

God Can Forgive You

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We know a red traffic light means stop. And most of us know better than to run it.

Why? Because we might kill someone or get killed ourselves. But there is another reason. That traffic signal represents a law that carries a stiff penalty, and penalty gives good reason for obedience.

Without the penalty it would not be a law; it would be only good advice. But when the penalty is added and enforced, people take it seriously because they pay more attention to penalties than they do to advice. And the more serious the penalty, the more seriously they regard the law.

The purpose of legal penalties is to secure obedience to the law. If penalties are not enforced, it gives people the idea that disobedience will not be punished.

Consider this scenario:

Mother tells Linda, "Don't dig up Mother's flowers. If you do, I'll spank you."

So Linda goes out to play. Fifteen minutes later Mother looks out and sees her darling uprooting her zinnias. "Linda," Mother yells, "come here right now!"

"Oh, Mommy please don't spank me," the little tyke pleads. "I'll never, never do it again."

"All right," Mother replies, "I won't spank you this time. But don't do it again."

Linda goes back to playing and mother returns to her housework. Ten minutes later Mother glances out, and there is Linda in the middle of the flower bed pulling up more zinnias.

"Linda! What did I tell you?" Mother asks sternly.

"Oh, Mama, I'm really, really sorry. Please don't spank me. I'll never do it again!"

"All right," Mother repeats, "I won't spank you this time either. But don't you ever do it again!"

Five minutes later Mother looks out, and what does she see? You guessed it. Linda is pulling up more zinnias.

Why? Because she didn't believe Mother really meant what she said. She disobeyed and yet escaped the penalty merely by acting sorry. Mercy was seen as leniency; law had become merely advice.

Now God, the moral Governor of the universe, is not dealing with acts of minor mischief. Planet Earth is in open mutiny. Moral order is threatened with total collapse. God is dealing with absolute rebellion in the human heart.

What shall God do about it? Justice demands He impose the penalty, and this He will do.

But God wants to win sinners away from their rebellion and forgive their sins. He wants to have mercy on them. But He will not allow people to think, *That was easy. All we had to do was say we were sorry. God must not be serious about sin after all.*

Here is the situation. God is committed to promoting and protecting the well-being and happiness of the universe in general and the world in particular.

Now the most harmful and destructive thing possible is sin. So because God is love and desires to protect the highest good of creation, He will do what it takes to shield it from the destructiveness of sin. This necessitates upholding moral order by enforcing the penalty when moral law is violated.

God wants to forgive, not punish. But forgiveness means setting aside the penalty, and that is dangerous. In fact, it stands to endanger the entire moral order. If even one person can sin and get away with it, the safety of all is threatened because the integrity of moral law is violated.

If God is going to set aside the penalty in any case, He must put something in place of the penalty that will do what the penalty was intended to do. It must have the same influence in preventing sin, demonstrating the destructiveness and guilt of sin, and letting everyone know that God means business.

What can that be? Repentance. Repentance is a necessary condition of forgiveness. Unless we repent, we cannot be forgiven.

But repentance by itself is not enough. It would promote the I-can-do-it-myself-whenever-I-get-ready idea. No, our repentance alone will not save us. We have sinned before the Lord God of the universe, and only He can forgive us.

Then why doesn't God just go ahead and forgive everybody? Because we would not respect Him if He did, just as we would not respect a judge who opened up all the prisons and turned the inmates loose.

Then what about a substitute? Let an animal be sacrificed as a substitute for the guilty person. No, because the sufferings and death of an animal would not have enough influence to stop people from sinning.

But a substitute is the right idea. Who shall it be? Another mortal cannot do it. All have sinned (Romans 3:23) so all of us would have to suffer the penalty for our own sins. No one could do it for someone else. Besides the suffering and death of one mere mortal still would not stop others from sinning.

Then how about an angel coming down and dying for us? No, again for the same reason.

Then who can do it? It would have to be someone who is innocent; someone who really loves others even though he does not owe it; someone so highly exalted that his sufferings and death would have a tremendous influence. When people really understood what he had done for them, it would have to have enough of an effect on them to cause them to love God and turn away from sin.

But who? There is only one--God himself.

And that is exactly what God did. In His Son Jesus Christ, God became a man and suffered and died on the cross as our substitute. The great Lawgiver suffered the penalty of His own holy law on our behalf. He fully satisfied the demands of justice and so made mercy possible.

He did the only thing that would have a moral effect on us greater than even the threat of the penalty; the only thing that would wake us up to the seriousness and guilt of sin and turn our hearts to God. Because of his sacrifice, we do right because it is right, not out of fear of penalty alone.

If the sight of Almighty God dying in agony and blood on a cross for our sins does not break our stubborn hearts, make us hate sin, and turn us to Him from sin completely and forever, nothing will.

He did it all for you--because He loves you. Now He offers you pardon, full and free. You cannot earn it. You cannot deserve it. Simply accept it as a free gift. Let the mercy of God offered to you at such a tremendous cost melt your heart and bring you to your Savior. Receive him; trust Him; love and obey Him forever. He is waiting for you now.