

Forgive Us Our Sins
(Lord, Teach Us to Pray, Part 6)

Matthew 6:12, 14-15; 18:21-35

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on September 10, 2017]

I

During the April 1992 riots in Los Angeles that followed the acquittal of four police officers in the beating of Rodney King,
a truck driver name Reginald Denny found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Taking a short cut off the Santa Monica freeway,
Denny drove right into the midst of the riot.

He was dragged from his truck and viciously beaten to within an inch of his life.

He only survived because of four South Central LA residents,
who witnessed the attack on television,
rushed to the scene,
put Denny back in his truck,
and drove him to the hospital.

After his painful recovery, Reginald Denny reached out to the families of his attackers in a gesture of forgiveness, and on the *Phil Donahue Show* even met and shook hands with one of them, Henry Keith Watson, and finally made peace.

A reporter, commenting on the scene, sarcastically wrote,
“It is said that Mr. Denny is suffering from brain damage.”

II

Do you suppose Jesus was suffering from brain damage when he told his disciples to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us"?

Right here is where the Lord's Prayer is most difficult to pray.

Perhaps that is why this is the longest and most involved petition in the Lord's Prayer.

It asks God to do something for us, then calls on us to do something for others.

Before there is any talk about our forgiving anyone else,
we are to ask God for forgiveness for ourselves.

As you know, Presbyterians and other Reformed churches (and most Baptists) use the words "debts" and "debtors"—

"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

In the Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, and United Methodist traditions, "trespasses" is most often used: "*Forgive us our trespasses,*" etc.

What's the difference and why does it matter?

Well, one version of the story, probably an urban legend, goes like this:

The Scots were merchants and the English were landowners. To sin against a Scot meant you hadn't paid your debts, so Presbyterians and others within the Reformed tradition preferred using "debts" and "debtors."

On the other hand, the English, being landowners, believed that the chief sin was trespassing on their property—thus the preference for "trespasses."

[This reminds me of a story I heard from a Lutheran pastor. In the town where he served, every year during Lent the various churches came together on Wednesday evenings for joint services.

When in the Lutheran Church, the Lord's Prayer was prayed using "trespasses,"
(Good Lutherans would never want to be "in debt," he said.)
and in the Presbyterian Church it was "debts."

At the end of the Lenten services, the Presbyterian pastor said,
"Now all of you Lutherans may return to your trespasses,
and we Presbyterians will return to our debts."]

That more reliable explanation goes like this:

When Thomas Cranmer wrote the Book of Common Prayer, the primary liturgical source for Anglicans, Episcopalians, and Methodists, he followed the William Tyndale version of the Lord's Prayer, which incorrectly used the word "trespasses," which actually appears two verses later in verse 14.

The Scots followed the King James Version, which correctly translates verse 12 as "debts."

Thus the difference between Reformed communities and Anglican-based communities, when it comes to how this petition is worded.

But really, what difference does it make?

Whatever way you translate it, it means that we all stand in need of God's forgiveness.

That may be why newer translations say "Forgive us our sins" (following Luke 11:4), which gathers in both debts and trespasses, and is a win/win or a lose/lose for everyone, depending on how you look at it.

III

So...to dig into the meaning of this fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer, we have to go back into the Old Testament, to the Book of Leviticus, chapter 25.

One of God's gifts to Israel was the concept of a jubilee year.

Every 50th year there was to be a great festival of redemption and renewal among the people.

All debts would be forgiven,
 those who had fallen into servitude would be released,
 and everyone would be free to return to his original home,
 regardless of the obstacles that might have blocked the way for 49 years.

There is something of this jubilee flavor in the 5th petition of the Lord's Prayer:
 "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

Life in the kingdom of God is to be characterized as a festival of forgiveness...

where all sins are forgiven,
 where all impediments to fellowship are removed,
 where there is joy and singing as people are reconciled to one another.

It is to enter that blessed state of the heart in which all debts are cancelled and all sins are forgiven.

It is to experience God's loving-kindness rising like the tide of the ocean purifying everything on the shores of human existence.

Jesus came into our midst as the bearer of forgiveness.

When a paralyzed man was brought to him for healing, before addressing the man's physical problem, Jesus said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." (Mark 2:5)

When a woman was led before him and accused of adultery, he said,
 "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8:7)

Throughout his ministry, Jesus associated with sinners—
 people shunned by the righteous of his day—
 and treated them as if God had forgiven them completely.

When he died on the Cross, he prayed for the very people who crucified him,
"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

Jesus' whole ministry was one of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Wherever and whenever the kingdom came, it came as a festival of forgiveness.

IV

"Forgive us our sins."

How badly we need it!

How sick and desperate we are until we have it.

The words spoken in anger.
 The hopes dashed.

The lives messed up.
 The chances missed.
 The years wasted.

We need forgiveness, don't we...
 the way Peter and the other disciples did,
 the way the soldiers around the cross did,
 the way the dying thief on the cross next to Jesus did.

How wonderful it is to experience forgiveness deep in the soul—
 to know that one's past is covered over,
 and that the future can be fresh and pure and good.

And the most wonderful part is that Jesus,
 who taught us to pray for forgiveness,
 is the one who died for our forgiveness.

"The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

It isn't only our sins, you see.

The festival of forgiveness includes the sins of others as well.

Jesus said we don't have our forgiveness by ourselves.

As we have been forgiven,
 so we are to forgive.

Peter brought the question of forgiveness to Jesus in the 18th chapter of Matthew's gospel.

"How many times should I forgive the sin of a brother or a sister against me?" he asked. "Would seven times be enough?" (18:21)

Peter thought he was doing the right thing.

The rabbis taught that you should forgive another person three times, and that was

all that was required.

They had a saying that went like this: "He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than three times."

The rabbis based this on Amos 2:6, where God forgives three times, but with the fourth transgression came punishment.

They reasoned that a person should not be more forgiving than God.

So for Peter to come up with forgiving seven times— why, he had more than doubled the requirement.

He thought he had shown himself to be a generous and loving person.

But Jesus answers that we are not to forgive seven times, but seventy times seven.

In other words, there are no limits to the forgiveness God requires of us.

We are to forgive those who hurt us as many times as necessary, even after we have lost count of how many times we have forgiven.

Peter thought that forgiving seven times was mercy enough.

Jesus said that seven times is not only a shortage of mercy— it isn't even enough to fulfill the minimum daily requirement.

V

Then to illustrate the point Jesus told a parable.

There was a man who was in debt to the king.

Actually, that is an understatement.

He owed the king 10,000 talents.

Now, even one talent was a considerable sum in those days.

The total annual taxes of Judea, Idumea, Samaria, Galilee, and Perea amounted to only 800 talents.

This man owed more than twelve times the total taxes of 5 provinces.

In fact, it would take a common laborer 150,000 years to earn that amount.

So when the king called the servant in for the day of reckoning,
it was impossible for the man to pay the debt,
and it would always be impossible.

So the king ordered the man and his family sold into slavery,
and all their possessions to be sold,
and the money used as payment toward the massive debt.

But the man fell down on his face...
he wept out loud...
he cried and begged and pleaded for mercy,
"Please, please, sire, give me a little more time
and I'll pay you every dollar I owe."

The king knew better—but he felt compassion for the man and his family.

So the king forgave the impossible debt and let him go.

The man couldn't believe it.

It was as though that huge debt never existed!

He went away overjoyed.

But as he was on his way home, the man saw a fellow servant who owed him a much smaller amount—
the sum a laborer could earn in 100 days—
and demanded payment from him.

When the servant proved unable to pay, the man had him thrown into prison.

Word got back to the king, who called the man in and said,

"You wicked and worthless fellow! I forgave you an impossible debt. Couldn't you have done as much for a fellow servant?"

And he threw the man into jail.

"So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matthew 18:35)

VI

In this parable Jesus makes the point that we do not have our forgiveness alone.

As we have been forgiven, so we are to forgive.

The kingdom of God is a festival of forgiveness,
a jubilee of cancelled debts—for everybody.

The 5th petition of the Lord's Prayer reminds us that there is the closest possible connection between human forgiveness and divine forgiveness.

They are two sides of the same coin...
they cannot be separated one from another.

The great Christian poet George Herbert said,

"He that cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass if he would ever reach heaven; for every one has need to be forgiven."

As we have been forgiven, so we to forgive.

Jesus makes this clear:

"Forgive as our sins even as we forgive those who sin against us."

Notice that Jesus does not say,

"Forgive me my sins and I will try to forgive others."

He does not say,

"Forgive me my sins and I will in general forgive others..."

with certain exceptions."

He does not say,

"Forgive us our sins because we have forgiven others."

He says, "Even as."

"Forgive us our sins even as we forgive those who sin against us."

A festival of forgiveness!

When you forgive someone you are saying to that person:

*What you have done to me is unspeakable—
and by all rights I should call it quits between us.
My pride and my principles demand no less.*

*However, although I can't guarantee that I will be able to forget what
you've done—
and though we both may carry the scars for life—
I refuse to let it destroy the relationship we have had with each other.*

When you accept forgiveness from someone else, it means that you too admit to doing something unspeakable that needs to be forgiven.

Both persons have to swallow the same thing—their pride.

This is why Jesus connects God's forgiveness and our forgiveness.

It is not that God's forgiveness is conditioned on our forgiving others.

Conditional forgiveness is not really forgiveness—it's just giving fair warning.

Besides, **our unforgiveness is the very thing we need to have God forgive us of the most.**

The same pride that keeps us from forgiving others
keeps us from accepting forgiveness from others.

Bob Lively says it well:

As citizens of this present moment, God is inviting us to forgive liberally. For if we hope to remain where we've traveled thus far with Jesus, we must stretch ourselves in the very direction we ask God to stretch for us. Simply put, we must forgive...we must make grace the norm of "on earth as it is in heaven."

VII

Making grace the norm on earth as it is in heaven.

What would our lives be like if we could embrace this truth and live by it?

What would our church be like if each and every Sunday we had a festival of forgiveness?

A 12-year old boy in California witnessed the murder of his father and the brutal rape and murder of his mother. His life seemed ruined. Sent to a state school for boys, he was apathetic and withdrawn, and did poorly in school.

Although he was paraded through the offices of several psychologists and attended numerous therapy sessions, nothing seemed to break through the shield of defenses his young mind had thrown up.

Then, shortly after graduation from high school, he attended a Young Life meeting and heard the testimonies of several young people about the difference Christ had made in their lives. When an invitation was given to accept Christ, he found himself going forward with tears streaming down his face.

His whole life turned around. His personality underwent an immediate change. Where he had been introverted and withdrawn, he suddenly began to make new friends. He applied to a local college and was admitted. After college, he went on to law school. And while in law school, he did something that had been building up in him since the night he accepted Christ as his Lord. He made arrangements to visit the man who had killed his parents.

The man was serving a life sentence in the state penitentiary. The first visit was not a very good one. They were both nervous and had a hard time talking to one another.

But the young man was determined and went back a second time. The second visit was a breakthrough. "If God can forgive me for the awful hatred I carried for you," said the young man, "he can forgive you for what you have done."

The prisoner was deeply affected by this message. On the fourth visit he surrendered his heart to Christ. The two men embraced, mingling their tears of wonder and joy.

And a few years later, when the prisoner was paroled, the young man, now an attorney in Modesto, California, helped him get a job and start a new life.

VIII

This, my friends, is the power of Christ and the power of forgiveness.

It is a picture of the festival that ought to be going on all the time in our lives,
both inside and outside the church.

It is the way we ought to treat one another in all our dealings.

It is what the Father has willed for us in his kingdom,
and what he has given us through his Son.

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

May God grant to each of us a measure of the grace of God's Son,
whose first words, when he was crucified between two thieves, were:
"Father, forgive them."

Amen.

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