

God Forgave You the First Time You Asked Him

Jesus gave us a powerful picture of what His Father is like when He told the parable of the **prodigal son** (Luke 15:11–32). It's the story of a rebellious, wayward boy who demanded his inheritance from his father and then set off to live life his way. He squandered everything before being forced by circumstances to consider returning home.

Because of his past behavior, he assumed his father would no longer welcome him as a son, but he hoped that possibly his father might have mercy on him and give him work as a servant.

He was living with a sense of **condemnation**. His thoughts were based on an understanding of love that is natural and human. Human experience teaches us that when we hurt someone, they usually take offense and close off part of their hearts to us. Generally the only way to get them to open their hearts to us again is by demonstrating true remorse and then proving over time that we are trustworthy.

This son assumed that because of his behavior, he had burned his bridges with his father and could now only hope, at best, for a position as a servant.

One of the greatest revelations I have ever received is that God's love for me is not based on my behavior. Even while we were still sinners, God loved us and gave Himself for us (Rom. 5:8). The love of God doesn't change toward us. Whether we are good, bad or ugly, He loves each of us entirely. When we mess up, we aren't surprising Him.

He knew what we were going to do ahead of time and still chose to place His affection on us. As author Graham Cooke says, God is never disillusioned with us because He never had any illusions about us to begin with! He is never annoyed with us

to the point that He will stop loving us. Even if we don't love Him back, He still loves us powerfully and intensely.

There was a time when I struggled to believe that truth. I knew in theory that God loved me—after all, didn't the Bible tell me so? My mind accepted this as a fact. But in my heart I felt as if God just tolerated me because He had to. Whenever I sinned, I felt I had to work hard to regain even that place of tolerated acceptance again. Like the prodigal son, my understanding of love was natural and human.

I remember praying and confessing my sins one day as I was driving in the car. It was my usual practice to go over anything and everything I'd ever done or could think of and ask **forgiveness** for it, just in case I hadn't repented properly the previous time I had asked. But as I asked God that particular day to once again forgive me for everything I might have done wrong, I felt Him interrupt me. I had just been pleading, "God, forgive me for this and that and for all the sins I've ever committed," when He spoke to me and said, "OK." That was all. Just "OK," as if it were all settled.

I didn't know what to do with that response! It was such a shock to me. Suddenly I realized I spent 90 percent of my prayer life **repenting** of things for which I'd already asked forgiveness. Ephesians 2:8–9 tells us that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ and not of works, which means our forgiveness is based entirely on His love for us. He had already forgiven me, and I was just persisting in unbelief.

The truth of the gospel is that Jesus saw what I would do before I even did it and paid the penalty for it in advance. What was lacking on my part was faith, not only in His forgiveness but also in His character. So many times I have felt a need to repent "properly"—that a quick sorry wouldn't be enough. This is how it works with human beings we've offended, so that's how we think it works with God.

Guilt should lead us to reach out and receive mercy, but often I felt as though I needed to really grieve for a time and let my sins weigh heavily on me until I had emotionally “paid” for them. I thought that the answer to redemption was to spend time dwelling in the dark places of my soul.

Human nature likes the idea of doing something for ourselves, of feeling that we’ve worked hard enough to earn God’s **mercy**. But that’s really a form of self-righteousness.

Think of how Jesus forgave Peter for denying Him three times. Peter had cursed and sworn he didn’t know Jesus. That’s a pretty offensive sin, and Peter felt terrible about it. Judas betrayed Jesus and didn’t know how to deal with his regret; he ended up killing himself, as though he were trying to pay for what he had done. But when Peter came to Jesus after His resurrection, the Lord helped him see that His love not only offered forgiveness but also qualification for ministry. And as if it was a sign of God’s redemption, we see that on the Day of Pentecost Peter is used as the chief spokesperson to speak to the crowds.

God has already **forgiven** us, and all we have to do is receive it by faith. He doesn’t want us to live under a sense of condemnation. Romans 8:1 says, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.” The word *in* (*en* in Greek) used in this passage can be translated “positioned at rest.” He essentially says, “There is no condemnation for those who are resting in faith in Me, as part of My body.” We are part of Him when we receive His life, part of His body, and He won’t condemn Himself.

John expresses it another way: “There is no fear in love; instead, perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment. So the one who fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:18–19, HCSB). That doesn’t fit our human understanding, but this is God’s way whether we understand it or not.

God's love cannot be interpreted through the filter of our human experience, and as the beautiful parable of the prodigal son reveals, His love is not like the human love we experience on a daily basis. His love is so surprisingly kind! It is a love that passes all of our **understanding**.

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