

God takes the piano off your back. *"I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more."* Your value comes from God. You're forgiven by God's grace!

But God doesn't just forgive you. What's the phrase we use? "I can forgive, but I can't forget." Not God. *"I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."* God forgives and forgets our sin. *"As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us"* (Psalm 103:12). This is how far God's grace extends. He forgives and forgets our sins!

That means that guilt doesn't need to be part of your life! The devil wants to plague you with a guilty conscience to turn you away from Jesus. He's so good at it that he even convinces us that we need to go around feeling guilty to be good Christians. As if the guiltier I feel, the better I must be. No! If you are going through life feeling guilty, you still don't get it. Once a sin is forgiven in Jesus, it never needs to come up again. If God has forgotten your sin, you can too! In your darkest moments, focus on God's promise: "I will... I will..." Whenever the devil haunts you because of your sin, tell him to take it up with Jesus. Because Jesus took that sin away!

Sin forgiven. Sin forgotten. The people of God. This is God's new covenant. This is what God offers you! But it sounds too good to be true. How can this be possible? How can I know this is true? This phrase—"new covenant" is only used this one time in the whole Old Testament. It's never mentioned again. For hundreds of years, this tantalizing promise of a new covenant hung in the air. Until one night, after supper, Jesus took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples and said, *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you"* (Luke 22:25). Sound familiar? The new covenant? How is all this possible? Jesus. Jesus' blood. Jesus shed his blood for us. Sin forgiven. Sin forgotten. The people of God. By Jesus' blood.

How do I know this is true? How do I know this is really for me? "Here's how you can know," Jesus says. "Touch it. Taste it. For you! It's for you!" When you take the Lord's Supper, there can be no doubt. Jesus' blood on the cross brings us to God. Jesus' blood of the new covenant forgives every one of your sins. Jesus' blood in your hand and your mouth and your heart changes you from sinner and slave to child and free. This is God's grace. For me. For you. "I will... I will...!"

So is it worth it? Is following Jesus worth it? I can't answer that for you. But I can answer that for God: Yes, you are worth it! Your whole life long, everyone you meet will make deals with you. For your money. For your body. For your skills and abilities. And the moment you can't produce anymore, you will be gone. But not with our God. When you see the cross, when you see the nails, when you see the blood of the new covenant, know that no one will ever love you like Jesus. Are you worth it? Jesus says, "Yes! Absolutely worth it. You are worth everything!"

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Pastor Nathan Nass

Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 18, 2018

³¹ "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. ³³ "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

Is It Worth It?

Is it worth it? That's what people around the NFL are asking these days. If you don't like football, bear with me for one minute. It's free agency time—the time when players can sign with other teams. Contracts are flying. Teams are changing. Every time a player gets offered a contract, what do you think he asks himself? "Is it worth it?" Every time an owner offers a player a contract, what do you think he asks himself? "Is it worth it?" There are so many factors. Injury. Winning. The team's atmosphere. The player's reputation. And, of course, the money. Before you sign a contract, you ask, "Is it worth it?" I guess \$84 million for three years is worth it...

That's the question lots of people are asking about Jesus: Is it worth it? You heard Jesus' words in our Gospel lesson today: *"The man who loves his life will lose it."* *"Whoever serves me must follow me."* And where did Jesus go? To the cross. Is it worth it? Add all of God's commands... Do I really want to follow what he says? You ask that in your own life. When you wake up on a Sunday morning. When someone questions your faith. Is it worth it? When being a Christian makes you stand out. When God's commands clash with your will. Is following Jesus worth it?

Lots of people are saying, "No, Jesus is not worth it." Including lots of people who probably used to sit right in the same pews where you are sitting. A new study of our Wisconsin Synod (WELS) was released this last summer. In the last 30 years, 250,000 members have left WELS churches. Not died. Left. 250,000 people. 50% of young people who are confirmed in WELS churches leave the church by the time they finish college. A full 50%. They knew Jesus! They studied his Word. They memorized and sang and confessed their faith. And then they decided Jesus wasn't worth it. Is he? Is Jesus worth it? Lots of people are saying No! What about you?

I wonder if they really understand what God offers them. You can't know whether

following Jesus is worth it unless you know what Jesus offers you! The Bible doesn't use the word "contract," but it does use a similar word—"covenant"—to describe God's relationship with us. In God's Word today, he promises his people a new covenant—a new contract. *"The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them."*

To understand this "new" covenant, you have to understand the "old" covenant. When God led the Israelites out of Egypt, he had them stop at Mount Sinai. There God made a covenant with the Israelites that he hasn't made with any other nation. He said, *"If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession"* (Exodus 19:5). If the Israelites obeyed God's commands, they would be his people and live in the Promised Land. This is the kind of contract we're used to: "You do that, and I'll do this!" If they obeyed, God would bless them. Make sense? That was the old covenant. What did the Israelites think? They said, "Yes!"

So how did it go? To put kindly, bad! It sounds simple enough, right? "Keep my commands and I'll bless you." That sounds like a fair contract. Why didn't it work out? The Israelites couldn't keep God's commands. In fact, they broke their covenant with God—over and over again. "You shall have no other gods." Broken. "Honor your father and mother." Broken. "Do not commit adultery." Broken. "Do not steal." Broken. I hope you realize that what might sound simple—keeping God's commands—is impossible for us! They ran off after other gods. They wanted to be like everybody else more than they wanted to follow God. They broke their covenant.

So God kept his promise. What was God's promise? He said, "If you obey, I will bless you. If you disobey, I will destroy you." God kept his promise. He raised up the Babylonians who destroyed the whole country of Judah and surrounded the city of Jerusalem. The famine got so bad that parents were tempted to eat their own children. That's the setting the prophet Jeremiah got to serve in. Great, huh? You know what he told them? "You are not going to win. You are going to be taken captives. Don't even bother fighting. God is against you because of your sins." Think that was a popular message? The people still didn't listen. Sin is so stubborn. Sin is so powerful.

If you were God, what would you do? I'd pull a Minnesota Vikings. Just get rid of all the quarterbacks and bring in somebody new! Start over. Not God. He offered his sinful people a new contract. A new covenant. Listen again: *"The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel.... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*

Did you catch what two words God said again and again? "I will." *"I will make a new covenant."* *"I will put my law in their minds."* *"I will be their God."* *"I will forgive."* *"I will remember their sins no more."* I will. I will... God's new covenant is unlike any other contract in the history of the world: It's one-sided. It's not, "If you..., then I..." No! It's "I will. I will. I will." That's grace. All God. All grace! Can you imagine this happening at your job? Your boss calls you in and says, "I'll like to offer you a new contract. How about this: You do nothing, and I'll pay you an exorbitant amount, because I love you and care about you so much." How's that sound?

That's not the way contracts are supposed to work, but this is God's covenant with you. "This is what I'm offering you," God says. "I will be your God and love you and forgive you. Period." That's the covenant! God really wants you to understand this! Your relationship with God is not based in any way on your performance. On your achievements. On your family history. On your appearance. It's based completely on God's grace from beginning to end. "I will. I will."

After saying all that, it still feels like now I should tell you what you need to do. Now would be the perfect time for an altar call, right? "Open up your heart and let God in! Here's what you need to do—trust and believe and act...!" But that's not what God says. None of that is in our text. God wants to overwhelm you with his grace. We talk about grace, but often we don't get it. Even as Christians, we put the pressure back on ourselves. "I've gotta believe. I've gotta trust. I've gotta do this..." You've felt that pressure! But it's not about you. Grace means it's all God! Even the good things we do isn't really us. God puts them into our minds and hearts. "I will. Period!" Soak in God's grace!

Two weeks ago, North Carolina played Duke in college basketball. Two top-ten teams. Probably the biggest rivalry in college sports. Duke was playing at home, but North Carolina had the early lead. They were up by 10 at halftime. Suddenly, Duke came storming back. They outscored North Carolina by 20 points in the second half and won by 10. What a turnaround! What happened? After the game, Coach K from Duke was asked, "What did you tell your team at half?" Know what he told them? "Take the pianos off your backs. Quit playing with all the pressure in the world. Just play. Our guys took the piano off their back and played basketball."

That's what God has done for you: Taken the piano off your back. If we had to earn God's love, if forgiveness depended on us, that would be like a giant piano on your back. But it doesn't depend on you! It depends on grace! God took the piano off your back. Men: The world tells you that you must always be in control, always be tough, never need help, always be achieving great things. But that's not being a man. That's a piano on your back! You can feel the pressure, right? Women: The world tells you that you must be independent, beautiful, strong, influential—all at the same time! But that's not empowerment. That's a piano on your back! You can feel the pressure. The devil whispers that you must be good, you better not sin or you're toast. That's a piano on your back! You can feel the pressure.