

# SUNDAY ARTICLE

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## God Does Not Forgive Excuses

Scott Hubbard

Very few of us fail to learn, at some point in our growing-up years, the fine art of the fake apology.

We have spoken a careless word to a friend, for example. Conscience lays a millstone of guilt upon our shoulders, but pride staggers forward, refusing to bend the knee. We look for a way to satisfy both parties.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," we say, skilfully implying that the real problem is with our friend's fragile feelings.

Or perhaps we add, "It's just been such a long week at work," or "I'm always cranky at this time of night" – statements that locate our guilt somewhere outside of us.

By the time we're through, we have decorated the word *sorry* with enough qualifications that we somehow deserve the apology.

Although the gospel of God's grace goes to war with such fakery, Christians are not immune from the allure to adorn our apologies and confessions with qualifications.

"What we call 'asking God's forgiveness,'" C S Lewis writes, "very often really consists in asking God to accept our excuses" (*On Forgiveness*, page 179).

The trouble, of course, is that God does not forgive excuses. He does not forgive qualifications. He does

not forgive "buts" and "I was just." But He does forgive *sins*.

### Forgive Me or Excuse Me?

Nowhere can we spot our fake confessions more clearly than in the accountability group, the Bible study, or wherever else we confess our sins to other people.

Whether we are confessing to someone we have wronged, or to someone who simply helps us in the fight of faith, the question remains: Can we lay our sins before the eyes of another, in all their hellish ugliness, without trying to tuck part of them beneath the cover of an excuse?

I often find that my grand ambitions to be transparent, vulnerable, and real feel much less grand as I sit across from another.

I read in my quiet times, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3) and pray, "God, I want to be like that." But then I discover that, in the company of others, I prefer to appear spiritually rich – or at least not so poor as I really am. Needy, perhaps, but not a welfare case. I act as if "Blessed are the poor in spirit" actually means "Blessed are those who need a little help."

And so, I often find myself tempted to adorn my confessions of sin with a variety of excuses, most

often in the form of extenuating circumstances and euphemisms.

### Excuses, Excuses

Sometimes, we explain our sin by adding an extenuating circumstance onto the end of a confession. We shift the centre of guilt from *in here* to *out there*, and subtly cast ourselves as mere victims of circumstance.

**Extenuating circumstance:** "I shouldn't have spoken to you like that; the kids have just been driving me crazy lately."

**Honest Confession:** "I lashed out at you because I felt impatient and angry. I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"

**Extenuating circumstance:** "I wish I wouldn't have spent the whole day watching that show, but it's been such a long week at work; I needed to rest somehow."

**Honest Confession:** "I used entertainment as an escape from stress instead of trusting God with the burdens I've been feeling."

*...we have decorated the word sorry with enough qualifications that we somehow deserve the apology.*

**Extenuating circumstance:** "I don't want to be bitter, but I just can't get over what she did."

**Honest Confession:** "I've been holding on to bitterness lately because, deep down, I haven't believed that God is a good refuge."

Other times, we blunt the edge of a confession with euphemisms. We exchange the names of specific sins with vague, Christian-y phrases that keep anyone from looking too closely.

**Euphemism:** "I stumbled."

**Confession:** "I lusted in my heart and turned away from Christ."

**Euphemism:** "I'm having a hard time being content."

**Confession:** "I envied this person's relationship and resented him for it."

**Euphemism:** "I could have been more kind."

**Confession:** "I lost control and snapped at my kids."

To be sure, confessions of sin sometimes warrant additional information. Our friends and family do not share God's omniscience, so knowing the factors at play can help to clarify the situation. But many of us, in our eagerness to "clarify," turn our sin into something excusable.

When we lace our confessions with such language, we are no longer confessing sin, and we no longer want forgiveness. We're offering an excuse, and we want someone to understand.

### Confess Like a Psalmist

Such was not the practice of the psalmists. When these holy men made public the confession of their sins, they used language that would startle some of our small groups.

When was the last time you turned to a roommate and confessed with Asaph, "I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward [God]" (Psalm 73:22)?

Or when have you looked at your accountability partners and, with David, lamented that your sins were "more than the hairs of [your] head" (Psalm 40:12)?

Or when have you prayed out loud with your spouse, and said to God, "For Your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great" (Psalm 25:11)?

Excuses were ready at hand for each of these men had they wanted to make use of them. "But the wicked are prospering!" Asaph could have said (Psalm

73:4-12). "I've just been in the pit for so long," David could have acknowledged (Psalm 40:1-2). "I'm just so tired of enemies boasting over me," he could have added (Psalm 25:2).

But they didn't. Where did the psalmists find the strength to confess their sins unvarnished? How could they say to God, in the presence of others, "I acknowledged my sin to You, and *I did not cover my iniquity*" (Psalm 32:5)?

Because they loved the grace of God more than they loved their reputations. *Grace* had captured them. And the captivity was so sweet they didn't dream of trying to escape with an excuse.

### Our Only Hiding Place

The psalmists had discovered, as Charles Spurgeon puts it, that "when we deal seriously with our sin, God will deal gently with us."

Our attempts to excuse our sin might be understandable if we had a harsh Lord, but such is not our Lord Jesus Christ. He holds an "abundance of grace" in His right hand (Romans 5:17), and stands always ready to bestow it on all who confess without excuse (1 John 1:9).

When we refuse to cover our sin (Psalm 32:5), Christ Himself covers it with His own blood (Psalm 32:1). And more than that: He hides us behind the shield of His righteousness; He preserves us from the condemnation of the accuser; He surrounds us for all eternity with shouts of deliverance (Psalm 32:7).

Better by far to be a poor debtor to grace, and yet belong to this Christ,

than to cover ourselves with the finery of our excuses, and yet be left to ourselves in the end.

So find your roommate, your few close friends, your spouse, or some other trusted confidant, and dare to rest wholly on the grace of Christ.

Provide any helpful information, by all means, but leave aside every excuse.

And find, when you are finished, what Jesus does with your inexcusable sin: He buries it. He casts it into the depths of the sea. He blots it out. He *forgives* you.

***"when we deal seriously with our sin, God will deal gently with us."***



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