

the ESSENTIALS



WHAT ALL CHRISTIANS BELIEVE AND WHY IT MATTERS

Part 10: I believe in the forgiveness of sins | Pastor Joe Wittwer | March 22, 2009

A. Fellowship Time (10-15 minutes)

1. Chitchat. Perhaps offer coffee, tea, or a cold drink with some snacks.
2. Pray (or invite someone to pray) to open the discussion.

B. Review Time (Read the summary below to the group: 5-10 minutes)

We're working our way through the Apostles' Creed, the oldest and most widely accepted of the creeds. The Creed contains the essentials that all Christians share in common. Richard Baxter, a 17th century Puritan pastor, wrote that there is a "core of orthodox Christianity that Puritans, Anglicans, and Catholics could all affirm," and he urged Christians to come together as "mere Christians," a phrase made famous by C. S. Lewis' book, *Mere Christianity*. Charles Colson writes, "[T]he truth of the great fundamental creeds—mere Christianity—can be affirmed by all true Christians." These are the essentials.

Some could argue that this section of the Apostles' Creed—"I believe in . . . the forgiveness of sins"—is one of the most important. Christians believe only Christ can forgive our sins, and we must believe that confession and repentance along with the Lord's forgiveness is essential to our faith.

1. Own up: confess your sin.

The apostle John writes, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). And the apostle Paul writes in Romans 3:23, "[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." What is sin? The Greek word *hamartia* literally means "to miss the mark." Imagine a bulls-eye. What is the bulls-eye in life? God's moral standard. God's righteousness. God's perfection. We all miss the bulls-eye far more often than we hit it. Sin is any thought, word or deed that misses the mark of God's moral perfection. So we are all sinners, but Jesus will and does forgive us if we confess our sin. God's standards are higher than any human being can ever live up to, therefore we must recognize our sin and strive to overcome it.

We won't clean up if we don't think we're dirty! Some of us have grown so accustomed to our sin that when someone says, "You're sinful," we protest, "No I'm not. I'm a pretty good person." We need a new idea of normal. Here it is: Jesus is normal. Stand next to Jesus, and compare yourself to Him. Then, like Peter, you'll say, "Wash me, Lord. Not just my feet, wash all of me." We have to accept the diagnosis before we can affect the cure. We must own up to our shortcomings—our sin, anger, lust, envy—there are so many attitudes that are sinful. This is where we start: we confess our sins. We agree with God: "You're right Lord. I was wrong. Please forgive me."

2. Open up: receive God's forgiveness.

At the Last Supper Jesus said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Scripture is clear that "Christ died for our sins" (1 Corinthians 15:3, 1 Peter 3:18). The penalty for sin is death; Jesus died to pay our penalty: "In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Ephesians 1:7). Once we confess our sinful nature, we must open our hearts and receive the forgiveness Jesus Christ has promised. He died for us, for our sins. We can choose to accept that or ignore it. Being proud and thinking you don't need forgiveness will get you nowhere. If you choose, instead, to accept the loving nature of God and

allow Him to forgive and restore you, you will be able to move past the sinful act and grow. The more we recognize the level of God's forgiveness, the more grateful we are.

3. Let it go: forgive others.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (**Matthew 6:12**). The Bible says that when God forgives our sins:

- He removes them as far as the east is from the west. **Psalm 103:12**
- He buries them in the deepest sea. **Micah 7:19**
- He blots them out. **Isaiah 43:25**
- He remembers them no more. **Jeremiah 31:34**

When God forgives you, He lets it go. And part of being forgiven is being forgiving! We must forgive our fellow sinners their sins, just as Jesus forgives us ours. After the Lord's Prayer Jesus goes on to warn, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (**Matthew 6:14-15**). We must not only move past our sinful acts with God's forgiveness, but also let go of the grievances we have held toward others. The only way to truly be forgiven is to take up the same forgiving nature of Christ and let others know that we forgive them. Jesus forgave us far more than we could ever comprehend and it is our job as Christians to show the same Christ-like love to our fellow human beings.

C. Life Group Questions (select, revise, and add as desired: 20-40 minutes)

1. Sometimes we struggle to think of ourselves as "sinners." But the meaning, as in the Greek *hamartia*, is to "miss the mark." If Jesus is our standard, how do we often miss the mark? Read **Matthew 5:21-22** and discuss how high Jesus calls us and how we all fall short.
2. Both in small and great things, where have you (or do you still have) trouble believing God has forgiven you? How do we get into trouble with both extremes of either believing we have very little to forgive or we have too much? How do we overcome each extreme? [Leaders, read **Ephesians 1:7** above again to move the focus to God's grace as needed.]
4. God's forgiveness is amazing. He sets the standard in forgiveness: our sins aren't just forgiven, they're forgotten. [Look up and read **Psalm 103:12, Jeremiah 31:34, and Matthew 18:21-35** together.] How do you not only accept the truth of God's forgiveness for yourselves, but also forgive others similarly and repeatedly as Jesus teaches Peter?
5. [Leaders: this is a sensitive area, and there should be no pressure to share—some may simply like the opportunity to confess and be prayed for. Remember to affirm confidentiality within the group.] Has this part of the Creed brought up any sins in which you feel it would be beneficial for you to acknowledge and confess before this group? Likewise, without gossiping or naming names, would you like to discuss any general situations where you see you need to offer Christ-like grace to others whom you have not forgiven? How can the group support you?

D. Personal Application (1-3 Minutes)

- Spend these last couple of weeks completing your memorization of the Apostles' Creed if you have not already mastered it.
- In your devotions, ask God to search you (Psalm 139) and reveal any unconfessed sin or unforgiveness of others you are harboring. Let these go—give them to God.

E. Prayer Time (As a whole group or subgroups of 3-4: 10-15 Minutes)

- Thank God for His grace in sending Jesus to atone for our sins, offering His forgiveness, and reconciling us to Him.
- Pray for God to reveal in your heart any sins it's time to confess to Him and to reveal to you any sins you need to forgive in others.
- Cover any other praises, requests or concerns brought up by the discussion.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth,

and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic church, the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.

For further reading on Christian doctrine:

- *The Faith: What Christians Believe, Why They Believe it, and Why it Matters*, Charles Colson and Harold Fickett, Zondervan, 2008.
- *Christian Basics: An Invitation to Discipleship*, John Stott, Baker, 1991.
- *Basic Christianity*, John Stott, InterVarsity Press.
- *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, N. T. Wright, Harper, 2006.
- *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis, Macmillan, 1952.
- *Christian Theology in Plain Language*, Bruce Shelley, Word, 1985

For further reading on the Apostles' Creed:

- *The Apostles' Creed*, William Barclay, Knox, 1998.
- *I Believe: Exploring the Apostles Creed*, Alister McGrath, Intervarsity Press, 1997.
- *Affirming the Apostles' Creed*, J. I. Packer, Crossway, 2008.
- *Credo: Believing in Something to Die For*, Ray Pritchard, 2005.