

Psalm 32
Matthew 6:9-15

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
August 23, 2020

Forgive Us...As We Forgive

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm today celebrates God's forgiving love. Yes, sin is devastating, but confessed sin is a means of re-establishing relationship between us and God. Listen to these words from Psalm 32...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson we hear again the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Today our focus is on the three verses which have to do with forgiveness. God is affirmed to be forgiving, but expects that we also will be forgiving towards others. Listen to these words from Matthew 6:9-15...

Sermon

Last week we considered the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread." Next time in this series we will look at the issues of temptation and evil. But today we want to focus on this fifth petition regarding forgiveness: "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

With this petition we come to that phrase in the Lord's Prayer at which, when gathered in an ecumenical setting, we are prone to hesitate. Will they say debts, trespasses, or sins? Presbyterian minister William Carl, now President of Pittsburg Theological Seminary, tells the story of what happened prior to a funeral service that he was to conduct:

I came into the back of the chapel at Sparkman Funeral Home and the organist was just playing along the way they do—funeral home organists can play anything with their eyes closed or while turning and talking to you at the same time. This one was no different; she just kept on playing as I told her about the service. When I told her that the soloist would be singing the Lord’s Prayer, without missing a beat she asked, “Methodist or Presbyterian?”

Thomas Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer*, published in 1549, was the primary liturgical source for Anglicans, Episcopalians, and United Methodists. It followed William Tyndale’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, which mistakenly translates the Greek word for “debts” as “trespasses.” That word for trespasses *is* found in verse 14 of Matthew 6, which is the verse after The Lord’s Prayer:

For if you forgive others their trespasses,
your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But not in verse 12 of the prayer. The Scots however, followed the King James Version which correctly translates the word as “debts.” Both mean we have done wrong, we have sinned.

And what this word “debts” enables us to understand is that “we are,” in the words of Karl Barth, “in default in our relations with God; we owe him a debt which we have not paid.” Why? Because we have not done our duty. We have not kept his commandments. We have sinned and done wrong.

Now “sin” is a word that has come on hard times in modern society. We are much more comfortable with mistake, error, or misunderstanding. As accepting and affirming of people as Jesus was, he was not afraid to use the word “sin.” He knew that we are made in the image of God, that every human being has worth, that all are prospects for the kingdom of heaven. But he also knew that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” He knew that we must make choices as to whether we will follow God, hallow his name, seek his kingdom; or allow sin to dictate our lives. And sometimes we have made bad choices.

Some might respond, “Well, this talk of sin doesn’t really include me. After all, I’m in church today. Surely the prayer is talking about the murderer, the thief, the drug dealer, the terrorist.” Therein do we succumb to one of the seven deadly sins—the sin of pride. No, those included here are all church-goers who have ever placed something or someone before God; who have been less than good stewards of their time, talent, or treasure; who have ever humiliated their husband or wife, child or parent, or someone else.

Is there anyone who will dare to claim that he has never crossed the line that divides truth and falsehood? Is there anyone who has never said an unkind or discourteous word? Have we never slipped up and done that which we would not, or failed to do that which we would?

(Rm. 17:9)

The truth is we have all missed the mark, we have all come short of God’s intention for us. We have sinned and we are in debt to God. God has given us life itself. From God flows the blessings of family, friends, church, health, and well-being. Food, clothes, and shelter. God is the author of our salvation, the guarantor of eternal life. When we ask God to forgive our debts, we are asking God to forgive the way we have squandered the blessings he has so graciously bestowed upon us.

“Forgive us our debts.” How badly we need it! How sick and desperate we often are until we have it! As the Psalmist said, “While I kept silence, my body wasted away.”

The words spoken in anger.

The hopes dashed.

The people hurt.

The chances missed.

The years wasted.

We need forgiveness the way Peter did when he denied he knew Jesus, the way the mocking people around the Cross did, the way the dying thief did. “Happy are those whose sin is forgiven.”

The Word of God through the prophet Isaiah is:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. (1:16-17)

In other words, repent. And repentance is not just a matter of feeling sorry or guilty for our sins; it also involves turning away from them. There is no point in a man praying for forgiveness for having beaten his daughter in a drunken rage, if he has no intention of dealing with his drinking problem.

Then there is that assurance of God’s forgiveness,

...though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

This is the healing Word of God—that his forgiveness opens the channel of his love, grace, and renewal. For he separates our sin from us as far as the East is from the West. (Ps. 103:12) And does not remember them anymore. (Isa. 43:25) We are given a clean slate, a new beginning.

An important point in this sermon on forgiveness is this: we need to forgive ourselves.

Again, William Carl says:

One of the hardest things in the world is to accept God’s forgiveness. Even though the minister may stand before us every Sunday and offer the Declaration Pardon: “In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.” But the truth is that God does accept us, does forgive us, and does want us to get on with our lives. To know that through Jesus Christ all our debts are canceled, you only have to accept God’s forgiveness. But you won’t be able to do that unless you’re willing to forgive others.

One of God's gifts to Israel was the concept of a jubilee year, described in the twenty-fifth chapter of Leviticus. Every fiftieth year, which of course occurred but once in most people's lives, there was to be a great festival of redemption and renewal among the people. All debts would be forgiven, those who had fallen into servitude would be released, and everyone would be free to return to his original home, regardless of the obstacles that might have blocked the way for forty-nine years.

There is something of this jubilee flavor about forgiveness in the kingdom of God. All debts are cancelled. All impediments to fellowship are removed. The difference is there is no waiting for 50 years. Therefore Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our debts."

But then he adds, "As we forgive our debtors." William Barclay says the literal meaning is, "Forgive us our sins *in proportion* as we forgive those who have sinned against us." Human forgiveness and divine forgiveness are thus interlinked. What are we to make of this? Is the Lord's Prayer teaching us that our pardon was not wholly won for us by Christ, but is in fact something which we earn by forgiving others?

This is not what Jesus was talking about. Rather he was telling us that we cannot *experience* forgiveness unless we are forgiving.

General Oglethorpe, to whom the young John Wesley was chaplain in the colony of Georgia, once said to his chaplain with great pride, "I never forgive." Wesley replied, "Then I hope, sir, you never sin."

The unforgiving person cannot really believe in forgiveness.

When Robert Louis Stevenson lived in the South Sea Islands, it was his custom to conduct family worship each morning for his household. And these services he always concluded with the Lord's Prayer. One morning in the middle of the prayer he rose from his knees and left the room. His wife hurried after him, thinking he was ill. "Is there anything

wrong?” she asked. “Only this,” said Stevenson, “I am not fit to pray the Lord’s Prayer today.” No one is really fit to pray the Lord’s Prayer if an unforgiving spirit holds sway in his heart.

In one of the legends that grew up around Leonardo Da Vinci’s painting, “The Last Supper,” the artist is said to have painted his enemy’s face on the shoulders of Judas. The story goes that he then could not conjure up the face of Christ. But when he forgave his enemy and painted out the insult, he saw Christ’s face in a dream that night.

St. Frances of Assisi said, “It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.”

How often am I to forgive? Just seven, like Peter thought? No, seventy times seven, or without limit. The Beatitude is “Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy.” By forgiving others we open the door for God’s mercy, love, grace, and peace—his blessing.

Here in this model prayer we are taught by our Lord to follow his own example as he from that lonely, awful cross prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” As Paul wrote to the members of the church in Ephesus:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Eph. 4:31-32)

Every Sunday most Presbyterians affirm their faith through the Apostle’s Creed. And in that affirmation, we say that we believe “in the forgiveness of sins.” Therefore, fellow debtors, fellow sinners, let us seek the forgiveness of God. And let us not block the experience of that forgiveness by refusing to forgive others or to forgive ourselves. Through forgiveness let us open the door to the new life that Christ would give us.

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Amen. And Amen.