

## ARTICLE XI.

## WHAT IS THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS?

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DOES the question need consideration? Has the Christian church been proclaiming the forgiveness of sins for so many centuries without really knowing what forgiveness is? A sufficient answer to the query might be, that every Christian doctrine is so profound that the combined wisdom of the ages has never been able to fathom its depths. Each age may add its treasures to the interpretations of the past, and gain new light upon the meaning of Christian doctrine. But the forgiveness of sins does not stand in as favorable a position as most Christian doctrines in that regard. It has always been a part of the gospel proclamation, but it has been strangely neglected in Christian theology, especially in works upon theology in the English language. Turn to the indices of such standard works as those of Dick, Dwight, John Pye Smith, H. B. Smith, the Hodges, Shedd, or Fairchild, and you will not find the word. The index of Stearns's "Present-Day Theology" has it, but the reader is referred to "justification" for references. The absence of the word from the index does not always indicate its absence from the work, but it does show that it is referred to only incidentally. So this word, so often on the lips of Jesus and on such solemn and significant occasions, is well-nigh banished from the scientific statement of the content of the Christian revelation.

The subsumption of the word in the index of Stearns under "justification" explains its absence in general. Everything that needed to be said about "forgiveness"

was supposed to have been said under "justification." Theologians recognized rightly that "forgiveness" and "justification" were parallel terms, though they never seem to have recognized the true relation between them. The theological thought of the English-speaking world has been determined constructively or polemically by Calvinism. "Justification" is a favorite word with Calvinism. The whole character of that doctrinal system is legal. It begins with a sovereign and ends with a court of justice. "Justification" is a legal term. It will fit into a system of thought resting upon governmental relations where the word "forgiveness" will find no place. Hence the latter has been thrust aside or reduced to a subordinate rôle. Henry B. Smith, speaking of the quite synonymous term "pardon," says that "justification involves what pardon does not, a righteousness which is the ground of the acquittal and favor; not the mere favor of the sovereign, but the merit of Christ is at the basis,—the righteousness which is of God."<sup>1</sup> Ritschl speaks of the forgiveness of sins as having a "negative ring" in contrast to "the positive term—justification;"<sup>2</sup> although he reduces the difference to a merely apparent one.

Loose as Smith's language is, he cannot mean that the term "the pardon of sin" is used without reference to Christ in his righteous character. The New Testament uniformly teaches that every step of the process of redemption is conditioned upon Christ as the manifestation of the righteousness of God. Man cannot be pardoned without the merit of Christ. The word "pardon" does not involve any overlooking of that fact. The only way in which the word "justification" can be supposed to involve what the word "pardon" does not is to regard justification as positive with regard to the believer, while pardon or

<sup>1</sup> *System of Christian Theology*, p. 523.

<sup>2</sup> *Justification and Sanctification*, p. 38.

forgiveness is merely negative. The Catholic position is that justification is the impartation to the believer of active righteousness. Smith cannot mean that. He must mean that pardon is merely the removal of the condemnation resting upon sin, while justification adds "a righteousness which is the ground of the acquittal and favor" by the imputation to the believer of the righteousness of Christ. But, in the first place, the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to believers is a refinement of theology, not a scriptural doctrine; and, in the second place, even allowing some force, it does not change a negative to a positive doctrine. Such imputation would not be the real transference of Christ's character to believers, but would at most be a mere legal fiction with reference to a judicial decision. The actual appropriation of Christ's character by believers is what has always—and quite properly—been denominated "sanctification." Justification would, then, even upon Smith's assumption regarding the relation of the words, simply define further the method of pardon or forgiveness, but would not represent a positive instead of a negative doctrine, nor really add to the idea of pardon what is not necessarily involved in it.

This and other attempts to define the relation of forgiveness to justification err in assuming that the terms differ in scope. The fact is that they present the same fact from different view-points. A slight examination of the New Testament usage shows this. "Justification" is Paul's word. The words "forgiveness" and "forgive" (*ἀφεσις* and *ἀφ(η)μι*) are used in twenty-nine New Testament passages, outside of the writings of Paul, with reference to God's treatment of sin. In Paul's Epistles they are used only three times,—once in quotation from the Septuagint,<sup>1</sup> and once each in the late Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians.<sup>2</sup> (Some scholars would use that fact as an argument against

<sup>1</sup> Rom. iv. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Eph. i. 7; Col. i. 14.

the Pauline authorship of these Epistles.) On the other hand, the words "justification" and "justify" (*δικαιώσις* and *δικαίω*) are used of the divine treatment of sin twenty-four times by Paul, and in only three other passages in the New Testament. Of the latter, one is in Luke's Gospel,<sup>1</sup> one in Acts,<sup>2</sup> and one in the controversial passage regarding faith and works in the Epistle of James.<sup>3</sup> In other words, every use of the words "justification" or "justify" outside of the writings of Paul may be accounted for as a reminiscence of Paul's usage. These facts are enough to show that what Jesus himself, and the New Testament writers uninfluenced by Paul, call "the forgiveness of sins," Paul prefers, at least as a rule, to call "justification." Forgiveness and justification do not then differ in scope, but are entirely parallel, differing only in the way in which the divine treatment of the repentant sinner is described.

It is not difficult to discover wherein this difference consists. Paul is formally legal in his method of thought—not essentially legal, for he never used a legal phrase that did not break down under the weight of his meaning. "Justification" is a legal term. The act is that of a court of justice. The state, previous to the introduction of modern reformatory methods with the consequent extension of paternalism in civic relations, recognized only two classes of citizens,—the innocent and the guilty. If a man were not guilty, he was justified, either proved innocent or declared innocent by a legal fiction. But when Jesus says, "If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,"<sup>4</sup> he plainly implies that the divine forgiveness of sins is the act of a Father. It is the outgoing of the Father's heart toward a repentant child. Justification is the act of a sovereign. The question as to which is the broader, richer term, "forgiveness" or "justification," can only be answered as we answer another

<sup>1</sup> Luke xviii. 14.    <sup>2</sup> xiii. 39.    <sup>3</sup> ii. 21 ff.    <sup>4</sup> Matt. vi. 14.

query, whether the fatherhood or the sovereignty of God be supreme. Calvinism had its answer. The theology which has outgrown Calvinism will have a different answer. The term "justification" has had and still has its value in emphasizing the fact that forgiveness concerns the personal relationship of God and the soul. The older theology was saved many a blunder by its preference for justification. But it remains that the individual believer rejoices in the forgiveness of a Father rather than in the justification of a Sovereign. Christian theology has suffered a loss by the banishment of the word "forgiveness."

The modern difficulty in the definition of the forgiveness of sins, however, arises when the doctrine is brought into relation to scientific conceptions of causality and law. The prayer for forgiveness is defined by the Westminster Larger Catechism as one for acquittal "both from the guilt and punishment of sin,"<sup>1</sup> and frequently forgiveness has been assumed to be the removal of the penalty of sin. Here the scientist enters a caveat. The penalty of sin is the consequences of sin. "Deeds are irrevocable," says Robertson, "—their consequences are knit up with them irrevocably." Punishment, according to W. R. Greg,<sup>1</sup> "is not an infliction for crime imposed by external force, but a natural and inevitable result of the offense—a child generated by the parent—a sequence following an antecedent—a consequence arising out of a cause." Therefore he concludes: "God is the only being who cannot forgive sins. 'Forgiveness of sins' means one of two things: it either means saving a man from the consequences of his sins, that is, an interposing between cause and effect, in which case it is *working a miracle* (which God no doubt can do, but which we have no right to expect that he will do, or ask that he shall do); or it means *an engagement to forbear retaliation*, a suppression of the natural anger felt

<sup>1</sup>A. 194.

against the offender by the offended party, a *foregoing of vengeance* on the part of the injured—in which meaning it is obviously quite inapplicable to a being exempt and aloof from human passion [*italics his*].”

As to these alternatives, Greg has not exhausted the possibilities of the meaning of forgiveness. There is at least one other which he does not recognize which will be developed in the sequel. But what are the consequences of sin and are they all inevitable? Sin has various consequences, without and within. It has an effect upon the sinner in his own soul and in his own body. It has an effect upon the world of which the sinner is a part, both upon the animate and upon the inanimate world. It has an effect upon God. In these regards sin is the same as any other act. I strike a blow. There is an effect upon the immediate object of my blow. If that object be a sentient being, there is both a physical effect and a psychological effect. The physical effect is determined by natural law. The psychological effect depends upon various psychic conditions in the one whom I have assaulted. It makes a difference what sort of a man I strike, and what is his mood at the time I strike him. There is an effect of my blow upon the universe as a whole. It has changed the center of gravity of the entire system. But there is, apart from the effect of my blow upon my relations to this world without, an immediate reaction of the blow upon myself. The discharge of mental and muscular energy along certain channels has left a permanent impression upon mind and body respectively. The same is true of every sin. It has consequences determined by natural law, and consequences dependent upon the action of sentient beings, and under the control to a considerable extent of the wills of those beings. The man I have smitten may turn to me the other cheek, or he may return the blow with interest.

<sup>1</sup> *Creed of Christendom*, p. 326.

It is with the consequences of sin determined by natural law exclusively that science deals, and it is these consequences that the scientist asserts are inevitable. His polemic against the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins is due to his identification of the punishment of sins with these natural consequences, and his assumption that forgiveness can only mean the removal of these consequences by mere fiat. The ethical message of modern science is summed up in the words: "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." The fervor that the scientist throws into his message in view of his belief in the universality and inviolability of law is something admirable. His is the largest contribution to practical ethics since the New Testament was complete. We cannot measure the consequences which this message is yet to have. The whole conception of law has been revitalized by being carried back from mere legal enactment to the heart of the universe of God's creation.

But with regard to the consequences of sin as determined by natural law, there is no assurance in Scripture nor in Christian experience that the forgiveness of sin will remove them. On the contrary, whatever Scripture utterances there are would seem to coincide with the teachings of science. The conception of natural law is thoroughly modern. Scarce a glimmering of it had arisen upon the authors of the Bible. Paul is the greatest scientist among biblical writers, and in the passage above quoted, and in the first chapter of Romans, he seems to rise to the conception of certain natural and inevitable consequences of sin. In general, scriptural writers seem entirely indifferent to the immediate bodily and mental reactions of sinful deeds. Whatever consequences there might be in body or in mind they regarded, as did Job's friends his afflictions, as inflictions of the sovereign will of deity. They were to be removed only by miraculous intervention. In promis-

ing the forgiveness of sin they did not promise such miraculous intervention. Nor have we any right to extend the scope of the gospel promises to embrace anything of the kind. In saying this I am not blind to the enormous remedial and recuperative power of nature, physical and psychical. No one has ever yet been able to measure that power with reference to the body, much less with regard to the soul. Here are divinely ordained natural agencies for the regeneration and sanctification of the vilest sinner. But, granting all their efficacy, they cannot make what has been as if it had not been. They cannot obliterate the scar of sin from the soul. We bear to-day the mark of every sin we have ever committed, and we shall bear it to all eternity.

In view of the supposed conflict between science and the doctrine of forgiveness, some popular theologians have attempted to save the doctrine of forgiveness by taking advantage of the etymology of the Greek word for "forgiveness" (*ἀφεσις*). It means literally "sending away," and the revisers of the New Testament have generally translated it by "remission," in preference to "forgiveness." Now, as nothing is ever said in the New Testament of the remission of penalty or consequences, but the phrase is always "the remission of sin," it is argued that the true doctrine is that God in his mercy "sends away" or "remit" not the consequences of our acts, but the acts that bring the consequences. I remember a sermon preached by Dr. Lyman Abbott at Chautauqua in 1889, in which he used these words: "What Christ has given in his covenant is this—a promise to remit, What? Penalty? that is not what he says. Sin. To remit is to send away, to abolish, to dismiss, to take off, to bury, to destroy. . . . Now in the New Testament I find the promise is not,—and I emphasize it,—is not the remission of penalty, but the remission of sin. If I turn to my classical Greek dictionary, I cannot find



anywhere that the phrase 'remission of sin' occurs. Then I turn to my New Testament concordance and cannot find anywhere that 'remission of punishment' occurs." Dr. Judson Titsworth, in his "Moral Evolution," follows suite. "The remission of sin," he says, "is not the covering of sin, an idea which is sometimes found in the Old Testament, or the forgetting of sin, or the ignoring of sin—which the pardon of sin or the forgiveness of sin in the sense of pardon may mean,—but the sending away of sin. . . . When God deals with sin effectively, saves men from it, he does not pardon sin, cover it up, forget it, ignore it, but rids men of it, gets them clear of it. . . . Human penalties are artificial and mechanical, divine penalties are natural and vital, organic, are in the nature of strict consequences. . . . There is no such thing possible as remitting penalties in the divine government without first remitting sin. The consequence goes when the cause goes, and not before."<sup>1</sup>

Just what does this mean? Neither Dr. Abbott nor Dr. Titsworth is a perfectionist. Certainly they do not believe that in the forgiveness of sin a man is instantaneously delivered from the practice of sinning. The sending away of sin as a practice is a process, never, so far as human observation goes, completed in this life. Forgiveness as an instantaneous act is only the initiation of this process of elimination. This must be their thought. This Dr. Abbott expresses when, writing of justification in his "Life and Letters of Paul," he says: "It is impossible that God should declare a man to be right when God sees him to be wrong. That would make God a liar. Because he sees in the penitent the beginning of righteousness, he accepts it as righteousness, recognizes it, fosters it, develops it."<sup>2</sup> If, then, justification=forgiveness, the latter is in reality a gradual process, whose ultimate results are discounted at the outset. This idea calls for further examination.

<sup>1</sup> Pp. 60 ff. <sup>2</sup> P. 231.

As to Dr. Abbott's distinction between classical and New Testament usage, the difference is accounted for by the thought of sin in the minds of biblical writers as something directed against God. Classical writers had no such thought, hence their language concerns only the penalty of sin. As to Dr. Titworth's distinction between Old and New Testament usage, it is certainly true that the Old Testament speaks of the covering of sin, the forgetting of sin, the ignoring of sin, as the pardon or forgiveness of sin. "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom Jehovah imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile. . . . I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity did I not hide: I said, I will confess my transgressions unto Jehovah; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin."<sup>1</sup> "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto Jehovah, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."<sup>2</sup> The forgiveness follows upon amendment of life, and is equivalent to having mercy upon the offender. But the New Testament writers take their language from the Greek Old Testament. Those words come surcharged with the same ideas. Paul quotes the words from the Thirty-second Psalm to illustrate his own doctrine of salvation by grace. It will require some more cogent reasoning than that of Dr. Titworth to prove that the New Testament usage is really such a violent departure from the Old.

The new interpretation cannot be carried out on New Testament ground. According to it, when Jesus said to the man sick of the palsy, "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee," what he meant was, "Son, a process is now begun in thee which at death [or somewhere in the vast beyond] will result in stopping thee from sinning; but meanwhile

<sup>1</sup> Ps. xxxii. 1-5.    <sup>2</sup> Isa. lv. 7.

the consequences of the sins you do commit will go right on, for they are inevitable." Even that would be a blessed promise, and by no means to be despised; yet it fell far short of the need of the palsied man, and of every sinner turning away from his sin. It is impossible to suppose that Jesus meant anything of the kind. Nor did he mean the removal of the natural consequences of sin. We moderns leap to the inference that the man's disease was the consequence of his past sin. Whether Jesus thought so or not, certainly no other natural consequences could have been in his thought, and the removal of the disease was a separate act, not necessarily involved in the forgiveness. In the Lord's Prayer Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, "Forgive us our sins; for we ourselves also forgive every one that is indebted to us." The human forgiveness and the divine forgiveness are made so far the same that the performance of the one is made the ground of petition for the other. Human forgiveness is essentially the putting away of the thought of the wrong done us as disturbing our personal relations with the guilty one. It may mean the remission of penalty, the removal of consequences, or it may not. The essential thing is the restoration of personal relation to the wrong-doer.

The mistake common to all the definitions of forgiveness to which reference has been made is the failure to recognize that God is a personal being, and that he stands in personal relations to men, over and above his relations through natural law and the created universe. The most grievous consequence of sin is the injury it works to that relation. What the repentant sinner needs more than all else is the restoration of fellowship with his Father. He needs it at once. He needs it as capital for the new life upon which he is entering. The relation has been broken by sin. That does not mean, as Greg suggests, that a spirit of vengeance is aroused in God; but it does mean

that the same relation cannot subsist between a rebellious soul and its God as can exist between an obedient soul and its Father. God's disposition is not changed by the coming of sin, but man's is, and the practical results cannot be the same. God's love is still there, but its action is hindered, and it waits, like the charged energy of a storage battery, for a channel by which it may flow out to its object. The moment the rebellious soul finds in Christ repentance, that moment the channel is open, and the divine energy flows. That is the forgiveness of sin. The prodigal has turned back toward the Father's house, and the Father has met him, and received him back into the arms of his love. The father of the parable could not blot out the son's memory of the wasted years, nor the sorrow at their recall, could not restore the wasted energies nor root out the evil tendencies that had been cultivated. The heavenly Father has greater resources, but we have no assurance that even he will work all these changes; and what he does work will be through natural remedial agencies and processes, taking natural in the widest sense. But, with fellowship with his Father restored, the man can bear the other consequences of sin, or even find them blessings in disguise. In the strength of that fellowship he can go forth to the conquest of his sinful habits, for in that fellowship there is the divine assurance of final victory.

"It is in keeping with the facts," says Ritschl, "to define the forgiveness of sins—as consisting in the removal of the total penalty attached to original sin—as that operation of God which restores sinners, separated as such from him, to the presence of God and their proper fellowship with him."<sup>1</sup> With this coincides the thought of Prof. William N. Clarke: "To forgive is to say to one who has done wrong (and to have it true), I do not think of you or feel toward you as one who has done this; I do not hold it in

<sup>1</sup>Justification and Reconciliation, p. 43.

my heart against you, I leave it out of my thoughts so that it does not embarrass the relation between you and me, it is between us as if it had not been. . . . A forgiven sinner is not regarded by God as one who has never sinned, for that is as impossible as any other contradictory thing. He is regarded as a sinner toward whom God's attitude is no longer determined by his sin."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Outline, p. 256.