

COMMUNITY CHURCH OF THE MIDLANDS***Unapologetically Christian, Unapologetically Progressive*****Pastor's Paragraphs****IS IT TRUE THAT THERE ARE SOME
PEOPLE WHOM GOD WON'T FORGIVE?**

A couple of months ago, I was having lunch with some ministers who are pastors of local churches. One of them was sharing with the rest of us the essence of his most recent sermon. It was entitled "God Just May Not Forgive You." As he expounded on his main points, he said that the Bible teaches the not-well-understood truth that there are some things God will *not* forgive. The other ministers nodded and responded with loud amens.

Does the Bible say that there is anything for which God will not forgive us? You may be surprised to learn that Jesus himself is quoted, in three gospels—Mathew, Mark *and* Luke—as saying that we can be forgiven for *everything*; then, he is reported to have immediately *contradicted* himself by saying that there is something for which one *cannot* be forgiven: a sin against the Holy Spirit! But read the contradiction for yourself as it appears in the Gospel of Matthew:

"I tell you, people will be forgiven for *EVERY* sin and blasphemy, BUT—blasphemy against the Spirit will *not* be forgiven. Who even speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will *not* be forgiven, either in this age or the age to come!"

(Matthew 12:31-32, *NRSV*)

That which interested me most about my minister friends is that they focused only on the *second* part of Jesus' reported statement that says there is something God will *not* forgive, yet ignored completely the *first* part of his statement which affirms that God will forgive *everything*! That is a serious omission, because it inevitably results in a significant *misinterpretation* of the scripture passage and an incorrect conclusion which, unfortunately, my ministerial friend passed on to his congregation. Actually, the no-doubt unintentional error of this good man—and numerous otherwise good pastors—has caused a great deal of needless anxiety among a lot of church members. Throughout my ministry, I have received questions about God's unwillingness to forgive some things from a number of worried people. So let me see if I can correct what I believe is a common but completely erroneous idea.

I think we need to take with radical seriousness the part of Jesus' reported statement that says "people will be forgiven for their *every* sin...." After all, since Jesus taught *us* to forgive another person on 70 times 7 occasions—far more than *any* human being we encounter is likely to need, would it make sense to believe that God would do less? That would make God inconsistent with God! So the reported statement of Jesus that God forgives *every* instance in which we hurt ourselves or others makes perfect sense.

The most powerful testimony that forgiveness is available for any and every human shortcoming, even *before* we ask, is implicit in Jesus' famous parable of the Prodigal Son. In that teaching story, you may recall, a son asked his Father to give him his part of an inheritance, even though the father was still alive. The father did so, but then the son left home and wasted both his money and his life on what is described as "riotous living." Eventually, he had no money, no friends, and not even any food to eat. So he decided to return to his father's house and hoped to be taken back, not as a son, but simply as a servant. As he traveled to his former home, he composed a statement of contrition to share with his father, thinking that it might soften the father's heart. But the father saw the boy coming, and before the son could verbalize all of his planned statement, the father ran and embraced him. That father, who in Jesus' story represented God, had *already* forgiven him, even before the son could ask for it! The boy was not merely *accepted* by the father, he was received with great love and rejoicing, and a huge party was held in his honor. Far from being taken back as a servant, he was fully restored to full sonship, as though none of his previous indiscretions existed. So *that's* the way God relates to us! Jesus' remarkable parable drives home the good news that God's enormous love forgives *every* shortcoming!

That teaching was much too radical for many of the 1st century followers of Jesus. Their Judaism had taught them that forgiveness had to be "*bought*." God had to be "won over," placated by all kinds of *sacrifices* before God would relent and forgive. Much of that thinking persists even in biblical books written by *1st century followers* of Jesus; and, after his death, previous Jewish indoctrination continued to dominate their thinking. They even *assumed* that the death of Jesus was a sacrifice *required* by God in order for God to forgive us. They thought and even wrote that our sins had somehow to be placed "on" Jesus, because although *we* deserved to die, Jesus had to die in our place so God *could* forgive us. But, fortunately the message of Jesus contradicted and corrected all that. The first part of Jesus' statement is unmistakably clear, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son makes it even more clear. Not only does God forgive without sacrifice, God, if we only knew it, *already* has done so! (More on that later)

But what about the *second* part of the statement Jesus is reported to have made: that there is a sin that God will *not* forgive: our sinning against the Holy Spirit?

Here's what you need to know. Just before Jesus spoke those words, Matthew's Gospel tells us that he had just finished healing a man. The result was that a mute, blind man suddenly was able to see and to speak again. The crowds who saw the healing were amazed, but some of Jesus' enemies told the crowd that Jesus' power to heal did *not* come from the Holy Spirit; rather, he derived it from a *demonic* source. So, Jesus' *second* comment was to tell his detractors, as well as the crowd, that to see good and to call it evil, or to see evil and call it good makes it impossible for a person with that level of spiritual blindness to *experience* forgiveness—not because *God* won't forgive that one, but because such a person is unable to *appropriate* it, to use it, to benefit from it. When one is unable to

distinguish good from evil or evil from good,
darkness from light or light from darkness,
right from wrong or wrong from right,
that which is holy from that which is demonic,

then his or her capacity to recognize even the *need* forgiveness is no longer present, much less the ability to *appropriate* the forgiveness that God already offered.

I think that, in the distant past, I told you about a dark cave in Tennessee that is filled with water in which fish swim freely. But scientists who have examined the fish have discovered something remarkable. Although the fish have eyes, they are blind. They have been in the darkness *so long* that when they are brought *into* the light, they cannot see. Although their eyes are quite normal physiologically, they have lost their God-given capacity to recognize and respond to light.

After Jesus healed a man and referred to the inability of specific Pharisees to distinguish good from evil because they claimed that the source of Jesus' power was demonic rather than an expression of holy activity, it appears that he may well have recognized with sorrow that those Pharisees were experiencing what the fish in the Tennessee cave experienced: a form of blindness—not physical apparently, but an inability of the brain to apprehend reality.

So the initial part of Jesus' statement still stands. He said that there is nothing at *all* that God will not forgive. And, again, according to his matchless Parable of the Prodigal Son, God *already* has done so and waits only for us to accept, appropriate and benefit from it. But those who have been surrounded by darkness for too long may have been so affected by it that they have lost the spiritual discernment to be able to respond.

I hope that this explanation of a sometimes difficult-to-understand and frequently misinterpreted scripture will help to clarify what I believe is Jesus' intended meaning—and that all of us will, as he put it, have “eyes to see.”

I am thankful that I have the ability to perceive the goodness in each of you, and am so grateful that we have the great privilege of learning and growing together.

With abundant love,

Your pastor and friend,

John

IT'S HAPPENING AT CCM

September, 2018

As usual, our fellowship will gather this month on the 2nd and 4th Sunday.

Sunday, September 9 (2nd Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. WORSHIP GATHERING

None of us can escape experiencing the ups *and* downs of life, great times *and* inevitable tough times, light as *well* as darkness. So, at our last worship gathering, our pastor helped us to see how each of us can go about “punching *holes* in the darkness.”

But *this* Sunday, John’s message will be “TAKING CARE OF OUR HOME: IT ISN’T WHAT YOU THINK!” If you can’t figure out what that topic is all about, just remember the last part of the title: It isn’t likely to be about *whatever* you think it is. So, dear people, we suggest that you live with the mystery until September 9th, then, as Jesus once said to some people, “come and see!”

We will have our usual opportunity for informal discussion of the sermon immediately following worship. (Out by about 12 noon or before)

Sunday, September 23 (4th Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. ENLIGHTENMENT GATHERING

(Definition of Enlightenment: Enlightenment is gaining helpful insights or deeper understanding.)

As you know, our fellowship regularly schedules a series of events in an effort to do our part to continue, in our small way, the healing ministry of Jesus: his attempt to help us to experience more abundant, fulfilling lives—physically, mentally, and emotionally as *well* as spiritually.

Since none of us can *escape* the stressors of daily life, we currently are dealing with the *issue* of stress. Of course, we experience stress in many different forms. Sometimes we say or do things (or fail to say or do things) that contribute to our own stress, and sometimes stress comes from sources beyond our control; so, in our current series, we’re dealing with *both* possibilities.

Our subject *today* will be “DEALING CONSTRUCTIVELY WITH ANGER”—one of the most potent stressors we will ever experience. The session is designed to help us to deal more effectively with our own anger as well as that of others.

(Out between 11:30 a.m. and noon)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

BIRTHDAYS

The following persons are celebrating their natal day during the month of September: Bob Nolan on 9/15, Harriet Hancock on 9/25, and Bill Austin on 9/27. We send our love and best wishes to each one of the aforementioned valuable persons with whom we are so privileged to share our spiritual journey.

BLESSING OUR JEWISH BROTHERS AND SISTERS

We who try to be followers of Jesus often forget that Jesus was not a Christian. He was a product of *another* religion—born a Jew and died a Jew. Our own *roots* are firmly embedded in Jewish soil. So let us remember our Jewish brothers and sisters who will be observing three important occasions during the month of September. The first, *Rosh Hashanah*, will be on September 9th and celebrates the Jewish New Year—a holy time set aside for prayer and penitence. Next is *Yom Kippur*, on September 18th. That is the Jewish Day of Atonement—the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. It is a time set aside for individuals to reflect upon their personal shortcomings as well as to ask for and receive forgiveness. Finally, *Shemini Atzeret* falls on September 30th and is dedicated to a heightened awareness of and appreciation for the love of God.

We mention these major festivals—only three among many others, because our Jewish brothers and sisters observe far more *spiritually* grounded annual occasions than we Christians do. We limit ourselves primarily to the now largely *secularized* observance of Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. Would it be helpful for us to learn something from the example of our dear Jewish friends—to have some deeply meaningful, specifically spiritual observances that are not shared and sometimes even distorted by our secular culture? That is worth pondering. Also, we can pause for a moment or two to offer our Jewish brothers and sisters a profound blessing. In my dictionaries, there are several definitions of what it means to bless others. One is to make something related to them especially holy by saying a *prayer* over it. Also, a possible definition of "blessing" is to offer *support* for something that is said or done.

Surely we can do our part to be *supportive* of our brothers and sisters by *saying a prayer* for them on the occasion of their three holy festivals this month. After all, these dear people keep alive and vibrant the deep spiritual roots from which our *own* faith was born! They deserve our endorsement, our empathy, and our loving encouragement.

WE ALL NEED SOMETHING

TO HELP US

THINK BIGGER

AND

REACH HIGHER.

CCM

IS HERE FOR YOU!

***WHEREVER YOU ARE, THE DIFFERENCE
IS WORTH ANY DISTANCE!***

Our Telephone:

Senior Pastor: (803) 331-9999. Our mobile cell phone is more reliable than our landline phone, because it is on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If no one answers, it usually means that our pastor is in a meeting, in a counseling session, doing regular spiritual mentoring, or is involved in some other form of ministry; but he will return your call as soon as possible, so please be sure to leave a message.

Our Websites:

CommunityChurchMidlands.com (Also .net, .info and .org)

or

CommunityChurchOfTheMidlands.com (Also .net, .info and .org)

Our Mailing Address: P.O. Box 6946, Columbia, S.C. 29260-6946

Our Location: CCM usually gathers on the 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month, and any changes will be noted in our monthly newsletter. Please join us at the gorgeous Seven Oaks Community Center in beautiful Seven Oaks Park, 200 Leisure Lane (between St. Andrews and Piney Grove roads, just off I-26 West). When you enter the spacious parking lot, you'll see the main entrance to our newly renovated building on your right. Once you are inside the Reception Area, our meeting locality is on your left. For updates on our programming, to verify meeting times, to learn about changes in scheduling, or for any pastoral need, please feel free to call 331-9999, night or day.

ALWAYS, WE'RE HERE FOR YOU!