Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

The words forgiveness and forgive, etc, are mentioned 126 times in the Bible! It is a key feature of the first sermons preached in the book of Acts. It is one of the first blessings in all the lists of blessings that we find in the New Testament. And we talk about “the forgiveness of our sins” in congregational prayers, in sermons, and we associate the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper with “the complete forgiveness of all our sins.” The Apostles’ Creed says, “I believe … the forgiveness of sins.” And here in the prayer that the Lord Jesus taught us to pray, we read, “*Forgive us our sins (or debts or trespasses) as we forgive those who sin against us*.” So, from all of this, it seems reasonable to conclude that the forgiveness of sins is a pretty important part of Christianity.

Now, some of you might be thinking, Come on, Pastor, we know this; the forgiveness of sins is something you learn about on the first day at ‘Christianity school’! But of course, today might be someone’s first day at ‘Christianity school’! So, for that reason alone, it will be good for us to talk about something that is such a fundamental part of Christianity. But when you think about it, Jesus didn’t say, Ask for the forgiveness of your sins, once, and then you don’t need to include that line in your prayers anymore; No. He taught us to pray, regularly, for the forgiveness of our sins. Why? Well, we will see why as we think about something that really is a part of the ‘ABC’s of Christianity – the forgiveness of our sins. And we will do this under two headings: **why** forgiveness is **needed** and **how** We Can be Forgiven.

1. So, first of all, **why forgiveness is needed**.
   1. And there are many verses in the Bible that we could refer to but one verse in particular spells it out very simply and plainly. And that verse is the last verse of **Matthew 5, verse 48**; there we read, “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*.”
      1. So, the first thing to note is that God is perfect. And dictionaries define ‘perfect’ as ‘without a single fault or defect.’ And to illustrate this one dictionary used the example of a **perfect or flawless diamond**. Perfect diamonds are “free of inclusions under 10 times magnification.” And fewer than 1% of all diamonds are perfect. A single one carat perfect diamond will set you back just over $10,000! Now, if you turn your microscope up beyond 10 times magnification, you will find imperfections eventually, even in a so-called perfect diamond. But there is *no* fault or defect or imperfection in God, at all. **1 John 1:5** says, “*God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all*.”
      2. But we can also think about perfection in a positive way. In **Ezekiel 21:27**, God was warning the people of Israel about the judgment that would come upon them if they refused to repent. And speaking about the Jerusalem and the temple, God said, “*A ruin, ruin, ruin I will make it*.” And the repeating of the word “ruin,” three times, emphasized how complete and utter the ruin would be. Well, in **Isaiah 6**, we are told about angels who praise God, saying, “*holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts*.” So, God is utterly and completely holy.
      3. And it follows then that if God is without a single fault or defect, and utterly and completely holy, then the only standard that would be acceptable to Him is perfection. And that is exactly what Jesus said here: “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*.”
   2. So, are we perfect? Are we without a single fault or defect, and utterly and completely holy? And of course, we have to personalize this: Are you perfect? Am I perfect?
      1. Well, again, what does the Bible say? **Psalm 14:2** says, “*The LORD looks down from heaven on [all humanity] to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one*.” **James 3:2** says, “*For we all stumble in many ways*.” And a most helpful verse is **Romans 3:23**; it says, “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*.” And this verse is most helpful because it explains that 1 - our problem is sin, 2 - what sin is, and 3 - that we have ALL sinned. So, let’s briefly look at each of these three things:
         1. First, **our problem is sin**.
            1. When the angel Gabriel told Joseph that Mary was going to have a son, he said to Joseph, “*You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins*.” So, Jesus came to save His people from their … sins. Sin is our problem!

If you ever turned up to the emergency room at hospital, what is the first thing that they do? Questions/x-rays to work out what is wrong. And they do this because it is only once they have correctly diagnosed the problem that they can begin the right treatment.

Well, if the Bible were an X-ray machine, and it took a scan of every human being, the image it produced would have three letters on it – S I N.

* + - 1. So, secondly, **what is sin**? Well, Romans 3:23 defines it as to fall short of the glory of God; to not measure up to the perfection of God. The word sin in the Bible literally means ‘**to miss the mark**.’ Think of darts thrown at a dart board that keep on missing the board, or arrows shot at a target that go wide or high or fall short. So, to sin is to miss the mark. But *how* or *in what ways* do we ‘miss the mark’?
         1. And I could give you a technical and doctrinal explanation of sin, but today I just want us all to hear the Lord Jesus expose our sin. So, I am going to read to you some words that Jesus spoke as part of the Sermon on the Mount (slightly paraphrased):

“*You have heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.' But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell … You have heard the commandment that says, 'You must not commit adultery.' But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' You have also heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the Lord.' But I say … Just say a simple, 'Yes, I will,' or 'No, I won't.' Anything beyond this is from the evil one. You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow. "You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbour' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!*”

* + - * 1. So, have you *never* gotten angry with someone? *Never* called someone a name, out loud or in your heart? Have you *never* lusted? Have you *always* kept your word? Have you *always* let someone slap you on both cheeks? Have you *always* obeyed, instantly, and with sincerity? Have you *never* stolen anything? Have you *always* loved others, including your enemies?
        2. And just to be clear, this is not just about outward acts but also our hidden thoughts and desires. **Psalm 19:12** says, “*Declare me innocent from hidden faults*.” Have *all* your thoughts and desires been *entirely* pure?
        3. **James 2:10** says, “*For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it*.” So, just one failure, of thought, word, or deed, makes us imperfect. And I hope that you are honest enough to admit that our problem is not one or two failures but a filthy, stinking, pile of failures!
        4. Charles Spurgeon once said words to the effect that if someone ever accuses you of wrong, before you jump on your high horse to defend yourself, remember that you are actually far worse than that person could possibly know! Now, there is a humbling thought!
      1. And thirdly, the Bible says that this is true of **all** **of** **us**. “*There is no one who does good, not even one*.” “*For we all stumble in many ways*.” “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*.”
    1. Jesus said, “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*.” But as we have seen, we are not perfect. In fact, we are utterly and completely imperfect. And so, as we read earlier in **Isaiah 59:2**, “*Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear*.” God cannot welcome imperfect sinners into His presence. In fact, as **Romans 6:23** says, “*The wages of sin is death*.” We deserve death. And this does not just mean physical death; it means that if our sin problem is not dealt with, we will be condemned to an eternity in hell. **Revelation 21:8** says, “*But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death*."
  1. Now, before we turn our attention to the solution to the problem of sin, one point of application. Jesus taught us to pray, “*Forgive us our sins*.” But listen to these words from the **Westminster Confession of Faith, Article 15.5**, “Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man's duty to endeavour to repent of his particular sins, particularly.” It is OK for us to sometimes just ask the Lord to “*forgive us our sins,*” but it will help you to recognize just how deep your sin problem is if you also take time to list your sins in prayer. One commentator put it like this:

*When the believer bows his head in prayer and utters the fifth petition, it is well to elaborate on it. Instead of referring to the general concept of sin, he [or she] says, "Our Father in heaven, please forgive the evil thoughts that arose in my mind and that still arise within me; the evil desires of murder and adultery and theft and rebellion of which I am not [even] conscious as I bow before [your] throne; the evil speech, the evil words I spoke against [you] and against [others]; and all the evil deeds I have committed. Forgive them all, our Father, and remember them nevermore. Dismiss them from [your] mind, for they all make me worthy of [your] wrath.*

And even that prayer is still quite general. It is good to even identify specific sins.

1. But that brings us to our second point, which is: **How We Can be Forgiven**.
   1. In **Romans 7:24**, having admitted his sin problem, the Apostle Paul said, “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*” He recognized that as a sinner, all he could do was keep adding to his sin problem; he could not fix his sin problem. So, the first thing we must consider is **who can fix our sin problem**? And the answer of the Bible is God.
      1. In our **Isaiah 59** reading, we read a long list of sins. And some sins were sins between one person and another, like murder or lying or injustice, and some sins were sins against God, like idolatry. But the chapter rightly emphasizes that all sin, ultimately, is sin against God. King David stated this plainly in his **Psalm 51** prayer. He had sinned against Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah, and he would have understood that, but looking to God, he said, “*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment*.” You see, God is our Creator and the law-giver. So, when we sin, we sin against Him.
         1. This is why the ESV Bible uses the word “**debts**” in this line of the Lord’s prayer: “*Forgive us our debts*.” A debt is money that you owe someone. So, if you borrowed some money from me, you would be in my debt. And because God is our Creator and the Law-giver, each one of our sins is a debt that must be paid to Him!
         2. We see this also in the **parable of the Unmerciful servant** that we read earlier in Matthew 18. Jesus wanted us to see that God is like the King, and we are like the servant who owed him 10,000 talents. And like that servant, we cannot pay; we cannot fix our sin/debt problem. Only the King/God can fix our sin/debt problem
         3. And we heard this also in our **Isaiah 59** reading; for having recorded the many ways that the people of Israel had sinned, God said, “*The LORD looked and … He was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so His own arm worked salvation for Him, and His own righteousness sustained Him*.” God, alone, can fix our sin problem.
   2. And so, the next question is: **How** can God fix our sin problem?
      1. Well, in the parable of the Unmerciful servant, the King simply decided to cancel the debt. But God cannot do that because He is holy and just. Lord’s Day 5 of the Catechism puts it like this: “God requires that His justice be satisfied. Therefore, the claims of His justice must be paid in full, either by ourselves or another.” And those words, “or another,” are the heart and soul of the gospel!
         1. In **Isaiah 59**, we also read these words: “*And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the LORD*.” So Isaiah said that a redeemer would come. And a redeemer is someone who pays the debt that someone else owes to set that person free. **Psalm 130:7-8** uses the same language; “*O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with Him is full redemption. He Himself will redeem Israel from all their sins*.” So, God will redeem His people from their sins through the Redeemer that He sends.
         2. And who is the Redeemer that God sent? Well, earlier in the sermon we read the words of the angel to Joseph about Mary’s son, “*You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins*.”
         3. And listen to **Colossians 2:13-14**: “*And you, who were dead in your [sins] … God made alive together with [Jesus], having forgiven us all our [sins], by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross*.”
         4. So, we look to Jesus on the cross. For on the cross, He took all of our sins upon Himself, every angry and lustful thought, every name calling, every failure to love our enemies, every selfish act, every failure to keep our promises, and He endured the Father’s eternal wrath at those sins, until the debt was paid in full.
         5. And we know that the debt was paid in full because Jesus said, “*It is finished*.” Redemption was accomplished! Justice was satisfied! Sins were forgiven!
   3. I began this point by quoting Paul’s words from **Romans 7:24**: “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*” Do you remember how Paul answered His own question? “*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! … There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*.”
      1. So, the chief question today is: **Are you in Christ Jesus?** Earlier in the service, we recited the words of Q/A 56 of the Catechism as our confession of faith. We said, “I believe that God, because of Christ's atonement, will never hold against me any of my sins nor my sinful nature which I need to struggle against all my life. Rather, in His grace, God grants me the righteousness of Christ to free me forever from judgment.” Is this what you believe? Do you know the guilt of your sins, and have you confessed them, repented of them, and put your faith in the finished work of Jesus on the cross?
         1. If you have not, then you are not in Christ and if you do not repent and believe, you will be condemned to an eternity in hell.
         2. But if you have, then you are in Christ; you have the forgiveness of your sins!
         3. And this is the first part of why we must pray “*forgive us our sins*.”
      2. But those of us who have the forgiveness of our sins in Christ will still know **the struggle of daily sin and guilt**; the sense of failure and filthiness than threaten to overwhelm and crush us when we have fallen into sin, again. And this, brothers and sisters, is why we are to ask the Lord to “*forgive us our sins*” regularly.
         1. And we must ask this not because God might pull the rug of forgiveness out from underneath us at any moment, but because we need fresh and daily and ever-deepening assurance that we are forgiven.
         2. “We all stumble in many ways”, again and again. We “all fall short of the glory of God,” each day. We do not do what we ought to do and we do what we ought not to do, every day.
         3. And so, the Lord says to us, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*.” When you ask the Lord to forgive your sins, because of Jesus’ finished work on the cross, He will cleanse the new ‘stains’ and give you a fresh sense of His forgiving grace. He will reassure you that you are still His beloved child. He will deepen your love of and thankfulness for the person and work of Jesus. And He will also empower you to forgive others as He has forgiven you.

This, congregation, is the good news of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ – the ‘ABC’ of Christianity. Amen.