

It is Better to Say “Remission” (of Sins) Than “Forgiveness” (of Sins)

“To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43).

Most modern versions use the word **forgiveness** in this verse rather than the word **remission**. I believe the word forgiveness in its base meaning is a suitable choice of words. In spite of this, I recommend that we use the less common word remission (of sins) whenever we are explaining the gospel. Normally, I like to use words that are more commonly understood than words that people are less likely to understand. But this is an exception.

I admit that if you use the phrase “remission of sins” instead of “forgiveness of sins,” most people will not understand what you are saying. If you use the word remission, you will have to pause for a moment and define the word for the hearer. At this point, you might be thinking to yourself, “Why use a word that I must then define?...Why not just use the word “forgiveness” since most people understand the basic concept of forgiveness?”

I hope to show here that when you use the word “forgiveness,” you will most likely fail to properly communicate the concept of what God wants communicated. The problem is not the word itself (forgiveness). It is the unbeliever’s false comprehension of the word forgiveness that introduces the error in the minds of those who hear it. Some people have a more distorted understanding of the concept of forgiveness than others. But I maintain that almost everyone has a distorted understanding of it.

To illustrate the basic problem, let me explain what seems to be the mindset of most Muslims concerning the concept of forgiveness. Muslims call their sins “mistakes.” Obviously, this thinking grossly diminishes the ugliness of their sin and reduces their likelihood of recognizing their need of salvation. But in addition to this distortion about their sin, they also have a diminished view of God’s absolute righteousness which cannot tolerate any sin whatsoever. With such crippled understanding of these important matters, they are hindered from understanding the gospel, including the concept of forgiveness. These corrupt views, together with their own experience of forgiving others (such as their children for example), are mingled together in their minds to form a corrupt understanding of the concept of forgiveness. Because of these things, to the Muslim, if God forgives, He is simply overlooking the “mistakes.” So, if we use the phrase forgiveness of sins when talking with a Muslim, he thinks you mean that God will “overlook” mistakes. Hopefully you recognize that this is a gross distortion of the gospel.

Because we want to communicate the gospel as clearly as we can, I suggest it is best to avoid using the phrase “forgiveness of sins” when explaining the gospel to Muslims. But I would go further and suggest that it would be better to avoid using this phrase when talking with any unbeliever. Most likely, every unbeliever you encounter has a distorted understanding of the concept of forgiveness. To some degree, most unbelievers understand it to be God overlooking our faults. This is not how this concept is defined by the New Testament.

Remission actually conveys the biblical view of what happens when a person repents and believes the gospel. It conveys the idea of the sins being sent away or removed, not merely overlooked. When this occurs, a person is “reconciled” to God. The reconciliation is made possible by the legal removal of sins.

When this occurs, God’s disposition towards us is forever changed. The Holy God can now bring us near Himself because our sins have been utterly removed. The finished work of Jesus on the cross made this possible. The sins were completely punished. There is no overlooking them! Overlooking them would not be righteous. They had to be fully punished and that is what happened while Jesus hung on the cross. It is completely righteous (just) for God to send our sins away from us. It is not a mere pardon! It is completely righteous for God to declare us righteous (justified).

If we persist in using the word forgiveness, these truths will be obscured because of the person’s distorted understanding of forgiveness. So, even though the average person does not understand what the word remission means, it is probably the better term to use when you are trying to help them understand the gospel properly. Yes, you will have to stop to define the word remission, but that process will actually call attention to the rich truth of what occurred when Jesus hung on the cross.