

“As We Forgive”

July 24, 2022

The Prayer Jesus Teaches series

Has it ever happened to you when you're focused on something and suddenly you hear it in a song or see it on TV? I'm sure it's because our minds are paying closer attention, and so we notice it, but it's happened to me as we've been studying the prayer Jesus teaches – usually referred to as the Lord's Prayer, but I'm really experiencing it as the Disciples' Prayer. And it's disciples' – plural – because it's a community prayer – *Our Father in heaven...*

It was a song that made me take notice. I've heard it many times on the radio, but the words struck me, especially as we're talking about forgiveness today. It's a song by Don Henley, who went solo after his time with the Eagles. The song is “The Heart of the Matter” released in 1989. It tells the story of love lost and a relationship struggle, and this is a part of it: *I've been tryin' to get down/To the heart of the matter/But my will gets weak/And my thoughts seem to scatter/But I think it's about forgiveness/Forgiveness/Even if, even if you don't love me anymore.* One part of it says, *You keep carryin' that anger/It'll eat you up inside.*

Now I'm not equating the teaching of Jesus with a soft rock ballad from the late 1980s, but the message is there. Forgiveness is really at the heart of the matter - at the heart of the Gospel. *Forgive us, as we forgive others.* Even saying it, even praying it, forgiveness is some of the most difficult work we do. And make no mistake; it is work. It requires something of us. Perhaps that's why it has a place in the prayer Jesus teaches; it's vital to our spiritual lives.

I hadn't paid too much attention to the grammar of the Lord's Prayer in a long time. As I was reading and studying, I realized that there's a connection. The phrases build on each other. *Give us today our daily bread* (the bread we need to exist), *AND forgive us as we forgive...* There's a connection between what we need to survive and forgiveness. We can't live without it. We need it ourselves – from God and others AND we need to offer it to others as a reflection of the love of God in our lives.

There's a story of a child who was learning the Lord's Prayer and prayed these words: “And forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets.” It's a misquote, but there's some truth there. This prayer is designed to bring us closer to God and to each other, and focusing on forgiveness catches all of us. No one is outside of that circle. As we prayed earlier, all of us have fallen short of what God intends for us. And all of us have hurt someone – whether we know it or

not. And I'd bet that all of us have struggled with forgiveness at some point in our lives.

The Lord's Prayer doesn't get old – but it can become too familiar. I think Jesus' purpose in offering this model prayer is to remind us that when we pray, we're praying to God and building that relationship with God, and we're also building a relationship with each other. Forgiveness is a part of every relationship with have – family, friends, colleagues, strangers – everyone. Forgiveness is a part of growing faith. I'm convinced that Jesus includes forgiveness in this model prayer because he knows that it's constant work for us, hard work for us, even daily work for us. *Give us today our daily bread, AND forgive us as we forgive...*

Roberta Bondi writes that we have “unhelpful and unrealistic adult beliefs about forgiveness” that are sometimes a result of how we learned it. How many of us were told, “Just say you're sorry.” Perhaps we've struggled to understand that forgiveness doesn't mean that we weren't hurt.

We've made forgiveness too simplistic. We've made it sound like a quick fix and an easy road filled with meaningless platitudes, rather than the difficult journey that it can be. We've said we're sorry without meaning it, and we've heard it from others when they didn't mean it.

We've made forgiveness more about other people and ignored the toll that unforgiveness takes on us. It's a burden that we carry. Nothing is happening to the person we're not forgiving. Many times, the person who wronged us doesn't even seem to know or care, but we're still clinging to the pain. Carrying that burden can keep us from the true joy of God's forgiveness for ourselves, too.

We hear forgiveness in the prayer Jesus teaches, and we know it was a part of his life and ministry. There are Jesus' words about forgiveness to Peter. This comes in the context of Jesus teaching how we should relate to each other when there's conflict in Matthew 18.

Peter asks a math question: “How many times do I have to forgive someone who wrongs me?” I'm with Peter. I want to know the answer. We can debate it – 77 times or 70 times 7. In the end, the point is that we lose count. Can we really track that? Forgiveness is that important. It's beyond calculations and keeping score.

There are Jesus words' while he's dying a cruel death and displaying agape love – asking for divine love and forgiveness for those who are actively watching him die. Notice that no one asks for forgiveness, but Jesus offers it. *Father, forgive them...*

That's difficult to wrap my mind around because we're used to forgiveness being conditional. We ask for it. We extend it. But what about this? **SLIDE** “Forgive them even if they're not sorry.” Does anyone else find that a challenge?

The most common word used for forgiveness means to release, hurl away, or free yourself. Pastor Adam Hamilton says that forgiveness is letting go of the resentment and the right to revenge. It doesn't mean that there aren't real and difficult consequences. It doesn't mean that we condone or excuse behavior. Forgiveness doesn't mean that everything is okay.

Forgiveness requires vulnerability on our part - admitting that someone hurt us or that we hurt someone - and that's hard to do. When trust is broken, it's painful, and vulnerability and honesty open us up wide. No one loves to be vulnerable. It forces us to deal with the bitterness, resentment, and anger that we carry - and it's a burden that can truly weigh us down if we hold on too tightly. Hurt and pain can begin to define us, but forgiveness (not quick and easy), can offer a release for the desire for retaliation and revenge. And we may think it will feel really good to retaliate or get revenge.

It's important, too, that we don't equate forgiveness and reconciliation. We may forgive, but never be reconciled. The relationship may not be restored, and sometimes that's the healthy way. Forgiveness doesn't call us into abusive or harmful situations.

It's also important to be honest that we really don't "forgive and forget." We need to erase that from our vocabulary. Maybe we should remember so that the cycle of pain isn't repeated and moving forward is possible.

Forgiveness seeks to really treat others and love others as we've been loved by God. What might it be like to pray for those whom you're struggling to forgive? How could we release them into God's care and God's will instead of trying to carry the hurt alone?

We forgive and let go. We're called to seek God's forgiveness and forgive others. I wish Jesus would've stopped at "forgive us" and didn't add the part about forgiving others. I can ask for forgiveness, but the call to forgive is hard. Sometimes that phrase even gets caught in my throat in those moments when I'm struggling with forgiving others. I don't want to see myself as more alike the person I'm struggling to forgive, but that's a part of this prayer. I stand in need of grace and forgiveness, too - just like the person I seek to forgive.

And when it comes to the evil in the world, our prayers for forgiveness may be even more difficult, though perhaps what we learn is that when we pray for forgiveness for ourselves and others, we understand the need to leave judgment to God. Again, it's not easy or quick, and it doesn't excuse behavior or consequences.

Even so, consider what it would be like without forgiveness. It's the cornerstone of our faith in Jesus - that we need a Savior to forgive our sin and offer us

new life. Without forgiveness, we don't fully experience the grace of God. We live in guilt – feeling separated from the One who came to save. Without forgiveness, we thirst for vengeance and retribution – getting back at those who have wronged us. Without forgiveness, we really can't have any stable relationship. Is there any relationship where forgiveness doesn't show up? How many of us have had to offer forgiveness to someone this week – or receive it from someone? Forgiveness is central to our relationships.

When we started this series, I told you about growing up and hearing Methodists pray “forgive us our trespasses” while our Presbyterians prayed “forgive us our debts.” Still other translations say, “forgive us our sin.” The word for sin – *hamartia* – comes from archery meaning to “miss the mark.” Sin means that we're not on the target – not living as God desires for us. Sin separates us from God. Forgiveness brings us back into right relationship when we repent and seek to live God's way of love, justice, and mercy.

The word Jesus uses in the prayer for what we need to be forgiven from is literally like debts – something owed to someone else. Jesus uses it in terms of sin and forgiveness because paying off someone else's debt was called redemption, making that person who did that a redeemer.

So, what is owed to God? There are things we do and things we don't do that grieve God's heart. God's grace releases us from those burdens. And when people heard this prayer from Jesus, it was powerful because many of them owed a debt to someone else. The call to treat others as God has treated us is a high calling, but a reflection of Kingdom living. How many of us have had a debt forgiven? Think of how that feels - to have a debt forgiven.

It wasn't until the 1500s that trespasses was used by William Tyndale in his translation. It has a slightly different meaning - going where we're not supposed to go - no trespassing. Sometimes it's intentional and sometimes it's not. It's similar to the idea of “missing the mark.” Whatever word we use, it's clear that we need forgiveness from God and others.

And it's that spiritual truth that connects to the next phrase – *as we forgive*. Asking for God's grace in our lives is linked to how we extend grace to others. That's Kingdom work and Kingdom living. *Thy Kingdom come...*

Asking for and offering forgiveness will change us. It forces us to deal with ourselves and our ego. And it forces us to realize that God in Christ who could respond to us without forgiveness, chooses to respond with love and grace that saves us and makes us new. That's Good News in this prayer.

Whose forgiveness do you long for? If its God's forgiveness, know that it's available to you. If it's forgiveness from someone else, I pray we can lift it to God, asking for peace - and asking for God's help.

Whom do you need to forgive? Pray for them - for God's will to be done in their lives, for God's care for them. It's hard work and deep spiritual work, but important work because it's who we are together.

Forgive us...as we forgive. Help us, we pray...