

Leader Guide for Study 4: Assurance of Pardon

Introduction

In early 1975, the Khmer Rouge regime, evacuated the capital city of Phnom Penh and seized control of the country of Cambodia. As part of his ascent to power, Pol Pot quickly began “purging” those they deemed a threat to the revolution. Eventually, the regime killed millions of innocent civilians and sent many more into rural work camps.

One of the people who was sent to these camps is Christopher LaPel. His parents and two siblings would be killed, but he eventually made his way out of Cambodia, became a Christian in a refugee camp, and came to the US. He eventually started several churches in Cambodia, and on one of his trips back to Cambodia, a man came to the church services led by Christopher and said he wanted to become a Christian, but said his sin was too great. Christopher encouraged him that God could forgive any sin, so the man became a Christian. He was filled with joy and went back to his hometown to teach others about the gospel of Christ.

A few years later, in an interview with a reporter, this man confessed his real identity, “Comrade Duch”, who was one of the leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime. Duch was in charge of a concentration camp which killed more than 12,000 people and buried them in a mass grave. Several of Christopher’s families were killed in this camp. Duch was turned over to international crimes court to be tried for his crimes.

When Christopher learned about his old friend’s true identity, he was understandably stunned, but he knew in his heart that the Holy Spirit had led Duch to speak the truth. Christopher forgave Duch and spoke on his behalf during his trial, but Duch was ultimately sentenced to life in prison, as he requested. Christopher visits Duch in prison and ministers to his family.

This is a powerful story of Christopher forgiving Duch and showing love to him, even though he knows the full extent of his Duch’s sins against his family and community. However, this pales in comparison to the pardon God grants us for every sin we have ever committed.

Last week we learned about Confession of Sin, which is a time for the congregation to collectively admit to and repent of our sin, and ask for God’s forgiveness. This week we will discuss the **Assurance of Pardon** portion of liturgy, which is a time for us to acknowledge and meditate on God’s forgiveness and pardon of our sins.

In the order of liturgy, **Assurance of Pardon** occurs after **Confession of Sin**. These sections go hand-in-hand and therefore sometimes appear to be one section in the liturgy. The format of

Assurance of Pardon is usually led by one of the Elders or Pastors, who often read a passage or pre-written statement which is meant to comfort those who have just repented of sin.

What does it mean?

In a legal sense, pardon is different from being acquitted (non-guilty), and is more than just simply being forgiven. The legal definition of pardoned is “To use the executive power of a governor or president to forgive a person charged with a crime or convicted of a crime, thus preventing any prosecution and removing any remaining penalties or punishments.” When we ask God for forgiveness, He not only forgives the offense, but in the eyes of His perfect law, we are exempt from any prosecution or punishments related to the offense.

Read Romans 5:8-9

8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners,
Christ died for us.

9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much
more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

Read Isaiah 53:5-6:

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

How can God pardon us when He is perfectly just? The doctrine of Justification teaches us that Jesus Christ died and atoned for our sins, once and for all. Because Jesus lived a perfect life, he alone was able to be our substitute. Therefore, when God the Father looks at us, he only sees the perfect actions of Jesus Christ on our behalf. This gives us confidence that God will forgive us while being just.

It's important to note that pardon is not distributed by a person, but only by God, since Christ himself secured our pardon. This is not a power delegated to certain groups of people, like the pastor leading Assurance of Pardon, but is freely available via direct access to all children of God. (1 Tim 2:5, Hebrews 10:12, 19)

Discussion:

1. Has someone ever forgiven you in a way that provided instant relief?
2. How can we prevent ourselves from taking the cost of grace for granted?

Why do we practice it?

Read I John 1:8-9

8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

We practice Assurance of Pardon weekly since we recognize pardon can only come through Jesus Christ. We cannot achieve our own pardon through good works or from a different source. Just like a sick person needs to admit they are not well before they can seek a physician's help, we must first recognize we have sinned and cannot pardon ourselves before we can ask for forgiveness and pardon. Note that the only requirement for forgiveness is confession to God. God is faithful to forgive us repeatedly and without limit, what a tremendous promise!

Read Luke 7:36-50

Being forgiven and pardoned should stir up joy and gratitude in our hearts because of the immense debt that has been forgiven. We deserve eternal death and separation from God, yet he chose to make a way for us to be restored. Like the servant whose massive debt was forgiven, or the woman whose great sins were forgiven, we have incurred a great debt of sin in our lifetimes, and therefore should rejoice when the slate is wiped clean.

Jesus here demonstrates that he has the power to forgive sins himself. Imagine being overwhelmed by your sin and then one day meeting a man who could forgive you and take away all your shame! We are promised this same opportunity if we will only humble ourselves and confess our sins.

Discussion:

1. What are some of the benefits to practicing Assurance of Pardon as a community?
2. Do you sometimes struggle to feel forgiven?
3. Do you sometimes take God's forgiveness for granted?

How do we practice it?

Now that we understand why we practice Assurance of Pardon, let's discuss how it is practiced. Here are two examples, one is a passage and another is a famous hymn:

Read Micah 7:18-19

18 Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?
He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in steadfast love.
19 He will again have compassion on us;
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.

Amazing Grace (first two verses)

Amazing grace
How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost
But now I'm found
Was blind, but now I see

'Twas grace that taught
My heart to fear
And grace my Fears relieved
How precious did
That grace appear
The hour I first believed

This is what Assurance of Pardon looks like. The congregation either sings a song, or more commonly, someone reads a passage of encouragement. Micah 7:18-19 encourages us that God does not retain his anger forever and casts our sins into the depths of the sea. Instead of anger, which we deserve for our sin, God chooses to show compassion to us. Amazing Grace reminds us we are all sinful wretches, but God's amazing grace pardons and restores you. Because of God's love for us, this should stir up joy and love in our hearts and compel us to worship Him.

Discussion:

- 1) What are some ways your heart responds to Assurance of Pardon?
- 2) How can you practice Assurance of Pardon during the week?

Conclusion

Assurance of Pardon is a practice meant to inspire joy knowing we are forgiven by God, and stir up gratefulness for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf. God is offering us peace if we are only willing to confess.

Discussion:

1. How should we respond to what we have learned today?

Further Reading

Westminster Confession of Faith on Justification:

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/justification-westminster-confession-faith/>

Christopher LaPel's story

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E035CclfjIM&feature=youtu.be&t=1>