

## The Lord's Prayer: Forgive Us Our Debts, Trespasses, Sins

Matthew 6:5-15

Have you ever noticed that the great documents like this perfect pattern prayer, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, doctrinal statements of various church traditions, all affirm our need for forgiveness and God providing the means and methods by which we are forgiven?

As we continue in our series on The Lord's Prayer, I want to share with you why I believe this is the hardest petition for any of us to fulfill. To put it simply, it is difficult. To demonstrate how difficult it is to forgive, as soon as The Lord's Prayer is completed, Jesus immediately reminds us of our need for forgiveness and our need to reflect the forgiveness given by God by forgiving those who have hurt us.

In the 1970s, a brilliant Korean student was enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He was involved in an exchange program that was known around the world.

One night when he left his dorm room to mail a letter, he encountered a teenage gang and was tragically killed. When the story was reported by the media, there was great outrage at this barbaric act. A cry for "justice" to be done was raised. The local authorities agreed to seek the death penalty when the persons responsible for the vicious act were apprehended. However, a letter from the victim's parents arrived; it shocked the authorities. It read as follows:

"Our family has met together, and we have decided to petition that the most generous treatment possible within the laws of your government be given to those who have committed this criminal action...In order to give evidence of our sincere hope contained in this petition, we have decided to save money to start a fund to be used for the religious, educational, vocational, and social guidance of the boys when they are released. We have dared express our hope with a spirit received from the gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ who died for our sins."

Now, consider this scene from one of Shakespeare's plays, Richard III. Lady Anne, the widow of Edward, Prince of Wales, follows the open coffin of her father-in-law, King Henry VI? Both men have been murdered by the Duke of Gloucester. The coffin-bearers stop to rest, and Anne pours out both her tears and her hatred for the murderer: "O! Cursed be the hand that made these holes; Cursed the heart that had the heart to do it; Cursed the blood that let this blood from hence!"

Without the witness and the work of Christ, I am sure that the second story would be the normal human reaction rather than the first. Christ has given us a more excellent way.

I had the privilege of reading a sermon that Dr. Earl C. Davis preached at his church titled, "Common Sense About Forgiveness," in which he shared: "There are no Summa Cum Laude graduates of the School of Forgiveness." In fact, he said, "Any kind of graduate of this school is RARE--for most of us are still learning the ABC's of forgiveness." Every time I read these words, I am given strength to re-enroll in the School of Forgiveness and to learn at the foot of the Cross about the subject matter called "Forgiveness."

We do not have to read very far along in the Bible--which provides the best witness I know of the divine-human encounter--to see that humankind disconnects from the will of God for our lives. Like Adam and Eve, we also try to hide the evidence of our wrongdoing from God. Adam and Eve run, hide, and blame each other for the breaking of the connection to God's will. Guilt is most often the result of our trying to hide our sin, rather than the result of the sin itself.

Forgiveness is based on God's initiation, not ours. Perhaps the best Biblical story to strengthen this principle is that of the loving father in Luke 15 running with open arms to greet his returning son. If in our sin we reflect our darker nature, God's forgiveness reveals how great God's love and light really are. We need to stop wasting precious time, talent and resources running from God. We need to realize that God is running after us to wrap God's loving arms around us.

Picture in your mind Jesus, dying on a cross with nails in his hands and feet, saying to those beneath him, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they have done." To have one who hung beside him cry out, "Remember me," and to hear the words, "Today you will be with me in paradise," models the fact that the heart of a resurrection faith is learning how to forgive.

Reverend Everett Palmer always enjoyed telling the story of a certain man who had the habit of wearing a very heavy winter coat on a blistering hot summer day. When asked why he wore it, he replied, "Because it feels so very good when I take it off." So many times, people have shared with me that forgiving someone who had hurt them was like taking a 100-pound weight off their chest. They could sleep well again.

I know that as I preach this sermon many of you are applauding forgiveness in general terms, but you are rejecting it in your own specific case. You are saying, "Pastor, you just do not understand. It is different." It reminds me of a television episode I saw on a rerun of "Happy Days." Someone has destroyed Fonzie's motorcycle. Fonzie is outraged. Fonzie declares that he better not find out who has done such an awful thing. Mrs. Cunningham tells the Fonz that "to err is human--to forgive, divine." The Fonz then immediately responds by saying, "But God never had a bike."

However, Scripture reveals to us that God did have a Son whom the world rejected and nailed to a cross.

I have been a pastor long enough to know that when I meet someone who cannot forgive other people, it reflects the naked truth that they themselves do not know the power of forgiveness. Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, once said, "The only way you can be assured of one's forgiveness is when you are able to forgive others." While you might not be able to completely forget what the other person has done to you, it is no longer a barrier to continuing that relationship.

This petition in the Lord's Prayer does not reveal a God who withholds love from us. However, I believe Jesus is teaching us that we can be so busy harboring hatred and resentment in our own soul that we will never hear the Christ speaking the words of forgiveness to us. If hatred is the driving force in our lives, we will waste ourselves going down the wrong road.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.