

FORGIVE... AS WE FORGIVE

The Lord's Prayer Sermon Series, Week 4

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Luke 17:3-5, 23:32-34
Matthew 6:9-12, 18:21-22

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VIDEO

We know the Lord's Prayer, but do we really know it, understand it, and take it to heart like Jesus intended? We are spending 6-weeks with this important prayer because there is so much meaning in the specific words Jesus invited us to pray as well as in the general pattern of the prayer. Several of you have shared with me your experiences of "Wow, I never exactly thought about it that way!" Perhaps, all of you have found yourself thinking over these past three weeks, "maybe I don't know the Lord's Prayer as well as I thought I did."

So, let's begin with a recap! Three weeks ago, I began with **"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name" (Matthew 6:9)**. I shared with you the implications of addressing God with the inclusive word "our" instead of "my" and the relational word "Father" instead of something like "Holy God." By acknowledging God's dwelling place as "heaven," we were drawn to the awesomeness of a God who created an immense universe but who is also as close as our breathe. And then I shared with you that "hallowed be thy name" is not an acknowledging of God's holiness, but our request that God's name be revealed as holy to others through us, through our words and actions.

Two Sundays ago, I focused on the statement, **"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10)**. I emphasized that it's God's kingdom and will, not ours, that is to be done. By looking at Jesus who most fully embodied God's kingdom and will on earth, we concluded that heaven looks like love, peace, mercy and justice, and God's will is about tending to those who are hungry, thirsty, sick and without clothes and shelter. To pray for God's kingdom and will to come on earth is to acknowledge God's expectation that we roll up our sleeves and get to work.

Last Sunday, we dove deeply into the statement, **"Give us this day, our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11)**. I pointed out that the words "US" and "OUR" mean we are praying for all God's children. I shared with you that a better translation of the original Greek is **"Give us this day the essential bread we need to survive."** So, what this means is that those who do not have enough food to eat are praying for actual food. Those who have plenty of food are praying for those without and offering to help provide the food needed. And for all who believe that Jesus is "the bread of life" (John 6:35), we are also praying for Jesus to spiritually satisfy our hearts and help us do God's will.

Today, we consider **"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matthew 6:12)**. Apparently, Jesus thought we needed to pray for forgiveness every time we pray. Early Christians prayed the Lord's Prayer not just once a day but three times a day: morning, noon and evening. This three times a day pattern for praying is a long-held tradition and is still a commonly accepted pattern for faithful praying. Perhaps you are thinking, why do I need to

ask for forgiveness three times a day or even once a day? After all, I'm not so bad - I haven't stolen from anyone; I haven't cheated on my husband or wife. Why should I ask for forgiveness when I am basically a good person? Centuries ago, the church came up with a list of seven deadly sins for us to consider whenever we want to pat ourselves on the back for being so good. The list includes **lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, anger, envy, and pride.**

Sloth is not a word we commonly use these days, but it refers to being lazy, apathetic, indifferent. It's about seeing something that needs done and not doing it. So instead of taking care of something, we tell ourselves that someone else will take care of it. Gluttony is also a word we don't use a lot; it's defined as excessive indulgence. It's most often related to excessive eating and drinking, but might it not also refer to something like excessive energy consumption and the negative impact that has on others? When it comes to anger, clearly there's an awful lot of that going around these days, and lust, greed, envy and pride are not in short supply either.

As your pastor, and in any given week, I struggle with at least three or four of these sins. What about you, how many do you struggle with regularly in thought, word or deed? Remember, Jesus made it clear that sin is not just about what we do, it's also about what we say and even what we think. When you think, say and do that which you should not think, say and do, you are actively engaging in **"sins of commission."** But there are also **"sins of omission."** These are the good things you fail to do but should do. Everyday there are acts of kindness, generosity and service that God is calling you to do, but you either fail to notice or choose to ignore those opportunities. Between our daily sins of commission and omission, there is much that needs to be forgiven. That is exactly why Jesus included a statement about forgiveness in his prayer. If you think you are not in need of daily forgiveness, then clearly the sin of pride has taken control.

Thankfully, every time you and I pray for God to forgive us our trespasses, debts, sins, we do so assured that God "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). Because of Jesus, you need never question God's love for you and God's desire to forgive you. When my kids were growing up sometimes their behavior and choices disappointed me, and yet it was through the eyes of love that I always saw them. I never had to think twice about forgiving them. It was easy for me to put my arms around them and forgive them because I love them. That's how it is with God.

Now I know, you are wondering why trespasses, debts, sins? Which is it? Last week, I reminded you that Jesus spoke Aramaic, but the Gospels were written in Greek. Sometimes when you take a word from one language it's not always easy to find a word that means the exact same thing in another language. Matthew has **"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (Mt. 6:12).** Luke has **"Forgive us our sins..." (Lk. 11:4).** Each of those gospel writers chose a different Greek word. And then in Matthew's further commentary about forgiveness he chose yet another word when he said, **"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt. 6:14-15).** Debts, trespasses and sins basically mean the same thing and clearly they

were used interchangeably, but there are distinct nuances to each word that make them a little different. I could easily take 30 minutes or more diving into the details of those differences, but I'm going to leave out some of the details and do it in much less time, because I know you already have soup on your mind.

The Greek word that translates as "sin" refers to missing the mark. It is an archery term. **So, if we try shooting at a bullseye, we know we need to go straight to hit it.** But sometimes we veer to the side, come up short, or overshoot the bullseye. Do you ever fall short, veer off course, fail to live up to the gospel ideal? The answer is yes; daily, in one way or another, we stray from God's straight path because we fail to follow Jesus' example and do God's will.

The Greek word that translates as "trespasses" refers to our infringing on someone else's rights. **When we think of trespassing it's often because we've seen signs like this...** The sign makes clear that you do not have the right to be someplace when that place belongs to someone else, and if you choose to infringe on someone else's rights then the result is punishment. In our lives we are routinely violating and offending one another which means we are violating and offending God. It's not our right to say and do that which hurts others, but we do it anyways – either we do it on purpose or accidentally. Adam and Eve violated God when they trespassed and ate from the one tree they were told not to eat from.

The Greek word translated as "debts" and "debtors" refers to owing someone else something like money. Jesus used this word a lot because the working-class people he taught, knew what it meant to borrow. Most people in that day lived payday to payday, whether that payday was daily, weekly, or annually like when a crop was harvested. Almost no one had money to spare for a savings account so when paydays yielded less than what was needed or there was an unexpected expense, they had to borrow. When that money came due and they couldn't pay, one of three things happened. First, they begged for more time and hopefully the one they borrowed from was merciful. Secondly, they were enslaved and had to work off the debt that way. Thirdly, they were thrown into debtor's prison. The only way to get out of prison was to find someone to pay off your debt. That person was called a redeemer, and the process was called redemption. We, of course, know Jesus as our redeemer. Out of compassion and mercy He paid a debt he did not owe to set us free from our debts of piled up sin.

We sin against God, we offend God, and we are indebted to God. We do all of this every time we do it to others, so Jesus tells us to ask God daily to forgive our sins, trespasses and debts. It would be nice if the sentence about forgiveness in the Lord's prayer ended with our admitting that we need to be forgiven? After all, is it really that difficult for us to admit that we have missed the mark, offended God and are indebted to God? It's quite obvious we have, and it's really wonderful to know that God loves and forgives us. But wouldn't you know, Jesus doesn't stop there.

Join me in saying today's statement and give emphasis to the capital letter words, **"Forgive us our debts, AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS!"** (Matthew 6:12) Yikes! Do you hear what you are saying? Are you comfortable with the last part of that statement? Are you holding onto any grudges? We believe that God is good and kind, gracious and merciful we want to grab hold of that. But apparently,

God wants us to be more merciful and gracious. Why? Because when we extend grace, the world is positively impacted, and earth looks more like heaven. So much of what's wrong and broken with the world is directly related to the grudges and resentments that we hold onto. Clearly, this happens in politics, but also in marriages, friendships, and it is why we go to war with one another. We hold on when we are supposed to let go. Forgiveness is about letting go not getting even.

So, Jesus says, "to the degree you are unwilling to forgive others is the same degree to which God will not forgive you." Wow, that doesn't sound very God-like! It could be that Jesus is using hyperbole to make a strong about forgiveness. But do we really expect God to forgive us daily of multiple offenses and debts, and yet we are unwilling to forgive others? In Matthew 18, Peter asks Jesus, "**How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?**" (Mt. 18:21). Jews had debated this issue for years, and somewhere along the line an agreement was reached that three was the right number of times to forgive. Peter had been with Jesus long enough to know that number needed to be higher, so he doubled it and added one. He probably thought doing so made himself look especially gracious and forgiving. But then Jesus said, "**Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times**" (Mt. 18:22). That number basically means unlimited forgiveness, and the point is that God extends to you extravagant mercy, so God expects you to do the same.

Are you someone who regularly brings up past grievances? Are you someone who refuses to let go? Every time you pray the Lord's prayer it's like God is throwing your unwillingness to forgive back in your face and challenging you to forgive. Of course, we have all been wronged along the way, and some have been wronged so seriously that it's very hard to let go. Forgiveness does not mean what happened was okay. There are things that will always be wrong. And whereas forgiveness sets that person who wronged you free, it's just as much about setting yourself free – free from the deep harm and heavy burden of anger, bitterness, resentment and retaliation. To forgive is to open yourself to the experience of healing.

Scarlett Lewis whose son Jessie at 6 years old was murdered along with 19 of his classmates and 6 educators at Sandy Hook Elementary school in December of 2012 thought forgiveness impossible immediately following her son's death. And yet, she chose forgiveness even as soon as her son's funeral when she encouraged everyone to change their angry thoughts into loving thoughts. Not long after Jesse's funeral, she launched the "Choose love Movement" which eventually became a non-profit organization that encourages the healing power of love. What she did reminds me of what Jesus did as he looked out from the cross at those who had humiliated, mocked, tortured and crucified him, and prayed, "**Father, forgive them...**" (Lk 23:34).

Are you carrying anger and resentment for someone who wronged you in the past? Maybe the offense happened a long time ago, perhaps it happened recently. Can you name someone? Ask God to help you forgive and let go. Whenever we ask God for forgiveness, it's important to remember that our forgiving of others is an integral part of our forgiveness and our experiencing of healing. And now as a community of Jesus followers, let us seek forgiveness by first confessing our sins, trespasses, debts to God. Let us pray together..