

If you've ever looked out your rear view mirror and seen flashing lights, then glanced down at the speedometer with despair, you probably know a horrible, sinking feeling. The shame of misbehavior. The foolishness of getting caught. The realization that somehow now you'll have to pay for this. That image of punishment is very real, but it's also very different from the image of punishment that comes out of the Bible.

Today's passage from the First Letter of John reveals something about forgiveness that merits reflection during this Easter season of the jubilee year. The big distinction is this. If you get a speeding ticket, you have violated a law, and the state expects you to make up for this if you want forgiveness. But in the First Letter of John, if you sin, you may repent, but you should understand that nothing you do can make up for the sin. There is no fine that you pay in order to set things right. The reason is that we are human and we cannot attain the perfection of God. We'll never get there. If you think about that long enough, you could get really depressed -- if it weren't for this: God has made a covenant with us. God has written into the covenant a means of reconciliation. God knows there's no way we could act as an equal partner in the covenant, so God gave us an equal partner. God gave us Jesus. Through his death, Jesus has made up for our sins. God has given us the means of sustaining our covenant through Jesus.

John writes, "If anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is the expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world." In other words, if you sin, the fine you would have to pay is way beyond your means, but you don't have to worry about it. Jesus already pleads for us; he is our intercessor with God. What's more, God sent Jesus. God loves us, and gives us the means of forgiveness for when we sin.

What God expects of us is that we keep the commandments. In John's community, there were people who said they know God, but they were not keeping the commandments. It's like they took a course, God 101, and they said they know who God is. John says, no, "The way we may be sure that we know him is to keep his commandments. Those who say, 'I know him,' but do not keep his commandments are liars." It's in the way we live that we come to know God more and more. We cannot be perfect, but we can know God better.

This message should give reassurance to all the baptized. Our sins were cleansed in the waters of baptism, but if we sin again, we can still obtain forgiveness through Jesus. This message should also challenge us to reflect on the ways that we offer forgiveness. Do we offer biblical forgiveness or do we offer speeding ticket forgiveness? If someone offends you, do you wait for them to pay for it in some way, or are you willing to offer forgiveness because reconciliation is constitutive of the relationship that you have?