



Lord, Teach Us to Pray: Forgiven and Forgiving

Luke 11:1-4 and I John 4:19-21

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Preface

This is now the 4th sermon on the Lord's Prayer in a longer series on prayer that will take us through the summer. Today we come to a place which is very hard for lots of people – the issue of forgiveness.

Introduction

A minister parked his car in a no-parking zone in a large city because he had run out of time before his appointment and couldn't find a parking space with a meter. Then he put a note under the windshield wiper that read: 'I have circled the block 10 times. If I don't park here, I'll miss my appointment. Forgive us our trespasses.' When he returned, he found a parking ticket from a police officer along with this note: 'I've circled this block for 10 years. If I don't give you a ticket, I'll lose my job. Lead us not into temptation.'

Side Road – Trespasses or Debts

One of the interesting features of First Presbyterian Church is that we have very few present here that have been lifetime Presbyterians. That impacts a number of things, but among the ones that hits you early and often is the change that is required to switch to "debts" in the Lord's Prayer. The Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Methodists, and Baptists, and all kinds of other folks, use the word, "trespasses." Even my joke uses the term, "trespasses." Years ago Warren Ost, a Presbyterian and then the director of a Christian Ministry in the National Park – an ecumenical ministry, told us in ecumenical settings to always use "trespasses." He said if we used "debts" the trespassers would get behind and never catch up.

So why do Presbyterians use "debts?" Having heard Luke's abbreviated version of the Lord's Prayer for the 4th time, and hearing the word "sin" used in that version, you are aware that churches use Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer. So turn to Matthew 6:9-13 for a moment. In Matthew 6:12 in our NIV pew Bibles you will find the terms "debts" and debtors" (Greek word – *Opheilo*). This word, "*Opheilo*", literally means debt. In the popular Jewish theology of the day, it was thought that our sins were a debt before God. So used in this way, the word "debt" was simply a synonym for sin. And in the New Testament there are lots of words for sin. Eskimos have 27 different words for snow – to distinguish which types. The New Testament has lots of words for sin – law breaking, deviation, shortcoming, rebellion, pollution, missing the mark, and owing debts.

Our earliest English translations of Scripture came from John Wycliffe in the 14th century, and he used debts and debtors. But though there was an English Bible, hardly anyone read it, because Wycliffe lived before the Reformation and the service of worship was still in Latin. But the second English translation came from William Tyndale in the 16th century. Tyndale translated the word as trespasses, which is another one of the synonyms for sin (*Parapipto* – trespasses). This translation resulted partly because he saw a word in Matthew 6:14 for trespasses. It was Tyndale who slipped the word “trespasses” into Matthew 6:12. And “trespass” is another synonym for sin. Tyndale lived at the beginning of the Reformation and worship soon changed to English. From that mistaken translation the Anglican Book of Common Prayer (1549) emerged which had the Lord’s Prayer in it – with “trespasses.” And it stuck, indeed. When Luke did his translation – largely for Greek speaking folks – the Jewish concept of sin as a debt would have been unusual for his readers. So he took the broader approach and translated the Aramaic Jesus spoke into Greek as “Sin” (*Hamartia* – missing the mark). The newer approaches to the Lord’s Prayer have “sin” as what was intended to be a unifying word – but as for now it is a third option.

1) Forgive us our sins (Luke)

This line of the prayer begins with a sweeping request for God to forgive our sins. This is an amazing request for we really don’t deserve to have our sins forgiven. But we must stop and remember to whom the prayer is addressed – Father. There is at basic root here a relationship of Father to child. To sustain that relationship we must remove the debris that could block the relationship.

As a child I had a tender conscience for which I am glad. On a snowy January day when I was about 10, my mother sent me to the post office to mail a letter to my sister, who was working in India in the Peace Corp. After putting the letter in the mailbox, a friend who walked along with me, encouraged me to mail a snowball. I don’t know why, but I did it. Yet, as I got home I didn’t feel good about it. The 10 commandments didn’t include anything regarding mailing snowballs, but it just didn’t feel right. I felt very odd around my mother, who was so thankful that I had gone out into the snow to mail the letter. That afternoon I tried to act as if nothing had occurred – yet soon I told my mother. She was not happy – telling me that the snow would melt and ruin the letter I mailed; my sister wouldn’t get the letter and wouldn’t know her family loved her. Then she began to describe how the snowball would also ruin many other letters, some of which contained payments for bills that would be missing. Eventually she mentioned that I had committed a Federal crime – a visit from the FBI might be in my future. And she capped it all off by telling me that it would all be worse when my father got home. It was not fun – confession never is – but I needed to restore the relationship.

We serve a holy God – and when we forget this fact we inhibit the relationship. We have been encouraged to confess our sins of commission – things we committed. And to confess our sins of omission – things we failed to do. This means we confess both wrongdoing and failure of right-doing. “Forgive for those things we have done and those things left undone.”

Yet, in God’s great mercy, the cross itself was God’s enormous statement that all our sins were nailed there for our forgiveness. That forgiveness opened us into the relationship God had designed for us. We were forgiven at the cross in what the writer of Hebrews called a ‘once for all.’

But day by day we sin again. Ultimately, they have been paid for at the cross – past, present, even future. But our daily sin damages the relationship with God – so we ask for forgiveness to be restored. I John 1:8-9 – “If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and our sin is ever before us. But if we confess our sin, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us from all unrighteousness.” Forgiveness actually means “to send away.” It means to loose the chains that bind. It means to “let go.” To forgive is to refuse to carry those debts anymore. But it also means the relationship with God is restored. So Sunday by Sunday in our liturgy, we ask for forgiveness in the prayer of confession. We don’t tell God anything new, but we seek restoration of the relationship. We want to

confess it all to God so we don't live in any kind of deception. Our liturgy is a part of our reminder of how to pray daily. In worship and in prayer, we adore God first – then confess.

Forgiveness is receiving a gift we do not deserve. We don't deserve God's forgiveness – God is Holy and we are not. When we get to heaven we will be amazed at what we see.

2) As We Forgive Those Who Sin Against Us

Because Jesus Christ has forgiven us, we are called to forgive others. A recent study in the Journal of Adult Development found that 75 of those surveyed believe that they have been forgiven by God for past mistakes and wrongdoing, but only 52% say they have forgiven others. Even fewer, 43%, say they have actively sought forgiveness for harms they have committed. (John Ortberg, Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them, 165)

God forgives us, but how do we respond? We remember the things people have committed against us. People in this room have faced lacerations to their souls. Relationships with sinners, even saved by grace, can cause so much pain – abandonment, divorce, adultery, sexual abuse, being cheated, being forgotten, searing criticism, physical pain, effects of alcoholism, failing to get the love you needed at a point in your life. You still remember the professor that failed you, or the doctor that misdiagnosed you. You remember the business partner that swindled you and the boss that unfairly fired you or denied you a promotion.

C.S. Lewis once said that forgiveness seems easy enough until you really have something to forgive – then it is incredibly difficult.

a) Conditional or Consequential.

Some do wonder if this is a conditional statement – meaning unless you forgive you don't get your forgiveness. Matthew 6:14-15 surely sounds like it. But most students of the Word believe these are consequential – that truly receiving forgiveness should naturally elicit in us a forgiving heart toward others. But Jesus tells a haunting parable in Matthew 18:21-35 that seems to suggest that forgiving others when we have been forgiven is not an option nor a suggestion, but a real command. We are asking to learn to forgive every time we pray this prayer.

What is the forgiveness we offer?

b) Giving a gift that someone doesn't deserve. The root word of forgiveness is to release or loosen or send away. To forgive means to no longer hold a wrongdoing against them.

Lewis Smedes has written two great books on forgiveness. The first was called, Forgive and Forget. The second was even more profound and was called, The Art of Forgiveness. I was looking for these books this week. I remembered that I had loaned out each book in Austin and didn't get them back – and suddenly I had to forgive someone. Smedes says that forgiving someone means we surrender the right to get even. We rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer – that they are a weak, complex, fragile person, not so different from us. We even go so far as to wish the wrongdoer well. We bless him. We recognize that forgiveness takes time.

c) It does not mean that we trust the person again.

You can forgive the person who cheats you but you don't need to do business with them. You can forgive the person who wrongs you without trusting them again. You may not even be able to be friends again – but you release them from the debt. Forgiving does not even require forgetting, but we detoxify the memory and purge its poison. Ideally forgiveness leads to reconciliation – but not always.

d) If you don't forgive, lots of difficult things happen.

The most difficult may be that a root of bitterness grows up in us (Hebrews 12:15)

Anne Lamott said – “Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die. I cherish resentment and bitterness because I want to hurt the rat that caused my pain. But after resentment and bitterness have festered long enough, I find out that the rat is me, after all. Don't forgive and bit by bit all the joy will be choked out of you. Don't forgive and you will never be able to trust anybody ever again. Don't forgive and the bitterness will crowd the compassion out of your heart slowly, utterly, forever. Don't forgive and that little grudge you nurse will grow larger and stronger. Although you may think you can hide it from everyone you know, in time it will become a monster of hostility and one day it will kill you. All that will be left of what was once a person is bitterness and hate. And that bitterness will spread. (Ortberg, Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them, 166)

Lewis Smedes, in his book, Forgive and Forget, wrote: “When you release a wrong-doer from their wrong, you set a prisoner free — but you discover that the prisoner is yourself.”

Episcopal liturgy reminds us of this as well. The sermon precedes the prayer of confession. The assurance of pardon is always followed by a tradition known as passing the peace. It can be used as a time of greeting – a ritualized Howdy-Doody time. But when Anglicans and Episcopalians do this deliberately – after we are forgiven we go around to someone who has wronged us and we pass the peace. Then they go to the table.

Conclusion

You may remember Corrie ten Boom's story of when a concentration camp guard approached her later in life after hearing her speak on forgiveness. He indicated he'd become a believer and held out his hand — and she couldn't shake it. She asked God to give her His forgiveness, and was then able to do so. She concluded, “When (God) tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.”