

Praying for Forgiveness

Every Sunday we recite together the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus has given as a model for our praying. Today we'll look at the petition for forgiveness, which is as important as praying for daily bread and for all of life's provisions.

Matthew 6:9-12

⁹ *“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.*

¹⁰ *Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

¹¹ *Give us this day our daily bread.*

¹² ***And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.***

Because I've often displayed my old sinful nature throughout my long life as a Christian and my ministry tenure as a pastor, I've given many people the opportunity to practice forgiveness toward me. Some haven't always been so forthcoming with their forgiveness. I can recall a deacon in a previous pastorate who refused to forgive me despite my effort to seek his forgiveness and reconciliation with me.

This deacon was an insurance salesman in our city and I had inquired with him about his life insurance policies and told him I would consider his offer before I made a purchase that I thought was best for our family. My “unpardonable sin” against him was to eventually purchase a policy from another company, which I thought he would understand and accept, even though I knew he wouldn't be happy about my decision. Although he made no counter offer or attempt to tell me why mine was the wrong decision, he angrily told me in no uncertain terms that he would never forgive me. And, as far as I know, he kept his word. Years later he suffered a stroke and resultant dementia, and probably couldn't remember my transgression and his vow, and so his widow asked me to conduct his funeral, at which I was unable to speak confidently about the condition of his soul, having no assurance that this church member and church officer was with Christ. My focus in that funeral was to speak to his family, a few friends (his temper had alienated him from many others) and business associates, in general terms about the hope we have in Christ.

Just as we're to pray for our daily bread, our material needs and also for God's daily grace, for ourselves and others, so we're to pray for our daily forgiveness, for ourselves and for others. Our need to be forgiven and to forgive is just as great as is our need for the provision of God's general and special grace. And we should crave for the Father's forgiveness as much as a starving person craves for a nurturing and satisfying meal. Jesus teaches us to pray for forgiveness and also spells out, in no uncertain terms, the inviolable principle of the necessity of forgiving others in order to be forgiven by the heavenly Father. Since life is all about relationships, one of our most basic needs is to be forgiven by God and others and to be forgiving in turn. One of the most controversial aspects of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth was his authority to forgive sins. Obviously, since God alone has the authority to forgive sins, Jesus was demonstrating his deity as the eternal Son of God. (Mk. 2:1-12).

We may call upon Abba Father to forgive us because we, as remade children of God, have received his amazing grace and complete forgiveness for our sins. All of our guilt has been lifted and removed from us and we're made righteous in the sight of God

because we're now in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). By grace alone we're justified (Eph. 2:8f), pronounced "not guilty" before Holy God. We're given an everlasting relationship with our dear Abba Father.

But we're to pray for our ongoing need for forgiveness. Although we're forgiven and given a right standing before Holy God, we nevertheless still have our old sinful nature. Being imperfect and sin-prone creatures, we thus need every day to confess our sins and cry to God for his forgiveness. As John says, "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*" (1 Jn. 1:8f).

Evidence that we're God's children and have received his amazing grace is our desire to maintain fellowship with God through the daily forgiveness of our sins. Sin can't break our eternal relationship with God but can interrupt our fellowship with him. This is why he commands his children to confess (agree with God about) our sins, and then forsake them continually, so we'll maintain sweet, uninterrupted fellowship with our Father and Lord Jesus.

And so Jesus teaches us to pray daily, "forgive us our sins." Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer uses the word "debt" for sin, which is the natural Aramaic word, which Jesus would have spoken. Our sin incurred for us a debt which we owe to God, which he paid for us through Christ's death on the cross. Daily we acknowledge before Holy God that we're sinners and always will be indebted to him, not only for what we've done to transgress his law and violate his will and dishonor his name, but also what we've failed to do to repay this impossible debt we owe to him.

What one of us can say at the end of every day that I've loved God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength and also have loved my neighbor, anyone and everyone I saw with a need (Mk. 12:28-34)? Every day we sin, not just by our acts of rebellion, and our speech and thoughts that aren't acceptable in God's sight (Ps. 19:14); we sin also by continuing to chalk up a debt of indifference to those in need, which amounts to indifference to the suffering Christ (Matt. 25:43). Thus, we need to pray for God's continual forgiveness and that he'll daily cleanse us and wipe clean the debt we chalk up every day (1 Jn. 1:9).

This fifth petition in the Prayer contains a critically important principle; and lest we miss the point, Jesus adds an explanation (vv.14 and 15). The only way we can receive God's forgiveness is through repentance of sin and faith in Christ Jesus. And repentance, the attitude of a changed mind and the action of a new direction, is not a one-time act. Repentance becomes the way of life as we confess daily our sins and seek to grow in true Jesus-likeness and freedom from sin which is through a life in the Spirit (Rom. 8:1ff).

I've given numerous occasions for people to practice their forgiveness toward me. There've been times when people came to me and expressed their willingness to forgive me when I was totally oblivious to the fact that I had offended or sinned against them. Perhaps it was a careless action, word or a failure to respond to a need. So, I found it necessary then to apologize for my actions or failure and also for my ignorance that I had offended and thus sinned against them.

With repentance and God's free but costly grace and forgiveness, we now have grateful hearts, and we realize that a forgiven heart is a forgiving heart. As disciples of Jesus, we forgive others in the awareness of how much he has forgiven us. This is what Paul meant when he admonishes the church to, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph. 4:32). How can we, who've been forgiven so much, not forgive those who've sinned against us? This is the principle of having been forgiven and being forgiving in turn. It's a spiritual principle as normal and should be as predictable as the law of gravity.

As we heard in our first Scripture reading, Jesus gives us a powerful "how much more" argument in his Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt. 18:21-35). Jesus tells this story in response to the question, "How many times should we forgive a brother or sister who sins against us?" Jesus says there must be no limit to forgiveness ("seventy-seven times" or "seventy times seventy" express an unlimited amount), because we'll always be in debt to God for our sin debt. No one can ever sin against us as much as we have against the Father. In this parable Jesus spoke about a man who had a colossal debt that warranted the sale of himself, his family, and all he had to pay his debt. When he begged the king to be merciful, this huge debt was cancelled and the man set free.

This same man who had been forgiven the colossal debt discovered that one of his colleagues owed him a miniscule debt. He threatened the debtor with his life, as he choked him, if he didn't repay the debt. When this man's debtor of the tiny amount begged for mercy, the man had this poor guy tossed into prison for his insignificant debt. When the master heard about the actions of this unmerciful servant, whom he had forgiven the huge debt, he was outraged. He cried in judgment against him, "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" And angrily, he had this scoundrel thrown in jail to be tortured until he paid back his huge debt. Jesus then concluded with, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (35).

When we pray for forgiveness, we acknowledge that God has in Christ forgiven us a huge debt we could never repay. Only the blood of our suffering Savior could pay our sin debt. No one could ever have a debt owed us that could compare with the debt we owe to God. If God has been so amazingly generous toward us, "how can we raise a fuss over a few dollars owed to us?" When God has forgiven us for hitting him with a club, we should manage to put up with a few little pinpricks that others inflict on us (Thielicke).

We can never earn God's forgiveness. Rather, our forgiving others is evidence that we've been forgiven; and if we're unwilling to forgive those who seek our forgiveness, we show we haven't received forgiveness ourselves. A truly forgiving heart is a truly forgiven heart (Wilkins). Grace-receiving people are grace-giving people.

This petition has been called by Augustine "a terrible prayer"—terrible because of this principle that the refusal to forgive is the refusal to be forgiven. We can paraphrase Jesus to say that we're to pray, "Forgive us our sin debts *only as we forgive those who have sin debts against us.*" In other words, "Don't forgive me if I don't forgive others." Those can be terrible words of self-condemnation, rejecting the forgiveness of Christ.

The great Puritan pastor Thomas Watson said, “A man can go to hell for not forgiving as for not believing”; and CH Spurgeon, proclaimed, “Unless you have forgiven others, you read your own death warrant when you repeat the Lord’s Prayer.” In other words, we’re praying, “Forgive us *only* as we forgive others.”

Jesus’ critics were theologically correct when they noted that if he were not the divine Messiah, as indeed he claimed to be, he would be blaspheming in declaring the paralytic’s sins were forgiven. “*Why does this fellow (Jesus) talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?*” (Mk. 2:7). Jesus revealed he had the authority to forgive, which was illustrated by a more obvious demonstration, his power to enable the lame man to walk. When Jesus asked, “Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’” he was saying that forgiveness would not be cheap.

Nowhere do we see the likeness of God any more clearly than when Jesus was suffering and dying on the cross he cried, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*” (Lk. 23:34). What amazing grace was poured out on us through Christ’s intercession, which he continues to make for us (Heb. 7:25)! When Alexander Pope said: “To err is human; to forgive is divine,” he probably spoke more than he personally knew (Buttrick). Stephen was speaking in the power of the Spirit, when as he was being stoned to death he prayed a similar prayer to that of Christ from the cross: “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*” (Acts 7:60).

Only God can enable us to forgive even our enemies, and in so doing we reveal his power, as did Elizabeth Elliot and others, who’ve forgiven their enemies in powerful ways. I saw great power to forgive in a missionary couple in my church in Brussels, who had to return to the US following the horrific murder of their daughter in the US. Ron and Renee were given the opportunity to speak directly to one of the murderers. Ron told the young woman, serving a life sentence in prison, that God loved her and wanted to forgive her, and Ron simply encouraged her to find peace with God. In ourselves we can’t love our enemies and those who’ve hurt us and those we love, such as the many victims of the mass shootings, which have become almost an epidemic. But Jesus gives grace for healing and the ability to forgive the worst offenders.

My greatest loss and trauma in ministry was the loss of a nineteen year pastorate of a church I had always considered the church of my dreams. Due to my loss in a power struggle with opponents who had resisted my leadership for most of my tenure, I offered my resignation rather than persist in a battle that would have further divided the church. I was devastated and despondent. A medical doctor friend in Oklahoma City invited us to spend a weekend in their home, and he gave me a small book about forgiveness, which cited how Job prayed for his “miserable comforter” friends, after which God fully restored Job’s life. Difficult as it was, I prayed for the men who had led in my demise. I actually began to forgive them, by God’s grace.

Daily we pray for our forgiveness (1 Jn. 1:9) and for those who’ve sinned against us with their relatively tiny little pinpricks. We all need God’s forgiveness, and therefore must forgive those who’ve sinned against us, no matter what.

Dear Father in the heavens, “Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others” (*The Message*, Peterson).