

**“Does God Grade on a Curve?”**

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

*Series: The Forgiveness Formula Week 1. God - the Catalyst of Forgiveness*

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August 21, 2016

It’s back to school time or, what some parents call, “The most wonderful time of the year.” Here’s a story to get students into the swing of things:

It was the final exam for a college Chemistry course. The exam was two hours long and exam booklets were provided. The professor, an extremely strict old school type, told the class any exam not on his desk in exactly two hours would not be accepted and the student would fail.

Half an hour into the exam a student rushed in and asked the professor for an exam booklet. “Why bother?” the professor said sarcastically, “you won’t have time to finish.” But the student took a booklet, sat down and began writing furiously. As the time ticked by, the professor loudly announced: “One and a half hours ‘til the end.” “One hour ‘til the end.” “Only a half hour left ‘til the end.” He was a real piece of work!

When the two hours were up, the professor called for the exams and the students filed up and handed them in...all except the late student who continued writing. Half an hour later, the last student came up to the professor still sitting at his desk preparing for his next class. He attempted to put his exam on the stack of exam booklets. "No you don't, I'm not going to accept that. It's late." The student looked at the professor and asked, "Do you know who I am?" "No, as a matter of fact I don't," replied the professor with sarcasm in his voice. "Do you know who I am?" the student asked again in a louder voice. "No, and I don't care." replied the professor with an air of superiority. "Good," replied the student, who quickly stuffed his exam in the middle of the stack and walked out of the room.

Since the beginning of summer we've focused on freedom from the seven deadly sins: anger, envy, greed, gluttony, pride, sloth and lust. Each week we looked at how to break the chains of these sins. Perhaps it felt like a test or exam for you. One person said to me, "I'm glad you're done with those deadly sins." "Why?" I asked. "Each week I went home feeling guilty and convicted. Just when I thought, 'Now that's my real problem,' you'd do the next sin and I found I had that one too!"

So, following that seven week exam we thought it would be good to offer some forgiveness. Today we begin our new series called, "The Forgiveness Formula." You won't find this formula on a Chemistry exam. Yet the Bible teaches there are certain factors, ingredients, and elements which foster forgiveness. Like Einstein's famous equation  $E=MC^2$  the forgiveness formula appears simple but can get quite complicated. Forgiveness is a great idea in theory. Everyone is for forgiveness...until you have to give it. That's when the Forgiveness Formula can start a chain reaction of questions:

What if I don't feel like forgiving?

What if the other person is not sorry?

What if they don't stop doing what I don't like?

How many times do I have to forgive someone?

Do I have to forgive AND forget?

And what about God? Is there a limit to His forgiveness for me?

Are there some sins which are unforgiveable?

How can I be sure He will forgive and save me?

To understand forgiveness the Bible says you have to start with God. Forgiveness is God's idea. In terms of the Forgiveness Formula, **God is the Catalyst**. In nature, a

chain reaction occurs when a catalyst, an addition to a system, triggers a chain of events that lead to large, sometimes cataclysmic results. Take for example a snowball rolling down the hill. It eventually grows into a larger snowball that can cause an avalanche. In the Forgiveness Formula God is the catalyst of a chain reaction but the results are healing, not destructive. God's forgiveness reconciles and restores relationships. The Bible says forgiveness starts with God.

“We love because he first loved us.” (I John 4:19)

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32)

“Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” (Colossians 3:13)

God always forgives first. Yet there is still a lot of misunderstanding about God's forgiveness. I sometimes hear the following comments:

“God can't possibly forgive me. I've made too many mistakes.”

“He must be mad at me because I say I'm sorry and then mess up again.”

“All this suffering means God is punishing me.”

“I'm not so bad. I don't need God's forgiveness.”

When it comes to God and forgiveness, some ask, “Does God grade on a curve?” Does he give out more forgiveness to those who deserve it and less to those who don't? After all, teachers grade on a curve. When scoring a test, a professor may distribute the results on a standard bell-shaped curve. A few students will fall in the “A” category, more in the “B”, the most will be “C”s, and the rest are “D”s or “F”s. If the test is exceptionally difficult, the teacher is more likely to grade on a curve. Otherwise, the whole class might fail. So when it comes to the most difficult test of all – the test called “life” - God, the ultimate professor, has to grade us on a curve. It just makes sense. We

assume a few saints and holy people will get an A or B. There will be obvious villains who deserve a D or F. And the rest of us will fall somewhere in the middle earning a respectable, average C. With some extra points for effort and good penmanship, we have a chance to be forgiven. So does God grade on a curve? Do I have to prove myself worthy of God's forgiveness? What must I do to earn His forgiveness? If I try harder, will that get me in His good graces?

We all know nobody is perfect. We all sense there is a fundamental separation between where we are now and where we want to be or where God wants us to be. You might say the goal of religion is to show us what we must do to cross this divide and reach where we want to be. Religions are human creations. They present us with rules, regulations and rituals which help us get a good grade on God's test. Religion gives us a way to prove we deserve His forgiveness. Religions are the exam we take which proves God should give us an A or B. Religions are like a bridge we build to get us to God. But is the bridge of religion enough?

If you drive down to the center of Yardley, pass Main Street and head toward the Yardley Inn you'll come to a halt at the Veteran's Memorial. In the past, on that spot, you could drive straight across the Delaware on a steel girder bridge. What happened to the Yardley Bridge? Long-time resident George Robinson remembers it this way:

The flood of 1955 was as deceptive as a sneaky thief. It was a hot dry August. The humidity finally was broken by heavy rainstorms that triggered the flood that washed over River Road like a surprise attack. First Hurricane Connie and less than a week later, Hurricane Diane dumped a cumulative total of 12 inches of water in less than 10 days. The river crested at 20.3 feet. Nearly half of Yardley's 902-foot span was under water. Debris from upriver crashed into the bridge.

So it was, on this weekend sixty-one years ago, the Yardley Bridge collapsed into steel splinters and was washed away. I recall one member of Woodside telling me she drove

across the bridge to a Trenton hospital to give birth to her son and then couldn't get back that way again.

Religion, like the Yardley Bridge, is our human attempt to build a bridge to get close to God and win His forgiveness. Regardless of the religion, they all tell us, in one way or another, you must do this, pray this, accomplish this in order to please God, to be forgiven by God, to be reconciled to God and live with God. Unfortunately, like the double hurricanes that August six decades ago, the forces of life destroy all our attempts. Whether that force is depravity, desire, disillusionment, denial or the devil, sooner or later all our attempts collapse when we try to build a bridge from our side to God's side.

That's why we hope God will at least grade on curve. Maybe He will give us a break or extra credit. Someone asked Jesus this question during His ministry:

A man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. (Matthew 19:16, 21-22)

Jesus purposely raises the bar high in order to prove to this man there is nothing he can do to be perfect and nothing he can do to earn God's forgiveness. As the rich man goes away, Jesus observes that it is hard for the rich to enter the Kingdom of heaven.

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:25-26)

All the religious rules, regulations and rituals will never be enough to make us perfect. Here is the bad news: God does not grade on a curve. Paul says, "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). When it comes to this test, all of our papers will come back marked with a big red "F." It is impossible to reach God from our side.

But here's the Good News: God came looking for us. God came to our side. God built a bridge to our side. In 2 Corinthians Paul writes,

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 17-19, 21)

When you reconcile two people you bring them together, you build a bridge between them, you restore the relationship. That is the goal of forgiveness. Please notice some important truths.

**God Does All the Work of Forgiveness.** Paul says, "all this is from God" (2 Corinthians 5:18). God does it all. He doesn't meet us half-way. He doesn't expect us to build half the bridge or any bridge. All the verbs in the passage describe God doing everything. He reconciles the world to Himself. How? Through Christ. Jesus Christ comes to be the bridge of reconciliation that God uses to get us back. Forgiveness starts with God.

**God Takes All Sin Very Seriously.** How does Jesus become that bridge? Paul uses simple, single-syllable words to express this profound truth. "One died for all, thus all have died" (2 Corinthians 5:14). What does that mean? When you realize that it took nothing less than the death of God's own Son to save us, you can never again say that sin is not so bad. You realize the seriousness of the disease, when you see the severity of the cure.

**God Takes All Punishment on Himself.** God performed a Great Exchange: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). On the Cross, Jesus, the perfect righteous Son of God, took the punishment for all our sin upon Himself. Our sin fell on Him. His righteousness comes upon us. That was the only way to reconcile us to God. He did all that to get us back.

**God Forgives All Sin Unconditionally.** Paul says Jesus died for all. “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them.” (2 Corinthians 5:19). He’s not keeping score. He’s doesn’t give you a grade. He gives you grace. That means, the door is open on God’s side. The Bridge is built. God’s arms are open wide. This is God’s offer to everyone. There is no sin you can commit that is greater than His grace.

Pastor Charles Stanley experienced this incredible message of grace during a seminary exam.

One of my more memorable seminary professors handed out an exam with the caution to read it all the way through before beginning to answer it. This caution was written on the exam as well.

As we read through the exam, it became unquestionably clear that we had not studied nearly enough. The further we read, the worse it became. Audible groans could be heard throughout the lecture hall. By the time we were turning to the last page, we were all ready to turn the exam in blank. It was impossible to pass.

On the last page, however, there was a note that read, “You have a choice. You can either complete the exam as given or sign your name at the bottom and in so doing receive an A for this assignment.”

Wow! We sat there stunned. “Was he serious? Just sign it and get an A?” Slowly, the point dawned on us, and one by one we turned in our tests and silently filed out of the room. It took the rest of the afternoon for me to get over it. I had the urge to go back and check with him one more time to make sure he was serious.

When I talked with him about it afterward, he shared some of the reactions he received through the years as he had given the same exam. There were always students who did not follow instructions and began to take the exam without reading it all the way through. Some of them would sweat it out for the entire two hours of class time before reaching the last page. Their ignorance caused them unnecessary anxiety.

Then there were the ones who would read the first two pages, become angry, turn in their paper blank, and storm out of the room. They never realized what was available. As a result, they lost out totally.

One fellow, however, topped them all. He read the entire test, including the note at the end, but he decided to take the exam anyway. He did not want any gifts; he wanted to earn his grade. And he did. He made a C+ which was amazing considering the difficulty of the test. But he could have easily had an A.<sup>1</sup>

God's grace is waiting for you. God's gift of forgiveness has already been won for you by Jesus on the Cross. You can stand back with folded arms and say, "I don't need God's help. I want to do it on my own." You can keep trying to build a bridge of your own. You can work hard at religion so you can prove to God you deserve forgiveness.

Or you can simply walk across the bridge. You can get across by the Cross of Jesus. You can receive His gift of unconditional forgiveness and find that on the other side of the bridge are the wide open arms of your Heavenly Father.

Today, I invite you to cross the bridge and be reconciled to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Stanley, *The Gift of Forgiveness* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson) p. 43-44.