

## THE PRISON CELL THAT'S NEVER LOCKED

A cartoon showed a bedraggled and disheveled prisoner probing his open cell door, calling to his gaunt cellmate, "The good news is that the cell door isn't locked. The bad news is that it never was—there's no keyhole!"

The truly bad news is that countless people imprison themselves for years at a time in their self-induced guilt, and the "worse" news is that they don't realize the "good" news that the Lord has provided an easy escape plan.

Why would anyone choose to live in a prison cell when not forced to? Or wallow in the sludge of oppressive, negative feelings of guilt when a simple cleansing of the filth is almost absurdly easy to reach? Imagine a person so dysfunctional that he shuts himself up in a dark, stuffy cave and closes the entrance so tightly that not the slightest ray of sunlight can penetrate the darkness. Would anyone blame the sun for that situation? A normal person would want to exclaim, "Open the entrance of your cave and let

in some sunlight! Better still, come outside and enjoy basking in the brilliant warmth of this beautiful day!"

The good news is God's gift offered to every despondent heart: "In your presence there is fullness of joy" (Psalm 16:11). Our heavenly Father, in his indescribable divine love, can hardly wait to "forgive us our trespasses." The Holy Spirit inspired the prophet Micah to articulate this amazing truth as a question that contrasts our God with pagan gods: "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression?" (Micah 7:18).

God's loving mercy overrides his righteous indignation at the horrendous evil of sin (which is an act of insulting the Creator of the universe). When the sinner takes the tiniest step toward his waiting open arms, God embraces him with the warmest affection. Truly God's tenderness and love total far more than all the human love added up from the beginning of human existence on Earth.

Few will deny that God's wisdom and power are infinite—although no one can really grasp them. But God's infinite mercy is a concept that many prisoners of their own guilt find hard to appreciate. As Paul says, "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel" (2 Corinthians 4:4). They can't accept the simple procedure required for eternal salvation: "Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out" (Acts 3:19).

The self-imprisoned may be unaware of the "no-keyhole door." In fact, any sinner's "cell" has a number of unlocked doors to afford him or her escape from the con-

finement of sin. The Bible speaks of six such portals of God's mercy—three of which are sacraments. *But implied for each one is the prerequisite of a repentant heart.*

### PORTALS OF MERCY

First, of course, is the “start-off-clean” sacrament. Baptism removes original sin, which is “‘contracted’ and not ‘committed’—a state and not an act” (CCC, #404). This is the sin that Romans 5:12 describes: “[S]in came into the world through one man, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.”

The baptism of non-infants also remits personal sin: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven” (Acts 2:38).

The second portal of mercy is the sacrament of reconciliation (improperly called “confession,” which is only the penitent's act of relating his sins to the priest). This sacrament is the most perfect door of escape from the prison cell of sin, because Jesus instituted it precisely for that purpose alone. He arranged for it to be channeled only through the apostles and their clergy successors: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.... If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:21–23).

Besides conferring God's “negative mercy”—sin removal—this sacrament also confers more of God's “positive mercy”—namely, a restoration or increase of sanctifying grace (see 2 Peter 1:4), a surge of actual grace to discern better what is sinful and be able to avoid it (Philippians 2:13), an inflow of sacramental grace that

intensifies contrition (2 Corinthians 7:10), an increase of merit or heavenly reward (1 Corinthians 3:8), an added indulgence for the lessening or dissolving of accumulated purgatorial suffering (1 Corinthians 3:13–15) and finally, a special spiritual intimacy with Christ in his gentle mercy (Matthew 11:28).

Third, we have the portal of the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, which was formerly called extreme unction. “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.... [A]nd the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven” (James 5:14–15).

Fourth, we enter the freedom of God’s mercy through repentance, also known as contrition. Either “perfect” (based on love of God) or “imperfect” contrition (also called “attrition,” based on fear of punishment) can educe forgiveness of sin. Even without sacramental confession and its many special advantages just listed, perfect contrition by itself suffices to remove mortal sin. However, ecclesiastical law, not divine law, requires that any such forgiven mortal sins be “submitted to the keys” of the church’s power in the sacrament of reconciliation, if available, before receiving Communion. Meanwhile, if no confession is available, or if the sins are doubtfully mortal, Communion may be received after a preparation by perfect contrition (see CCC, #1452).

Imperfect contrition is not a sufficient preparation for Communion after mortal or doubtfully mortal sin. But with confession, imperfect contrition suffices to remove

any sin. The Council of Trent affirmed all this (see CCC, #1453).

Fifth, an act of sincere love of God that would imply a deep regret of having offended him as the beloved of the soul also gives entrance to God's mercy. This act would contain implicitly an act of perfect contrition and hence would be conditioned by the above statements regarding perfect contrition. "I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little" (Luke 7:47).

Sixth, an act of sincere fraternal charity—that is, an act of love of God as his presence is recognized in another human—brings us to mercy in another way: "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death" (1 John 3:14). This Christ-focused fraternal charity also would contain perfect contrition implicitly and hence open us to the above conditions.

Given these six routes of "escape from the prison of sin," we can only marvel at how the Lord strives to give us every opportunity to be free of the bondage and confinement of sin. It seems that he strives to exhaust his divine ingenuity in finding ways to shower us with his loving mercy. All that is required of us is to reach out to him and be caught up in his embrace of mercy.

There's a bumper sticker that says, "If you feel far from God, guess who moved!" That is a reversible separation, as David showed in his simple prayer: "Draw near to me, redeem me, set me free" (Psalm 69:18). Yet countless souls have become calloused in not recognizing the Lord's yearning to embrace us in his mercy: "I took them up in

my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love...like those who lift infants to their cheeks" (Hosea 11:3–4).

### A MERCIFUL ENCOUNTER

A passenger next to me on a plane flight noticed my Roman collar and soon engaged me in a conversation about religion. He remarked that he had given up his childhood faith "because," he said, "the Bible speaks so much about the wrath of God." He was incredulous when I told him that every such passage was qualified by the option offered to every sinner to evade such wrath by turning to God's mercy. I observed that the Bible mentions the mercy of God directly in more than four hundred places and indirectly in hundreds of other places, from the psalm prayers to the mercy parables of Luke 15 and beyond.

When this man brought up the time-worn objection about Jesus' referral to the "unforgivable sin," I explained that *any sin that is "unforgivable" is not so by reason of God's refusal to forgive but by the sinner's refusal to be forgiven*. The sinner refuses forgiveness by simply refusing to apologize to God for spitting in his face by sin. The Lord patiently and lovingly urges the sinner to accept his divine forgiveness, but the recalcitrant sinner simply refuses to accept it.

I showed my fellow passenger a statement from the *Catechism*, a copy of which, providentially, I happened to have in my valise. I urged him to read not just the opening words of the passage but the entire paragraph. It started with the words of Jesus: "I tell you, every sin and

blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven." Then followed the commentary: "There are no limits to the mercy of God, but anyone who deliberately refuses to accept his mercy by repenting, rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit. Such hardness of heart can lead to final impenitence and eternal loss" (CCC, #1864).

The third personality in God's triple personality, the Holy Spirit, acts as grace-bestower. Thus "blasphemy against the Spirit" is simply refusal to accept God's grace of forgiveness and salvation.

I tried explaining this by a simple kindergarten-level illustration: "If you were poor and I offered you a no-strings-attached gift of a million dollars and you refused it, could you blame me for selfishness or injustice? Your being deprived of the gift would be your choice, not mine. Counterpoint that example with the passage about the 'unforgivable sin,' coupled with the inspired words of Peter: 'The Lord is...patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance' (2 Peter 3:9)."

*The world's worst sinner can be forgiven in a fraction of a second by simply saying to the Lord, with true sincerity, "I'm sorry." Refusing to do so is the only way one can end up in hell.* The unrepentant sinner says, in effect, that he is prepared to accept the endless anguish of hell rather than humble himself by opening up to God's mercy with a simple apology.

I showed my fellow passenger that instead of distortedly emphasizing the wrath of God, he should emphasize the pride and stupidity of any unrepentant sinner. The wrath of God is mentioned in the Bible *only* in the context

of the obdurate and sustained refusal of persons or nations who snub his loving mercy.

The devil knows that pride is the main roadblock to repentance and ultimately salvation. “‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourselves therefore to God.... Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts.... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (James 4:6–8, 10).

When I opened my Bible and showed the man just a few descriptions of God’s tender mercy, such as the parable about the Prodigal Son, his acrimony seemed to melt away. I invited him to say, “I’m truly sorry, Lord,” while accepting the salvation earned for him by Jesus’ death. He hastened to blurt out that commitment—almost tearfully. His parting words as the plane landed were words of gratitude and a promise to return to the practice of his Christian faith. Truly, “the hope of the righteous ends in gladness” (Proverbs 10:28).

This encounter left me with a grateful heart too, as I recalled the words of James 5:20: “[W]hoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”