Affirming Our Faith through the Apostles' Creed
I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins

Text: Psalm 103:8-12 -- The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. 9 He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. 10 He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. 11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

Introduction: According to **the Random House Dictionary**, "***hatred***" is defined as a feeling of intense or passionate dislike. ***It seems that lately, I've been running into a lot of people who love to hate***. All you have to do is watch the news to see that I'm right. As to why, sadly, I only have to look as far as my own heart for the answer. **Hatred tends to validate my feelings of self-righteousness. It makes me think I'm better than the people or things I loathe. The result is that I feel better about myself, especially If I can get others to share my hatred**. This week I spent some time studying the word "**hate**" in the Scriptures and discovered that the only time it is used in the Bible **in a positive way** is when it speaks of an aversion to something that God regards as wrong or evil. An example is found in **Revelation 2:6**, where the Apostle John wrote these words to the church in Ephesus: **"But you have this in your favor. You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans which I also hate**." The problem with the hatred that occasionally finds its way into my heart is that my thoughts and motives are never as pure as God's. ***When it comes to an aversion to evil, He gets it right every time***. I, on the other hand, do not! Jesus confirmed my very human propensity to moral corruption when He said in **Matthew 15:19, "Out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."** Perhaps this is why I battle feelings of ill will for others and find it so difficult to forgive those who have wronged and hurt me deeply. **I still want a pound of flesh. If I'm honest with myself, I want revenge**! Most of the time I would say that I agree with **C. S. Lewis** when he said, "***Everyone says that forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive***." Lord, please change my wicked heart. ***I am so grateful that God is not like me***. He does not harbor hatred for all those who have wronged him, up to and including an entire world that has turned its back on Him. He loves us and offers us **forgiveness now** instead of **vengeance** (punishment based on justice) **later**.

This morning, I want to open up the Word and take a closer look at the heart of God especially as it relates to the next line in **the Apostles' Creed** that says, "***I believe in the forgiveness of sins***."

Context: Psalm 103 is written by King David **to remind himself** of God's blessings so that he will continue to be grateful for all that God has done for him. The first two verses tell us **how a person should praise God** (*all that is within me*). The next three verses explain **why a person should praise God** (*forget not all His benefits*). Then verses six through eighteen talk about **the nature of God that we should praise Him**. And finally, the last three verses touch on **who should praise God** (*those in heaven and on earth*). I want to spend the next twenty-five minutes or so unpacking **the third part** -- the nature of God that we should praise Him, and especially what we find in verses eight through twelve. Let's begin with His mercy and grace.

The Mercy and Grace of God (**The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide (contend) nor will He keep His anger (hold a grudge) forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities -- Psalm 103:8-10**). This passage is based on David's meditation on **Exodus 34:6.** You may remember that after Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, he descended the Holy Mountain where He met with God only to discover that Israel was already engaging in idolatry, worshipping a golden calf, and participating in all kinds of sexually perverse acts. In his anger, Moses broke the original tablets by hurling them to the ground at the foot of the mountain. Then he took the golden calf, burned it, and ground it up into powder which he mixed with their water and made the people drink. After the Sons of Levi purged the camp of 3,000 rebels, Moses made intercession for the rest. Later, God told him to cut out new tablets for himself to replace the first set and to ascend the mountain a second time. It was there on Sinai that God revealed His nature to Moses reaffirming that He is merciful and gracious. Aren't we glad that God is slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness? Otherwise, He would have poured his wrath out on the Hebrews for their brazen idolatry and wiped them out. Now here in **Psalm 103**, **David recalls the incident and then reminds himself of these two very important moral attributes of God .... mercy** (**God's goodness toward those in misery and distress**) **and grace** (**God's goodness toward those who deserve only punishment**). The two often go hand in hand in the Bible (**Nehemiah 9:31** -- speaking of Israel -- **But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God**; **Hebrews 4:16** -- **Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive**

mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need). So how does David see these two attributes joined together in the nature of God.

- **First, they are seen in what God will not do. He will not always chide nor will He keep His anger forever**. This means that although He may be justifiably angry over the sin of His people, the Lord doesn't keep on accusing us and hold a grudge against us. Instead, He chooses to forgive us! **This is so very different from what we tend to experience in our relationships with each other**. We get hurt and then we hurt back! And we see it as a sign of weakness if we're the first to give in and seek reconciliation. Better to have someone come crawling to us, than vice versa. David knows that as great as God's righteous anger can be, His mercy is even greater!!! **He offers forgiveness to the condemned**.
- **Second, they are seen in what God does not do**. **He does not deal with us according to our sins nor repay us according to our iniquities**. If God were to do so, what would it look like? I can think of two places in the Scriptures that might be helpful here. In **Genesis 6** we're told that **God saw how corrupt all the people of the earth had become. Even though He gave them a hundred years to repent under the preaching of Noah, no one turned to Him. So, God wiped everyone off the face of the earth but Noah's family in a great flood**. Look also at **Genesis 18 and 19**, **when the outcry to the Lord against the people living in Sodom and Gomorrah became exceedingly great** (*God could not find even ten righteous men in either city*), **He sent his angels to destroy both**. No one was spared except Lot and some members of his family. Even his wife perished as she looked back with regret at having to leave the city she loved.

  Aren't you glad God is both gracious and merciful to us? **In our misery and distress, He pours out His goodness toward us, though we do not deserve it. If we're honest with ourselves, we know that what we really deserve is His punishment, but miraculously we receive far better**. **Our culture seems to have the idea of wrath down pretty well** (*after all it is revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men* -- **Romans 1:18**), **but it struggles with the concepts of grace and mercy**. Take many of the villains in our contemporary superhero movies for example. **They often share the perspective that fallen humanity is worthy of wrath, vengeance and destruction, but grace and mercy? Forget it**. They may share a biblical view of sin but agree there is only one cure for it. These anti-heroes understand that human beings are flawed sinners, and the solution is always the same: **wipe out every human being without mercy**. For instance, in the original ***The***

Matrix movie, ***Agent Smith*** calls humanity "***a virus***." He says, "***Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet***," "***You're a plague, and we … are the cure***." In the movie ***the Justice League: Crisis on Two Earths***, ***Owlman*** wants to destroy the cancer called humanity by destroying Earth. In the ***Batman Begins*** movie, it is ***Ra's al Ghul***, the leader of the League of Shadows that tells Batman: "***Gotham's time has come. Like Constantinople or Rome before it, the city has become a breeding ground for suffering and injustice. It is beyond saving and must be allowed to die. This is the most important function of the League of Shadows***." Fortunately, God is very different from the anti-heroes of these movies. He shows grace and mercy to a world that deserves wrath and judgment and here's why.

The Steadfast Love of God (**For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us -- Psalm 103:11-12**). The word for God's steadfast love is "**checed**." It is one of the most important ideas in the entire Old Testament. It shares three basic meanings that cannot be separated from one another ... **strength, steadfastness** and **love**. The best English translation may be "**devotion**." I wonder if marital love isn't a pretty good illustration of it. ***A couple are legally bound together, they share a sense of obligation to keep this contract, yet they also have mutual affection for one another***. This is the kind of love that God demonstrates for us. In this Psalm, David shares both the extent and evidence of God's **checed** for us.

- **The Extent of His Love** -- **For as hIgh as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him**. This is another way of saying that **God's steadfast love toward us is inexhaustible**. His "**love tank**" never runs empty. Most of us would have to admit that sometimes ours does! We use up all the human emotion of love that we can muster and then we have no more. We're done. This is what leads so many couples to divorce today. They have only a limited supply of steadfast love to offer and when it's gone, they have no other source to supply it. That's because God is the only infinite source of checed. His love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It never fails! **And the only way we can love the way God does is to love others with His divine love**.
- **The Evidence of His Love** -- **As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us**. It is God's steadfast love that results in the forgiveness of our sins. Through the blood of the Lamb (Jesus Christ), our sins have been atoned for. Now they will never again be held against us. They have been removed as far away as possible. **Just after the turn of the new**

Millennial, Microsoft formally launched the final revision of its Windows operating system for PCs. It was called Windows "Me"—short for Windows Millennial Edition. One feature of Windows Me that caused quite a stir was its "system restore" feature. Here's how it worked. Suppose you suffered a system crash on your computer. You're not a computer expert, and you don't know how to recover the last two weeks of financial information you entered Wednesday, your daughter's history report she started writing Monday, or your favorite game. All you had to do was select "system restore" and specify the date to which you want your machine reset. Voila! Problem solved. All the things you somehow had messed up were put back in their configuration as of that earlier day. It proved to be a lifesaver for many. Imagine if the same kind of thing were offered to restore human lives? Do you think you could supply it fast enough to keep up with the demand? **Bob would "system restore" to the day before he began the affair. Sue would go back to the day before she tampered with payroll data. Ivan would choose the day before the big fight that caused his son to run away from home**. Maybe you can remember the day when things crashed for you—and now you'd give anything you own to restore things to the way they were. Listen ... God won't erase all the consequences of our actions, but He promises something far better: to forgive us and remove our transgressions far from us. He promises to work for the highest good even through what is bad, and one day, He will make all things new. ***What Windows Me calls "system restore" God calls redemption***.

Let's consider in our final moments together, what our response should be to the mercy, grace and steadfast love of God.

- **We respond with FAITH**. Forgiveness is available to anyone who trusts in Jesus Christ for salvation.
- **We respond with PRAISE**. When a person understands what our sin has earned from God (wrath) and what we receive from God despite it (grace and mercy), the only response that makes any sense is praise and adoration.

Conclusion: As we wrap things up, let me share with you this story from **Rick Atkinson** in the book, ***The Guns at Last Light***: As WW2 drew to a close, Americans took more and more reprisals against German soldiers. The violence of war wore down the American soldiers, especially when stories of German atrocities spread. At **the Battle of the Bulge**, for example, **SS troops** slaughtered over a hundred American soldiers after they had surrendered. By the time the Allies reached Germany, they showed no mercy. These, after all, were the perpetrators. German

soldiers flying white flags were gunned down. And when the Allies liberated concentration camps, their sense of outrage and hatred grew even more murderous. "***Still having trouble hating them***?" (General) **Eisenhower** asked a nervous young GI after touring Buchenwald. At Dachau, American liberators stood aside while inmates literally tore apart their guards, limb from limb. GIs gunned down many more after they surrendered. **In contrast, think about how God responded to us at the Cross of Christ**. If you think about it, the decision to murder someone takes a good deal of determination. Those who plotted Jesus' death, those who hounded Pilate until he released the Lord to be crucified, even the Roman soldiers who beat Him and then nailed Him to a tree—they did it with passion, with hatred. ***What had He done to deserve death by torture—or, any death at all***? In their minds, Jesus threatened their sense of order; He endangered them through His heedless rhetoric; He was a living blasphemy. They hated him enough to kill ... and what about the niceties like judicial procedure ... not necessary. ***And how did God take i***t? Looking at this world that scorned and abused his own Son, and hung him up to die a slow, dangling death, surely, He must have hated them, enough to kill them all. ***Except He didn't***. God didn't hate them at all. That's not how He feels about any of us. The Bible says, "**He demonstrated HIs own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)**. Instead of giving us His wrath, God offers forgiveness to everyone who looks to Jesus' death on the cross in payment for their sin. **What a great picture of His grace, mercy, and steadfast love on display for all to see and experience for themselves**.

NOW JOIN ME AND LET'S DECLARE WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS BY RECITING TOGETHER THE APOSTLES' CREED.

*****

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth: And in Jesus Christ His only Son, Our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into Hades; The third day He rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, **the forgiveness of sins**, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.