

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

Pastor Adam Parker

9/7/25

**Sermon Title:** The Problem of Forgiveness

**Sermon Text:** Romans 3:25b (reading v. 21-25)

**Rom. 3:21** ¶ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

**Rom. 3:22** the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:

**Rom. 3:23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

**Rom. 3:24** and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

**Rom. 3:25** whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

**Main Point:** When God lets guilty people go free, he exposes himself to the charge that he is an unrighteous judge.

## **Outline:**

1. Pristine Perfection
2. Purity Provokes a Price
3. Pardon Presents a Problem

## Introduction

When I was in college I took a class for my philosophy degree that was called “The Atheistic Argument from Evil.” In this class, we addressed head-on for an entire semester what has been traditionally called the “Problem of evil.” In particular, this “problem of evil” has been seen as a question that is difficult for Christians to answer: in a world where God is good and sovereign, how is it that there is sin and suffering?

Now, I have a point in bringing this up, but I’d like to say something first that’s a little bit of an aside from what I’m really getting to: the problem of evil is not just a problem that Christians must answer, but all worldviews have to answer it. Non-Christian religions must answer it, and even atheists and agnostics have to answer it. For the Christian the question is, how is God’s power and goodness compatible with the existence of evil in this world?

But the atheist also has his own problem of evil that he must answer. You see, for the atheist, the problem is, “Your idea that there *is* a problem seems to imply that you know things should be otherwise. Not only that, but it seems to imply that there is something meaningful in the random collision of atoms that you think make up the world and humanity. How do you account for your sense of moral good and evil in a universe where there is no transcendent standard to define what is good and evil, such that we can look around and say, ‘This shouldn’t be happening; that thing over there is bad’?”

That is to say, the problem of evil is something that all worldviews have to answer. And I would suggest that not only is the Christian able to account for the universal sense that death and suffering are actually bad, but we also have the reality of a comfort – a way of making peace with suffering. And that is because in Christ God has entered in and experienced the same suffering that we experience. The Christian can account for our sense of good and evil, but we can also provide a sense of an answer and a resolution to the question.

But I bring this up today with this text for a specific reason: people do have a sense that there is a problem of evil – that it *seems* to some like there is a contradiction between God’s existence and the existence of evil. And not to deepen the problem or make it more difficult for us as Christians, but today’s passage presents us with

a different problem, and one that people don't usually think about (if ever), and that problem is what *might* be called the "problem of forgiveness."

What is the problem of forgiveness? Well a couple of months ago I preached on the topic of God's wrath. And in that sermon I talked about the righteousness of God, and how it is in God's very character to respond to injustice and sin because our sin is an insult and an affront to God's character. And it is in God's character to respond to sin with a righteous anger. It is a matter of God's character and honor that sin takes place in God's universe, and that character and honor of God is at stake when he doesn't immediately destroy sinners or respond with wrath when evil takes place.

And I see today's passage as a companion to that sermon on God's wrath. Now, some of what we'll look at here today is review, but here is the bottom line: Paul is saying in verse 25 that *prima facie* (that is, on the face of it), it seems like it should be a theological *problem* that God "passes over sins previously committed." That seems like a problem. In other words, God didn't punish sin when he said he would.

It would seem that either he can't punish sin, he won't punish sin, or perhaps he isn't holy after all. Any of those possibilities would be very destructive to God as we know him. And that is the problem that forgiveness creates.

Given the justice of God, how can he ever show mercy to anyone who deserves wrath? What I want to do today is present the problem. At our conclusion I'll present the beginning of Paul's answer, but the real answer will come in next week's sermon. So this week I'm going to introduce the problem, and put it as starkly as I can. And then next week I plan to show how God has resolved that problem in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## **1. Pristine Perfection**

Our first point today is Pristine Perfection.

It is important, if we're going to take the problem of forgiveness seriously, that we first take the character and holiness of God seriously.

One of the earliest books I ever read as a new Christian was R.C. Sproul's book *The Holiness of God*. It is a modern classic, and is still (I think) required reading for any Christian.

One of the things Sproul points out in that book is this. "How we understand the person and character of God the Father affects every aspect of our lives." He goes on to say that because God is inescapable, it matters who he is and what he is like.

Sproul goes on to make an important point: that Christians often do not reckon deeply with the holiness of God, and what that means. Often, the people in the Bible who had to reckon with God's holiness did so (in a sense) against their will.

They were confronted by God's holiness and terrified by it. For example, in Isaiah 6:3 we are told how Isaiah saw this vision of God, and heard the cherubim crying out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And Isaiah's response was not an interested fascination. Isaiah tells that he was scared and fell flat on his face in the presence of God and his holiness, and he starts crying and confessing his sin. Why? Because he saw the God who is "Holy, holy, holy." God is three times holy. He is holy in the maximum.

We often have a really simplistic and limited view of God's holiness. We may think of God's holiness, perhaps as sinlessness. And God is sinless, of course. He is perfect and pure, but holiness is more than just something God is. To say that God is holy is not just say that he is missing sin. Instead, his holiness, to quote Sproul, means this:

"When the Bible calls God holy, it means primary that God is transcendentally separate. He is so far above and beyond us that He seems almost totally foreign to us. To be holy is to be 'other,' to be different in a special way."

Now, God's purity is part of his holiness. He is unlike us. He is sinless, for one thing, and we are sinful. This is why Isaiah, when he sees the Lord in the temple, immediately begins confessing his sins in God's presence. He is struck by God's goodness compared to his own sinfulness.

And God's holiness is very closely connected to his sinlessness and his judgment of sin. Think of Habakkuk 1:13 – "You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong..." Habakkuk is really driving home the incompatibility

between God's nature and our sin. He hates sin. It is incompatible with God and his character.

We see God's pristine character and holiness in 1 John 1:5: "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." Just think of the absolute language here. There is *no* darkness in him. In him is light. So he is positively good (light) and absolutely lacking in sin (darkness). This is the character of the holy God.

Or Psalm 5:4–6: "You are not a God who delights in wickedness... the boastful shall not stand before your eyes..."

Again, we see this idea that God's holiness and our sin are mutually exclusive. But to understand the problem and take it more seriously, we have to begin with God's character.

Here is my question for you: you may love God's grace. But we will never know and appreciate God's grace if we will not take seriously God's holiness, purity, and goodness and what we might call his "otherness" Until we really reckon with God's holiness, we will struggle to understand what is it that is really so amazing about God's grace.

If we do not take God's holiness seriously, we will not understand what Paul is even doing here today. My question is, do you recognize the holiness of God? Do you worship God in his holiness?

## **2. Purity Provokes a Price**

Second today, Paul's argument reminds us that God's Purity Provokes a Price.

That is to say, because of God's Holiness, our sin demands that he give a response that matches the gravity of our sin.

This takes us back to Romans 1 again, where Paul tells us that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all kinds of ungodliness. Let's go back further in the Scripture. One book that we don't spend a lot of time in as Christians may be the book of Leviticus.

And yet this book is very precious, because in Leviticus God reveals what it is that he demands of us because of our sin. Leviticus really introduces us to the sacrificial system of Israel, where God shows us that the wages of sin is death.

Romans tells us this, of course (6:23), but even there Paul is just repeating the theme of Leviticus 17:11, which says this: “The life of the flesh is in the blood... it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.” God is saying, the only right response to sin is for the one who sins to have their life taken. That’s what God promised Adam in Genesis. The day you eat of the tree, you will surely die. Right? Sin provokes a price: death.

Because sin requires death, God institutes the bloody sacrificial system in Israel so that Israel vividly sees the death that sin requires. And they see it over and over and over again year in and year out for centuries as they see this blood shed because of their sin.

Think of this: in Israel, when you participated in the sacrificial system you took this animal, and you shed its blood in your place. Because you sinned, this animal had to die. Why? God was showing them (and us) that the wages of sin is death, and He was showing it in a vivid way. The place you went to offer these sacrifices was not a beautiful, clean, white room. It was a blood-soaked place that had a greater resemblance to a butcher shop than a church.

God is saying to the worshiper, “This should have been you. And yet this other creature is standing in your place.”

Even then God was preaching the wages of sin: death. You see this creature that died because of your sin? That’s what your sin deserves. In our sin, we deserve to die. This is why Hebrews 9:22 says, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”

Because of God’s purity, there is a price to be paid for sin.

If we don’t internalize, love, and believe this, we will not understand the rest of this book, or why there is any need for a sacrifice in our place. God’s purity provokes a price.

### 3. Pardon Presents a Problem

This takes us to our third point today, which is that Pardon Presents a Problem. I mean, all we're doing at this point is bringing these things together. God is holy, and does not clear the guilty. We are sinners, and deserve to die because that is the wages of our sin. And the apparent problem is, we're not dead! And it's not just that we're not dead. God has been merciful for generations!

Think of all the times in Scripture God has previously passed over sins, and not punished them as they deserve. Psalm 103:10 – "He does not deal with us according to our sins..."

In Exodus 32, after the Israelites fall into idolatry, Moses pleads for forgiveness, and God relents. Here's the question: did God suddenly stop caring about the sin of idolatry? Has God changed his character such that now sinners can besmirch his name and worship creatures rather than the creator? Has he changed the rules? Has he stopped caring about his own holiness?

That's the question that God's mercy should cause us to ask!

Or in 2 Samuel 12, David has committed murder against Uriah. He has stolen Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, and their union has even produced a child. I mean think of all the commandments David has broken.

He loved himself more than God, that's the 1<sup>st</sup> commandment.

He committed murder; that's the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment.

He committed adultery. That's the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment.

He's stolen his neighbor's wife, that's theft – the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment.

He's also lied in this situation, which is the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment.

He coveted his neighbor's wife; that's the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment.

The entire second table of God's law has been utterly shattered by David. The character and holiness of God just thrown on the ground like garbage, like God isn't watching and doesn't care. If there is anyone in all of Israel who deserves to die now, it's David.

And *YET*... in 2 Samuel 12:13, David repents and Nathan the prophet tells David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die." On the one hand, what a precious thing to hear if you're David. We love God's forgiveness. This is precious to us.

But there's a lot of unanswered questions here. Right? Like, in a drawer? Like it's just gone? I mean, God says He just "put away" David's sin. He put it away. If you're an onlooker here you should be like, "What!? Uriah is dead! Doesn't God care? What happened to God's holiness??"

But how can he do it? Does God just *decide*, "Yeah, the first commandment, the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment, and all those commandments in between don't really matter to me"? "I don't really matter"? Again, we should feel the tension. You love God's grace and mercy, but first FEEL the God-centered theological problem that this forgiveness makes! Paul feels it. He wants us to, as well.

God is vulnerable to a charge here, isn't he? David is still breathing!

Take a God-centered view of forgiveness for just a minute instead of a man-centered view. This is potentially a massive threat to God's supposed holiness, isn't it?

This is the heart of Romans 3:25 and the question that it raises for us: how can a just God forgive sin and still be a just God?

One passage that brings all these things together vividly if we're listening closely is in Exodus 34:6. There, God gives his law to Moses, and Moses tells us that Yahweh

"passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.'"

I mean, if you're Moses and you're listening carefully to that you might be thinking, "How?" "How do you 'by no means clear the guilty' and yet also *forgive* iniquity and transgression and sin?"

An astute listener should be thinking, "Something has to give here! There's compromise somewhere in the system. Somewhere in God's character.

Because you can't clear the guilty, AND forgive sin! It's one or the other. By definition forgiving sin means not punishing someone for what they did! Right?"

Are you feeling the weight of this problem?

Think of what we're seeing again in verse 25 of this passage. Paul says that God put Jesus forward as a propitiation by his blood for a reason: "to show God's righteousness," Why did his righteousness need to be shown in the first place? Paul gives the answer. He says, "because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins."

Paul is talking about the past here. He's saying, in a sense, remember when God just "put away" David's sin??? He never did anything about that. This whole time... it's been a *thousand* years... and all this time there has been an unresolved charge just hanging in the air: is it possible that God is not righteous?

Paul is almost certainly aware of Proverbs 17:15: "He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord."

The death of Christ really is God's answer to this charge: "how can God justify the wicked and not be an abomination himself?" Just letting sinners get away with it.

It is a God-centered problem, not a man-centered problem. Forgiveness isn't a problem for *us*. We *like* forgiveness. We *want* forgiveness. Give us *more* of that! And to be honest, we sort of assume that it's easy for God to forgive. We hear about it so much that it's like water: it's just everywhere and we take it for granted. "Forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness... yes, of course."

But today's text is Paul telling us, "Actually forgiveness is a huge problem that requires a huge answer."

Forgiveness is blood from a stone; it's an oasis in the desert; it's an island in the middle of the sea. It's impossibly hard to find apart from a miracle of God.

## Conclusion

And if I could conclude by giving you a preview of next week's sermon, I want to show you this exact miracle. Here it is, from Isaiah 53: "He was pierced for our transgressions... upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace..."

You see where this is going: Our God is a forgiving God. He puts away sins. For all of those who trust in this suffering servant that Isaiah was talking about, the miracle is real: God forgives sinners because the Servant bore the price that holiness demands. It will be paid.

There is no such thing as unpaid sin. There is no sin in all the universe that ever goes unaddressed.

The answer is what we will see next week—that God actually does care about sin and actually does respond to sin, and actually continues to be holy, and never compromises his holiness in the forgiveness of sinners like Abraham and David and Paul... and yet he does not punish the sinner but instead punishes sin in his son instead (2 Cor. 5:21).

Think of that moment in Genesis when Abraham's son asks him, "Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" and Abraham responds, "God will provide his own sacrifice."

We'll go into the answer deeply next week. But as we go today, know that God provides his own answer to his own problem.

Forgiveness is a rare mineral: hard to find, more precious than gold. My hope for us this week is that we will anticipate God's answer next week, but even more, that we would be covered in gratitude because we can see that forgiveness is an unspeakable testament to the love, the wisdom, the goodness, the righteousness, and the holiness of God.

*Let's pray.*