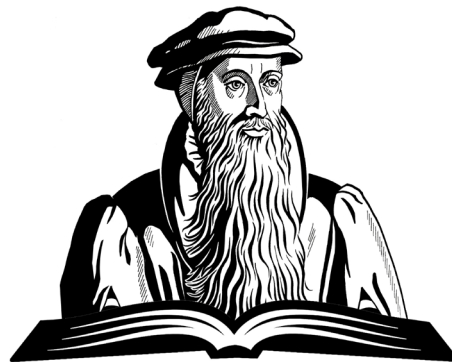

**VIDEO LECTURE MODULE:
THE APOSTLES' CREED**

LECTURE 11
ARTICLE 10: THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Lecturer Presenter: Rev. Cornelis Harinck



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

THE APOSTLES' CREED

13 LECTURES

Lecturer Presenter: Rev. Cornelis Harinck

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THE APOSTLES' CREED

Rev. Cornelis Harinck
Transcript—Lecture 11

Article 10: The Forgiveness of Sins

In Article 10 of the Apostles' Creed, the Christian confesses, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." Though short, it is an article with extraordinary content. Much is said in few words. It appears as if this confession was taken directly from Psalm 130. In this Psalm, the question is asked, "If thou, LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" (Psalm 130:3) The answer is, none. For we "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "There is none righteous, no not one" (Romans 3:10). All the world is guilty before God. However, then a confession of faith follows: "But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Psalm 130:4). What a blessed confession this is! Here a statement is made regarding God that is of vital importance for each of us, namely, that there is forgiveness with God. God forgives! He forgives sin and iniquity. Psalm 130 declares, "With thee, there is forgiveness." The Psalm speaks of forgiveness as being as consistent with God's character as light belongs to the sun. It says, "forgiveness is with thee"—it belongs to God.

Forgiveness is a foundational component of God's essence. Forgiveness proceeds from his gracious nature. The Lord proclaimed in Moses' hearing, "The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin"—Exodus 34 (verses 6 and 7). Infinite goodness and grace are the fountain from which forgiveness issues forth. "For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive"—Psalm 86, verse 5. If God were not infinitely good, there would be no forgiveness. Scripture proclaims God to be the God of forgiveness: "But thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not"—Nehemiah 9, verse 17. Psalm 103 says, regarding God, "Who forgiveth all thine iniquities" (verse 3). And Isaiah testifies of God, "He will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7).

Forgiveness is designated as the great promise of the New Covenant: "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more"—Jeremiah 31, verse 34. The New Testament declares John the Baptist to have been born "to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins"—Luke 1, verse 77. Jesus forgave people their sins. He was vested with the authority to forgive sins. He forgave the sins of the lame man, and said to the scribes and Pharisees, "that ye may know that the Son of man hath power upon earth to forgive sins"—Luke 5, verse 24. He sent his disciples into the world to proclaim God's forgiveness: "And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations"—Luke 24, verse 47. The forgiveness of sins was the chief content of the proclamation of the gospel. Peter declared about Jesus, in the house of Cornelius, "To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins"—Acts 10, verse 43. Forgiveness is a grace acquired by Jesus. Ephesians 1:7 says, "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.

Forgiveness assumes the presence of evil. There is an evil that needs to be forgiven, namely, sin. If it remains unforgiven, we will have to suffer for it eternally. So horrible is the evil of sin. But God be praised—there is forgiveness with God. Jesus said to the penitent sinner, "Thy sins are forgiven"—Luke 7, verse 48. Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts" (Matthew 6:12). Forgiveness is thus associated with sin and guilt.

People think lightly about sin. They do not view sin as a transgression of God's holy commandment. They see sin more as a mistake, a weakness, a wrong decision, the result of certain

circumstances, or as caused by other people. At best, we may still view it as an evil that we inflict on other people, but not as an evil committed against God. The notion of sin has been annulled. We fail to see how great an evil sin is in the eyes of a holy and righteous God. What is sin according to the Bible? The Scripture uses different words for sin and the commission of sin. The word most commonly used for sinning means, “to come short of,” and it primarily refers to a coming short of the goal one should have achieved. It thus expresses failure and miscarriage. According to the Bible, man comes short of his created purpose when he sins, that is, when he neither loves God above all, nor his neighbor as himself. He fails to achieve his objective, departs from the path of life, and will die. He thereby comes short of a blessing, and will be accursed instead. God says, “All they that hate me love death”—Proverbs 8, verse 36.

Sin has been brought into the world by Adam and Eve, and in them we all sinned. For we all were in the loins of Adam, and he was our federal head. Their sin is thus the sin of all humanity. The apostle teaches, “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners”—Romans 5, verse 19. We were created to find our happiness in God, that is, to honor and love God as he is. Having listened to the devil, and desiring to be like God, we have come short of our purpose and destiny. Fallen man no longer fulfills the purpose for which God created him. The apostle concludes his sad account of the sinfulness of fallen man by saying, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God”—Romans 3, verse 23.

Another word the Bible uses for sin and the commission of sin means, “to deviate from the right way.” It is a description of something crooked and wrong, and stepping over the border. When one does something that is not right, he sins. John writes, “Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law”—1 John 3, verse 4. The Bible views sin as a violation of God’s law. It is to step across a line that God has drawn in his law, by saying, “Thou shalt,” and “Thou shalt not.” The Ten Commandments clearly draw that line and establish boundaries. When we cross that line, we are sinning. The result is death. Any act that deviates from the divinely prescribed path leads to perdition: “For the wages of sin is death”—Romans 6, verse 23. Sin, in the Bible is not merely a tangible and actual transgression of God’s law. Sin proceeds from a wrong inclination—from man’s fallen and evil disposition. Jesus taught, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile the man”—Mark 7 (verses 21–23).

Finally, the Bible designates sin as a rebellion—a mutiny against God and his law. It is the exclamation of what we read, in Luke 19, verse 14: “We will not have this man to reign over us.” Sin is rebellious disobedience. It is rebellion against God, as the King of kings. In this manner, it is spoken of sin, in Psalm 2, verses 2 and 3: “The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.”

Sin is ultimately a going astray. It is to believe the lie the devil imposed upon Adam and Eve, namely, that one can find happiness apart from God. The devil proposed to Adam and Eve that nothing would make them happier than to be their own god, and determine what is good and evil. He said, “For God does know that in the day you eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil”—Genesis 3, verse 5. What a lie! Adam and Eve believed this lie, and thereby departed from God, from the good Shepherd and his safe pasture. And we still believe this lie. Sin is therefore described as such, in Isaiah 53: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way.” These Biblical references make clear what the evil nature of sin is. It is opposition to God’s will, rebellion against his kingship, a disregard for his goodness, contempt for his love, and a betrayal of his faithfulness. Sin is wanting to be as God. Sin is arrogant pride. Instead of honoring God, it is an honoring of self. Sin has been correctly summarized as an evil that opposes God and all that pertains to God.

God, therefore, hates sin, for sin conflicts with his holy nature. There is nothing as contrary to God as sin. He neither is able nor willing to do anything other than punish sin. God would contradict his very being if he were indifferent to sin. Sin has consequences, for it provokes God to wrath and renders us liable to the judgment of damnation.

Sin also defiles us. It is an infection that has affected our entire nature. Sin has darkened our

minds, has rendered our will abhorrent of good, and has defiled our passions. Sin is the greatest evil—even worse than death and hell. If there were no sin, there would be neither death nor hell. Sin provokes God to wrath: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men”—Romans 1, verse 18. It leads to the questions, how can God ever forgive such evil? how can my sins be forgiven?

When people are either wrong or fail, they will commonly say, “After all, I am only a sinner.” People will readily confess that they are sinners. They will admit that they are not perfect and that all is not as it should be in their lives. Yet people are not very concerned about that. After all, there is forgiveness with God. Most people take it for granted that God forgives sins. Is he not God for that very purpose? Others are of more serious mindset. They deem penance, confession of guilt, repentance, and especially faith in Jesus Christ to be essential in securing forgiveness from God. There are but few who believe in the necessity of blood—of reconciliation through the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son.

The question is, how can a holy God forgive sin? The forgiveness of sin seems to contradict the holiness and justice of God. God reveals himself as a holy God in the Bible. He cannot tolerate evil in his presence: “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity”—Habakkuk 1, verse 13. Scripture emphatically teaches that God cannot leave sin unpunished. When the Lord proclaimed his name and nature to Moses, he said, “The LORD, The LORD God, . . . that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation”—Exodus 34, verses 6 and 7. How then can God forgive our transgressions of his commandments, so that he will never again remember our sins? How can he proclaim, as we read, in Isaiah 43, verse 25, “I, even I, am he that blotteth out your transgressions for my own sake, and will not remember your sins.” How can God maintain his holiness and justice, and forgive the sinner?

Here God’s love and wisdom have found a way to punish sin and save the sinner. It is the adorable way of the vicarious death and substitution of Jesus Christ, depicted in the sacrificial ministry of the Old Testament, and preached in the gospel of the New Testament. Abraham’s words to Isaac have been fulfilled, “My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering”—Genesis 22, verse 8. God has provided a sacrificial lamb. He appointed his Son to be a Surety and Mediator for sinners. He punished the sin of his elect church in Jesus, the Surety and Savior, so that he could forgive sinners. “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him”—2 Corinthians 5, verse 21. God’s forgiveness is grounded in the satisfaction of Christ. Jesus’ vicarious suffering and dying on behalf of sinners is the foundation of God’s forgiveness.

The apostle, therefore, says of Jesus, “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believes in Jesus”—Romans 3, verses 25 and 26. In Christ, God executes judgment on sin, and acquits the believer. In Christ, God can forgive without contradicting his holiness and justice. Grace has gained the upper hand, however, not at the expense of, but rather, based on righteousness. In Romans 5, verse 21, the apostle shows that righteousness and grace have met each other in Christ. He says, “That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.” This is the adorable way of redemption that God reveals to us in Jesus Christ in the gospel. It is a way of redemption that testifies of unspeakable love. “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all”—Romans 8, verse 32. It is the revelation of God’s adorable wisdom. “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!”—Romans 11, verse 33. His wisdom has found this way of salvation.

These are the things that the angels were desirous to look into—1 Peter 1, verse 12. It is called the mystery of the gospel, of which Paul speaks, saying, “That I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel”—Ephesians 6, verse 19. The Greek word for mystery, “mysterion,” refers to a secret that is revealed. The New Testament uses this word for various things, such as the mystery of the end of the ages, the resurrection of the dead, and the future of the people of Israel. However, most often, this word is used for the preaching of the gospel. The

preaching of the gospel is the revelation and proclamation of God's plan of redemption. It is the revelation of a mystery.

The sin problem has been solved in the God-man Jesus Christ. There is forgiveness with God. Sin has been judged in Christ, and God's justice has been satisfied. The great redeeming work is done. Sin is done away, and everlasting righteousness is brought in. Now there is forgiveness of sins for everyone who believes in the crucified Christ. What a joyful sound is the preaching of the Gospel! There is forgiveness with God for transgressors doomed to die. The door of God's mercy stands open all day. Everyone who comes seeking mercy and forgiveness shall not be sent back empty.

The apostles went forth into the world with that joyful message—a message that brought salvation to a world lost in sin and guilt. In Psalm 32, verse 1, David says, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." The man whose sins are forgiven is a blessed man. Knowing forgiveness of sins is the greatest of all blessings. It is a blessed man who can say, I am a sinner that is forgiven. But how does one become the recipient of that blessing? The Bible links the forgiveness of sins to the knowledge of sin, to repentance, and to faith in Jesus Christ. There is a way that leads to forgiveness. It is of utmost importance not to lose sight of this way. To simply assume that Jesus died for our sins, apart from repentance, faith in Jesus Christ, and renewal of life is an illusion and a dangerous deception. Our spiritual wounds will thereby not be truly healed. Forgiveness is, in the Bible, inseparably linked to the knowledge of sin, repentance, and faith in Jesus Christ. Knowledge of our sins and our sinful existence leads to a seeking of God's forgiveness. You cannot expect people to pray for the forgiveness of sins, of which they are ignorant. In Psalm 51, David says, "For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me." God brought David to this acknowledgment. God had to convince him of his horrendous evil. David himself did not realize the great evil he had committed.

David first became aware of the sin of his adultery with Bathsheba, and the murder of Uriah, when the prophet Nathan brought this to his attention. Before that, he closed his eyes to his sin, and considered his behavior to be normal. After all, did not all kings do such things? Why then could he not do it? However, when Nathan came to him and told him what God thought about his murder of Uriah, and adultery with Bathsheba, he confessed, "I have sinned against the LORD"—2 Samuel 12, verse 13. Man will come to a right knowledge of his sins, only when he comes face to face with God. We will not perceive what sin is in the eyes of an infinitely holy and just God, until God shows us. Moses said this already, "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance" (Psalm 90:8). The first thing we need is for God to illuminate our hearts, and show us that we are transgressors of his holy commandments, and that by our sins, we have provoked God to wrath. We must be confronted with our sins. As long as a person does not see his sins, he will not seek forgiveness. The knowledge of the disease is the first step to healing. Though God will determine the depth of that knowledge, the measure of the knowledge of one's sin and sinful existence must be such that he will be compelled to seek God's forgiveness.

The Bible also links the forgiveness of sins to repentance. Although Jesus commissioned his disciples to proclaim God's forgiveness to all the people, they were not to do so without calling them to repentance. He commanded them, "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name"—Luke 24, verse 47. The Greek word here translated as repentance is "metanoia." It has the meaning of a different way of thinking about God and yourself, and a returning to God with sorrow for sin. Jesus linked the forgiveness of sins to this repentance. Repentance makes forgiveness sweet. When David sought to cover his sins and not confess them before God, his conscience accused him, and a sense of God's displeasure consumed him. How everything changed, when he confessed his sin before God! He says of it, "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah"—Psalm 32, verse 5. His confession of guilt and sin led to forgiveness. All of Scripture highlights this link between repentance and forgiveness. The apostle John writes, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"—1 John 1, verse 9. A conviction of the evil of our sins, accompanied by a heartfelt sorrow, is the way that leads to the forgiveness of sins.

Furthermore, the forgiveness of sins is linked to faith in Jesus Christ. When Paul addressed

Jews in the synagogue, who believed that they could be righteous before God by the keeping of the law, he said, “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by him all that believe are justified from all things”—Acts 13 (verses 38–39). The great blessing of having our sins forgiven is not secured by either good works, acts of penance, tears of repentance, or earnest prayers, but rather, by simply believing in Christ. We become righteous in God’s sight by casting ourselves upon the blood and righteousness of Jesus. We are not justified before God by the deeds of the law, but only through faith in Jesus Christ.

The gospel proclaims forgiveness of sins to all who believe in the crucified Christ. The forgiveness of sins is, therefore, intimately connected with the atoning death of Jesus. Romans 3 says that we are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (verse 24). Jesus declared of himself, “For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many”—Mark 10, verse 45. He came to pay a ransom and to redeem slaves of sin and Satan. Isaiah says of Jesus the Messiah, “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). John the Baptist identified Jesus as “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world”—John 1, verse 29. The Apostle John says of Jesus, “And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin”—1 John 3, verse 5. The apostles have proclaimed boldly that there is no forgiveness of sins apart from faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in the forgiveness of sins rests on the promise that everyone who believes in the crucified Jesus will receive forgiveness of sins. Peter said to the people gathered together in the house of Cornelius, “To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins”—Acts 10, verse 43. Not in the way of working or meriting, but by believing in the atoning passion and death of Jesus, we obtain the forgiveness of our sins.

Unfortunately, this liberating Biblical teaching is often misused. Many will say, “You just have to believe that you are a sinner; that Jesus is the Savior, and that your sins are therefore forgiven.” However, such intellectual faith does not minister the true forgiveness of sins and peace with God to our hearts. True and Biblical faith is the focal point here. Such faith is linked to the knowledge of sin, repentance, and a resting in the finished work of Jesus. The faith that ministers the forgiveness of sins and peace with God to our hearts is a repentant faith. Faith and repentance are like Siamese twins. When you separate them, both of them die. You can only look to the cross of Calvary, and to a Jesus crucified for sin, as a guilty and contrite sinner. To behold Jesus suffering and dying for our sins, brings peace to the contrite heart. It is therefore called the “life-look.” Here, only a look is sufficient. To our comfort, it may be said that our salvation does not depend on the strength of our faith, but rather, on the Christ who is appropriated by faith. The woman with the issue of blood was healed, only by touching the garment of Jesus.

Finally, the forgiveness of sins is accompanied by a forsaking of sin. Jesus came to save his people from their sins, but not in their sins. He does not leave us in sin, but rather, he frees us from the power of sin. Nothing is so capable of breaking the power of sin, and fuel a love for God’s commandments, as the knowledge of the love of Christ, who sacrificed himself for the remission of our sins. The Christian walk of a renewed life is the best evidence that our sins have been forgiven.

What a blessed Confession: “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” When Martin Luther was deeply troubled by God’s holiness and the sight of his sins, Abbot Von Staupitz asked him whether he had recited the Apostle’s Creed that morning. He had naturally done so, for it belonged to the monastery ritual. Von Staupitz then asked the desperate Luther, “Have you not confessed, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins”?”