

## The World's Greatest Prayer

Forgive us

6 July 2008

So we're in our fourth week of the message series, The World's Greatest Prayer. We're taking an intentional look at the what is often called the Lord's Prayer, but could just as well be called the disciple's or student's prayer because Jesus' disciples saw that his spiritual power was connected to his times of prayer, and so they asked him to teach them how to pray. And his response to them is this prayer that many of us have memorized. And it's easy to get into the habit of just saying this prayer by rote. This series is to help us re-engage with the powerful and meaningful phrases of this prayer and help us revitalize our own prayer life.

Already in this series, our lead pastor, Aaron Brown, has led us through the first three phrases of this prayer. Remember that in the first phrase, ***Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed be your name***, Jesus is making two very different and yet equally true statements about God. One is that God is holy, set apart, the creator and master of the universe, and yet the word Jesus uses for *Father* means "Dad". We can have that casual, personal relationship with the creator of the universe and he is as near to us and real to us as the air that we breathe.

The next phrase is, ***Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven***. We reworded this phrase to "make up there come down here – and use me to make it happen."

Last week the prayer turned to our fundamental needs. ***Give us today our daily bread***. And we talked about how that means that we trust and thank God not just for the food that sustains our life, but also for all symbolic ways we receive our daily bread; how God meets our fundamental needs for forgiveness, for freedom, for his presence, and for a savior. All symbolized in the Bible through bread.

Today we're going to look at a very challenging phrase: ***Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us***. Now if you've gone to denominations of churches in your life, you'll know that different traditions say this phrase slightly differently. The three common English words that different churches use are debts, sins and trespasses. And it's good to know which one of those three you need when you're speaking the prayer out loud in a group of people. I'm used to saying "trespasses", but the Presbyterian church I worked at in Scotland for a year said "debts". So I'm up there in front of God and everybody, leading the Lord's Prayer and we get to this point and the crowd stops after one syllable while my amplified voice keeps rolling for two more. Now that's bad enough, but when you stop to think about what those two syllables can sound like on their own.... Yea, I'm not the quickest learner in the world, but I only made that mistake once.

This prayer occurs twice in the Gospels, once in Matthew 6 and a shorter version in Luke 11. Luke uses a the most commonly used greek word for sin, hamartia, which literally means to miss the mark. It's an archery term. When we miss the mark, we are not where we should be. The word "trespass" comes from this kind of understanding of sin...we are not where we should be...we have stepped outside of the boundaries...we have crossed the line between right and wrong.

Matthew uses a different Greek word for sin in his version of the Disciple's Prayer, one called "opheilema" which is more accurately translated as "debt". It means a failure to pay what is due. The idea is that with each sin, we place ourselves in debt to God, a debt which we cannot repay.

Of course, the big picture here is that we are in two places at the same time: we are sinners in need of forgiveness and we have been victims of the sin of others. We are sinners - we have this mountain of moral debt to God that we cannot repay. Our lives have missed the mark and we have chosen to step over that line that separates right from wrong, truth from deception, just from unjust. Sometimes we slip over that line; sometimes we try to walk that line, and sometimes we just march over that line regardless of the consequences.

At the same time, we are sometimes victims of someone else's sin. Someone else is in debt to us for their actions. Someone you trusted hurt you. Somebody gossiped or twisted the truth about you. Somebody in

business cheated you or weaseled out of an agreement. Someone in your family wounded you. A parent neglected or belittled you. A spouse betrayed you. A friend turned on you.

These are people who have “trespassed against us”. These are our debtors...and I wish that it was that they were only in debt to me financially, because then I could just send Vinny and Vito for collection time and feel like some justice has been served. But that’s vengeance and that is not the way of Jesus...that is not what his kingdom – his will on earth (which we have previously prayed in this prayer) is about. Today’s phrase is tough because it says, “Forgive us as we forgive”.

“As we forgive”... That one little word is packed with powerful implications. It is connecting two actions together. There is a correlation between the forgiveness we hope to receive from God and the forgiveness we give to those who are in debt to us. This is a strong and recurring theme in Jesus’ teaching and we better pay attention to it. So to help us understand a little more what Jesus is actually teaching us in this phrase from the prayer, let’s look at a parable he teaches in Matthew 18, starting with verse 21.

If you have your Bibles with you, you can open them and follow along; otherwise, just follow along on the screen or on your outline: (TNIV)

**21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?"**

**22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."**

Let’s pause here to set up the background a bit. At this point in Matthew, Jesus appears to be talking to just his disciples. Peter obviously feels like someone has wronged him, maybe repeatedly, and he’s asking Jesus just how far he is supposed to take this forgiveness thing before he can send Vinny and Vito out to take care of the problem. Now we assume that Peter knew the teaching of the Rabbi’s and that the answer was 3. The Rabbi’s taught that if someone did something wrong to Peter once and he forgives them. They do it two more times and he forgives them the second and third time. If it happens a fourth time, he is not obligated to forgive any more. It does not, however, give him permission to send in the Sicilians. So Peter is trying to look good to Jesus with this question because he doubles the Rabbi’s traditional answer and then adds one more for good measure. Jesus’ answer is pretty clear...that there is never a time to stop forgiving. And then Jesus illustrates with this story.

**23-23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt."**

Now we need to pause here for a minute two. The text actually reads 10,000 talents. Now a talent was a measure of weight that would equal about 75 lbs. It could have been of gold or silver. In any case, it was a fortune. In the whole region of Israel, from Galilee to below Jerusalem, the tax revenue collected for that entire region in one year was just over 1000 talents. Jesus wants us to pick up a few important things at this point;

1. This King is different than most kings. Kings don’t give out loans of this kind. This character of this king is one of mind-boggling generosity.
2. The debt is unpayable. It’s so massive that even the Bill Gates of his day could not have paid it. The servant could never, ever, repay it. The King would not get even close to the value of the loan back even by selling his servant, his wife, his children.

**26 "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27**

Of course, this guy is desperate. He’s throwing up a Hail Mary here. Look at the exact request here. “Be patient with me, he begged, and I will pay back everything.” Really? He’s going to repay it? I don’t think the King buys it, do you? This guy is still scamming...and he’s just trying to get off the hook. And all of Jesus’ listeners are anticipating what will happen next because they know the rule, “You owe, you pay!” So they’re waiting for the axe to fall on this guy when Jesus tells the next line of the story...

***The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.***

This is not just a curve here, this is a knuckler. No one saw this coming...it's so far from reality. Kings don't just let massive debts go unpaid. But as we've already learned, this is a generous and compassionate king, and he is moved with pity for this desperate, selfish, frightened fool. And he forgives the debt.

So let's think about this for a moment. Debts don't just disappear. Somebody has to take the loss. Who pays? The king pays. He's set in place a whole new system of debt management; you owe, I'll pay. This is the economy of grace. Do we know what grace is? Grace is that gift of God – a forgiveness and mercy we receive that we do not deserve and could never repay.

The king says, "I'll take the hit. I'll suffer the loss. I will take care of the whole price myself so you can go free." That's grace. The disciples are whispering to each other..."but this guy doesn't deserve it". And that's exactly what Jesus wants them to realize. No, he doesn't deserve it – and neither do you!

Jesus clearly wants us to identify with this foolish servant. Sometimes we think, "I'm a good person...I don't do this and I don't do that and I'm certainly not as bad as this guy." But the truth is that every one of us has run up an astronomical debt of sin that we can never repay. We're all trespassers, all debtors, all sinners. We don't deserve for that debt to be cancelled – we could never make things right no matter how long or hard we worked. Someone has to pay... and the King says, "I will cover it. I will make the payment." That's grace. It's amazing...and it saves foolish sinners like me.

Back to the story...

***28 "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. [9] He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.***

***'His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'***

***30 "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.***

Now, we'd expect that the forgiven servant you just dodged the bullet would be gracious and merciful in response to someone who owed him just a little bit of money...one hundred days wages. That would be a nice little story. But Jesus doesn't usually tell nice little stories. He tells stories about the way people really are. And like it or not, the truth is that we all do this! We get this huge gift of grace...God wipes out all of our mistakes - this mountain of moral debt – and then someone does one thing wrong to us- someone owes us- and we will cling onto it as tightly as the foolish servant who grabbed his debtor's neck. We want our justice, or vengeance. In some way, we want that person to pay the price, even though someone else paid ours.

Do you know what I'm talking about here, church? Who is it for you? Who is it and what did they do that makes you willing to forget that someone paid the price for your massive debt? We all have them. I can think of two people in my life that I have been trying to let go of my desire for vengeance. I think I'm past the anger, but you know there's a part of me that wouldn't mind if they suffered some small hardship. I'd be OK with that! And that's me being the foolish servant in this story. That's me not living in the economy of grace. That's me not willing to forgive even when I've been forgiven for so much. Forgiveness really is letting go of your right or desire for vengeance. That's all it is. It doesn't mean you have to trust them...you don't even have to like them to forgive them. You just need to be willing to let go of your desire for vengeance.

Sounds easy enough...yet we all have people running through our minds that we'd really like to forgive...but man it would feel good to wring their little necks. Back to the story...

***31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.***

***32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.***

***35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart."***

This last statement is very sobering and challenging! This goes back to the correlation phrase of the Lord's Prayer. Forgive us AS we forgive. Help us receive your grace and extend it to others. And I wonder from the way that Jesus told the story if this guy ever got grace at all. This foolish servant never really asked for grace in the first place. He asked for the "works" plan, remember. He said to the King, "I will pay for everything...I can handle this!...I can take care of this myself!" He never asked for grace and when grace was given there was no response, no expression of thanks.

So even though he was offered grace, I don't think he ever really got it. He just wanted to get off the hook. And there's a world of difference between wanting to be forgiven and just wanting to get off the hook.

When you want to be forgiven, you want to rebuild a relationship. You want to repent. You want to set right whatever you can, not to earn it, but because that's part of reconciliation. It's much different than just wanting to get off the hook. And I wonder sometimes if we don't really want forgiveness from God, we just want to get off the hook. And this is why Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us AS we forgive".

Jesus wants us to get grace! He wants us to experience the true freedom from our sins. He wants us to connect to this generous and compassionate and forgiving Dad in heaven. So if we seek that...ask for that...and that's grace, then when we receive it we will desire to give grace and forgiveness to others.

Conversely, if we can't give it, then we probably never really got it. Maybe we just wanted to get off the hook. Maybe we still think we can do it on our own.

Walter Wink writes about a couple. Their names were Grossmeyer, and they were on a kind of peace-making mission visiting some Polish Christians some years after World War II. They were there as emissaries of another group, and they asked these Polish Christians, "Would you be willing to meet with some Christians from West Germany? They want to ask for forgiveness for what Germany did during the war and begin a new relationship. Would you meet with them?" And there was a long silence.

Then one of the Polish Christians said, "What you ask is impossible. Every stone of Warsaw is soaked with Polish blood that they spilled. We cannot forgive." And the Grossmeyers understood the emotion. They finished the conversation, and they were getting ready to leave. But they decided to close the meeting by praying the Lord's Prayer.

And they knelt down and they prayed as Christians have in every country, through every century for 2,000 years now, these servants of the King, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Your kingdom come." They prayed until they got to these words, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." And then they just stopped and couldn't pray anymore. There was just dead silence, and they were deeply distressed.

And the one who said they couldn't forgive a few moments earlier said, "I must say yes because if I don't forgive, I can no longer say this prayer. I can no longer call myself a Christian if I don't forgive. Humanly speaking, I can't do it. But God will give us the strength." And 18 months later Polish Christians and West German Christians met in Vienna and began rebuilding a relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ.

And I wonder over the last 2,000 years how many marriages might have changed, how many friendships or families or churches might have been healed if when the Lord's Prayer was prayed we just stopped at that line and let the Holy Spirit work. And I think maybe the Holy Spirit has some work to do in this room today if you'll let him. So I'm going to ask that you let him.

So here's what I'd like to invite you to do with me today. I'd like for us to say the Lord's Prayer together. And we will stop when we complete the phrase..."forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We will have a few minutes of dead silence. And I want to ask you to do one or both of two things.

1. No longer be content with wanting to get off the hook with God. Seek his forgiveness and ask for the fullness of his grace in your life.

2. Be grateful that you have been forgiven so much...and ask for God's help in extending forgiveness to someone else.

Close with prayer.