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."* (34:7b). This means that God punishes sinners without exception and even allows the consequences of their sin to impact the lives of up to four generations of descendants. So how can God forgive sin and at the same time hold the guilty accountable? It sounds like there is a contradiction between God's mercy and His justice.

Of course, there are no contradictions in His character. Mercy and justice are reconciled and find harmonious expression in the offering of a sacrifice. Sacrifice is the means by which sin's penalty can be carried out on a substitute so that the sinner can receive forgiveness. In the Old Covenant, God established an elaborate, but temporary, system of animal sacrifices for Israel. Under the New Covenant, God provided His own ultimate sacrifice, Jesus, the Lamb of God. His death demonstrated the greatness of God's mercy in that Christ would die to purchase our forgiveness. But it also demonstrated the wickedness of sin in that only Christ's death could fully satisfy God's justice. This teaches us that forgiveness is not only a priceless commodity; it is exceedingly costly, as well.

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Unfortunately, the biblical truth that forgiveness is priceless and costly is so easily forgotten. We usually have no trouble believing that God is a forgiving God. But we often fail to grasp how deeply and desperately we sinners need that forgiveness. Our tendency is to underestimate the number of our own sins. We misjudge the gravity of our sins. We redefine them so that we don't have to think of them as sins. All this amounts to is that we undervalue the high cost of such a priceless gift. This is a tremendous hindrance to our spiritual journey, for we will never fully experience the wonder of God's forgiveness until we appreciate the depth of our own sin. This is what Jesus taught the Pharisees when he said, *"...He who is forgiven little, loves little."* (Luke 7:47).

Consider Peter's experience with Jesus in Luke 5. It is likely that Peter was no more or less moral than any of his contemporaries. But when Jesus' revealed His holy power through the miracle of an extraordinary catch of fish, look at Peter's response: *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."* (5:8). Suddenly, in the presence of Jesus, he felt intense shame and guilt for his sins. And yet, that is the very moment when Jesus offered forgiveness and called Peter to follow Him. Peter's spiritual journey with Christ began as soon as the boat touched shore.

John was there with Peter that day and left his nets to follow Jesus as well. Years later, John wrote a letter to a church under his care out of concern for their attitude toward sin. Heretical teachings had crept in, spawned by Greek Gnostic philosophy. Gnosticism (from the Greek word, *gnosis*, meaning *"knowledge"*) taught that everything in the physical realm was inherently evil in contrast to the inherent purity of the spiritual realm. The physical and the spiritual didn't mix; they had nothing to do with each other. This philosophy led some people in the Church to deny the incarnation, saying that the divine Christ could never unite with the physical man, Jesus. Some also claimed that once a person became enlightened by a unique spiritual experience, sin would no longer be an issue affecting their spiritual lives. This gave them permission (so they thought) to indulge in whatever sinful pleasures they wanted without creating any barrier to their fellowship with God.

John tackled these mistaken beliefs in his first epistle (1 John), confronting the false teachings about sin by introducing each with the phrase, *"If we say..."* (some translations, *"If we claim..."*). He begins by reminding his readers that *"God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all."* (1:5) Light is a metaphorical way to describe God's perfect moral purity. Then John confronts the first false teaching in verse 6, *"If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."* Gnostic influence had led some of John's readers to think that they could nurse sin in their hearts and that it would have no affect whatsoever on their spiritual lives. John's response is that any unconfessed sin raises a barrier that destroys fellowship with God. He tells them flatly that they were living a lie. God is light; He will not fellowship with those who embrace darkness.

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John challenged the second false teaching in verse 8, *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves...”* He used the singular noun for *“sin”* to refer to the sinful nature, as opposed to the many sins we commit. Some believed that once they had this *gnosis* experience they would no longer have a sinful nature. John countered that these people were self deceived. He wanted them to understand that denying the existence of their sin nature was a dangerous departure from the truth. John dealt with the third false teaching – that people who had this *gnosis* experience no longer committed any sins – in verse 10, *“If we say we have not sinned, we make Him [God] a liar...”* Here, John used the past tense verb, *“sinned”* to indicate the sinful thoughts and behaviors that no one is exempt from. In effect, the belief that a mystical experience could make one sinless made God out to be a liar, for it was God who declared, *“...there is none who does good, not even one.”* (Psalm 14:3)

Today, Gnosticism isn't a real contributor to modern Christian culture. Nevertheless, the false teachings it spawned still creep into Churches, distorting truth, and leading many Christians down precarious paths. It's not uncommon to meet those who believe they can continue to live in direct disobedience to God's word and still enjoy His fellowship. People have an amazing ability to selectively disregard almost any of God's laws, yet justify their behavior on the grounds of their supposed closeness with Him. As long as they try to be faithful and obedient in most areas, they expect God to wink at the “few harmless liberties” they take. There are also those today who deny the existence of the sin nature. They may deny it altogether, or claim that it gets removed after a particular experience. Some will even claim to be able to live completely free of sin.

The Bible says these are all lies that will keep people from becoming mature followers of Christ. A critical milestone on the path toward maturity is the realization that harboring unconfessed sin – *any sin* – destroys your fellowship with God. You must also accept that sin is pervasive; a nature within you that infected every part of your being, ruling over you and driving your sinful life until its power was broken by special grace. Until you acknowledge the true extent and nature of your own personal sinfulness, you will never fully appreciate or appropriately experience God's forgiveness. God's Spirit spoke through John, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* (1:9) The link is unmistakable; forgiveness is offered on the condition of confession.

John revealed his purpose in writing so directly to this Church: *“I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation [the sacrifice that removes God's wrath] for our sins...”* (2:1-2a) His goal was not to have them wallow without hope in their guilt. Rather, he wanted them to understand the enormity of their need, so that they would hope in Jesus Christ alone. He is the sinless advocate pleading on their behalf before God. *But Jesus doesn't plead their innocence. He acknowledges their guilt and pleads his work on the cross as grounds for their acquittal.*

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What does this mean to you? How will you respond? Will you entertain and shelter the sins, however small, that drove a stake through your Master's hand? Will you redefine sinful attitudes or behaviors so that you don't have to think of them as sin? Or will you learn the spiritual value of self-examination, confession, and repentance?

You may have heard forgiveness described as a free gift of God's grace. This is so true. God loves to forgive and He will forgive all your sins as He promised. You can rely on His faithfulness. But never forget that the free gift of God was purchased at the cost of His perfect Son. His was the only life that could pay the debt for your sin. Forgiveness was a costly gift you never could have earned. That's what makes it priceless.

**online –**

Remember to visit [www.perimeter.org/discipleshipcurriculum](http://www.perimeter.org/discipleshipcurriculum) for this week's downloadable audio, video, or print resources.

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## MISSION

*"I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." (Philemon 1:6, NIV)*

Hopefully you made these two very significant commitments in your Journey Group meeting last week: to attend the upcoming **X-PRESS Your Faith** Seminar; and to pursue an opportunity to walk through the *Life Issues* booklets with someone on your target list.

In order to help you prepare for the **X-PRESS** Seminar your Mission assignment this week is to listen to "X-PRESS Your Faith, Parts 1 & 2". You can access these audio messages as an MP3 download from [www.perimeter.org/discipleshipcurriculum](http://www.perimeter.org/discipleshipcurriculum), or you can purchase the CDs in the bookstore.

Please listen to these messages even if you can't attend the **X-PRESS** Seminar. Also, please listen to them again even if you have heard them before.

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