

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham  
“Following Jesus 101: Forgive Unconditionally—Part 1”  
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Psalm 103:1-12; John 21: 15-19

You are forgiven. That thing you did that loops in your mind’s eye before you fall asleep. The regret that follows you everywhere. Let it be, God has forgiven you. This is an amazing truth! It is one of my favorite things to remind people of. In fact, I think if the world understood this one thing, truly became convinced of their forgiveness, we would have instant world peace. God’s unconditional forgiveness is one of those warm and fuzzy doctrines we wrap around us when the world gets cold. But...

Unconditional forgiveness is a theological minefield. Let me just trigger one of the mines for you. Hebrews 2:9 “Jesus tasted death for everyone” 1 John 2:2 “He is the appeasement for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” What great news, until you realize Hitler was in our world – a little less warm and fuzzy now. Unconditional forgiveness for a world that includes Hitler has been a topic of debate among theologians and continues today. These verses say Jesus died for the forgiveness of “the whole world.” But I am not looking forward to bumping into Hitler in heaven.

So maybe these verses don’t mean the whole world. Maybe there is some condition involved to receive God’s forgiveness. Maybe we need to repent. There are tons of verses that talk about repenting and then being forgiven, maybe they are right and not these “whole world” verses. Maybe there is a level of belief one needs to have, or a percentage of obedience, or show of outward change. The whole world can’t be the truth of forgiveness.

If any one of these conditions is real then that means there is a corner of humanity that forgiveness cannot reach. A darkness that keeps some people out of the promises of forgiveness. We are more than happy to put Hitler in that corner. He ran for the darkness at full speed. But if that dark corner exists, how can I be sure I haven’t stumbled in unknowingly? If there is a place that is too far gone, I can never be sure if I have repented enough, or obeyed enough, or believed enough, or changed enough. How can you measure the essence of a person’s goodness verse badness?

There is a story about Archimedes being asked to make an impossible measurement like this. He was asked by a king to determine if a crown was 100% gold or not. The king had given 1000grams of gold to the gold smith to make a crown. But the king suspected that the gold smith replaced some of the gold with silver and pocketed the gold for himself. Archimedes had to figure out a way to test the crown without destroying it. Archimedes knew he had to measure the crown’s density. But to get that he needed to know the mass and the volume of the crown. Mass was easy enough with a scale, but there was no way to find the volume of an irregular shape. And he could not melt the crown to make it a regular shape. How could he measure the volume?

It is said he was stepping into a bath when he suddenly yelled, “Eureka!” which means, “I have found it!” What he had found is now called Archimedes principle, a way to measure the volume of something with an irregular shape. As Archimedes got into his bath he observed the water overflowing more and more as he submerged himself. He realized he could collect the displaced water and that would tell him the volume of the object. He could then test the crown by measuring how much water it displaced and measure its mass to calculate density. Then compare it to how much water was displaced by 1000grams of pure gold and that mass.

If the resulting calculations were the same the gold smith was honest, if not, well it was bad news for the gold smith.

Who knew “shower thoughts” were a thing all the way back in 275 BCE! There must be something woven into our brains that makes certain places fruitful ground for thinking. Places where the vast capacity of the brain to imagine is unlocked and we feel free to contemplate the mysteries of life. Maybe the shower isn’t your thinking place, maybe for you the quiet morning hours are the best place to think with the first sips of coffee awakening your brain. Mine seems to be the moment right before sleep, when my brain should be shutting down but instead it is finally coming up with brilliant comebacks and better plans of action than I could have thought of hours before.

These swaths of time, where our brains work unencumbered, can lead to amazing moments of “Eureka!” where our full creative capacity is unleashed. These times are also pockets where our regrets fester. Where our creative brains turn against us and ruminate over sins we have committed, words we can never take back, actions we should have taken, and sudden realizations of how our choices have led us to the consequences we can no longer avoid. We have all been in this headspace. Feeling far away from forgiveness, thinking “am I too far gone?” “Am I stuck in that corner of darkness forgiveness cannot reach?”

Peter is in one of these pits as he sits with the risen Christ. He hides it well, but weighing on his conscious is the fact that in Jesus’ most desperate hour Peter chose to deny even knowing his friend. Three times he denies Jesus. Now as he sits next to Jesus eating breakfast his spirit is heavy with regret and shame. He tries to cover it up by being overly welcoming to Jesus, jumping out of the boat to swim to shore and be the first to greet him. As he sits with Jesus during breakfast, Jesus turns to Peter and asks, “Do you love me?” and Peter quickly answers, “Yes.” Jesus asks again, “Do you love me?” and Peter answers again, “I do.” Then Jesus asks a third time and Peter finally hits the moment of “Eureka!”

He realizes Jesus knows everything - everything, every denial. Jesus knows what Peter did to him, and worse what he didn’t do for him. He didn’t stand firm and support his friend, he ran away. The memories flash of each person asking if he knew Jesus. Each “NO” rings louder in his head. When the rooster crowed, he remembers Jesus saying he would deny him and the pain cuts through him. Jesus knew he would run away the whole time. And now sitting with Jesus, Peter relives each moment again. His brain giving him a bird’s eye view to each denial and feeling each stab of pain again.

Jesus asks three times because Peter denied three times. But also, Jesus wanted Peter to get to the “Eureka!” moment. The moment where a new realization changes Peter’s world. And events that seemed out of place suddenly snap into focus. At “Eureka!” Peter cannot be the same as he was before because suddenly, he knows the full weight of what has happened. “Eureka!” He is forgiven.

Peter realizes the forgiveness he has does not come from his overexuberant welcome of Jesus. His forgiveness is not dependent on his answers to Jesus’ question of love now, because Jesus knew Peter’s sins as he walked to the cross and Jesus did not turn away from Peter. “Eureka!” I have found it.

The thing Peter finds is unconditional forgiveness. God’s forgiveness is unconditional. It comes before we repent, before we can work to earn it, before we can change our ways, before we are worthy, before we even know we need it. That’s what makes it unconditional. While we were still sinning, God forgave the world.

So...what do we do with the Hitler problem? Because if God forgives the world and there is no pocket of darkness outside of forgiveness’s reach for someone like Hitler. If we are all in the same glorious light of

forgiveness, why would anyone choose to be good? Being good is hard. It is not always the easy or more comfortable choice. In those situations, where being good is harder than being bad, what would motivate someone in a world of unconditional forgiveness to choose to be good? I think the answer is in the second half of the exchange Jesus and Peter have. After each confession of love, Jesus asks Peter to take care of his people.

Peter has already been forgiven so his response to Jesus' request can't change that. The reason Jesus makes the request is because he knows when someone has had a "Eureka!" moment they will want to do something about it. When Archimedes made his discovery, it is said he jumped out of the bath and ran naked through town to his laboratory to begin testing his new theory. He could not wait to see how the world had changed in light of his discovery.

We do not need to change to be forgiven. That is offered by God without condition. But if we have truly encountered the unconditional forgiveness of God it's going to change us. Because we have found it, "Eureka!" a different life, a new world of possibilities.

When King David had his "Eureka!" moment, he writes this: (Psalm 103)

Praise the Lord, who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion,  
who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.  
The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.  
The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.  
He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;  
he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.  
For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for us  
as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

David's response to the unconditional forgiveness of God is to make sure others know who God truly is.

People who have had their "Eureka!" moment are going to impact the world differently. The evil we displace with our presence will be great. A "Eureka!" person is going to have more of an effect on the world than a person who is still worried if they are in a dark corner of humanity.

We will still have moments when our brain tries to convince us we have gone too far. But after "Eureka!" we know the way out of the pit. And we can waste less time ruminating on our mistakes and use those times of uninhibited creativity to think of how to make the world a better place. Instead of worrying about the what ifs of our past, we are free to imagine the what ifs of our future.

Why would someone choose good? Because they know how powerful good can be. They have felt evil's weight, worried that they could never throw it off, and then forgiveness lifted it away. "Eureka!" people choose to do good because good chose them first.

Wherever your best thinking place is, whether it is in the shower, or in bed, or in the car, wherever it is that your creativity thrives, I want you to write the word "EUREKA!" to remind yourself that you are forgiven unconditionally. Do not waste another moment worrying about how God sees you. Because before any of it you were forgiven. Let that truth sink in. I can't wait to see what evil you displace with that newfound reality.

"Eureka!" you are forgiven.