

Teach Us to Pray sermon series
Forgive As We Are Forgiven
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We continue our sermon series on the Lord's prayer today with the acknowledgement that, just because we say it every week, we don't necessarily know what we're praying. There's a depth and power to this prayer that dissipates with too much familiarity. That's why it's good to listen to the prayer through the lens of little kids when they are first learning it.

For example, did you know God has a name? As one child prayed, "Our Father, who art in Heaven, Harold be thy name." Hey Harold! Another child offered this sage request: "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us some Email." Hey, kid, you may not wish for that once you actually get an email address. And then this one from a child who makes the prayer even better: "Forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets."

Our verse today is the one about forgiveness, the one that asks God to forgive us and makes the claim that we are forgiving others. Ugh. Probably the hardest line in the prayer. Can we start by naming the fact that forgiveness is an outrageous act that goes against human nature? I believe our nature is revenge. When someone hits us, our instinct is to hit back. We see that early in the Bible in what's called the Law of Lamech. Way back in Genesis 4, right after Cain and Abel, we learn that a man named Lamech was wronged by one of his neighbors, who probably put trash in his basket. So Lamech says, "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold."

That's one of the reasons God gives the law to the Israelites about justice. You know the "eye for an eye" part, but listen to the whole thing: "When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." While that may sound barbaric to us, God was trying to tone down the human desire for revenge to make sure our vengeance is commensurate with the original crime. But notice, forgiveness is not even listed as an option.

Then Jesus comes along and changes the whole game. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes this radical statement: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." Jesus removes revenge as an option for being wronged or hurt and instead gives radical forgiveness as a model.

And then, we have the passage read earlier, when Peter comes to Jesus. He tries to show Jesus just how merciful he is by suggesting a number of times to forgive someone – seven – that he feels is generous. But Jesus has something better in mind. Some translations of this passage have Jesus responding, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy times seven times." That's 490 times, if you're keeping score. Which you shouldn't be doing, which is the whole point of this scripture. Jesus isn't giving us permission to get to our 491st moment of forgiveness and go, "Aha! Not THIS time!" Jesus is telling Peter that any number he thinks of is too low.

Which is probably why Jesus made sure to include this line in the Lord's Prayer. Because it starts with "...and forgive us...", that makes me think it is linked the line before it about giving us this day our daily bread. Part of our daily sustenance is the forgiveness God offers us, because each day we do something to violate our covenant with God. God's mercies are new every morning, a spiritual diet of grace and forgiveness for our sins...or debts...or trespasses.

OK, let's clear that up. Which one is it? Well, depends on which translation you read. The Greek word is *hamartia*, which means to miss a mark, like an arrow missing its target. Each translated version of this word has its own nuance of meaning. To sin is to miss the target of loving God and loving our neighbors. "Trespasses" is a later addition the prayer and carries with it the imagery of overstepping a boundary, of violating another person's space.

"Debts" has a little more cultural relevance. Back in Jesus' day, it was almost impossible to get out of a debt owed to someone. Your two choices were either to enter into indentured servitude to work off the debt, or to languish in debtor's prison until someone paid off your debt for you. To forgive a debt would have been a huge gift to the person who was indebted. So, when we use "debts," we are asking God to forgive the wrongs we have done instead of subjecting us to the penalties we owe.

The bigger issue here is not whether to say, "sins," "debts," or "trespasses." The bigger issue is that many people who say this prayer every week don't consider themselves sinners, debtors, or trespassers. And the even bigger issue is that those of us who pray this prayer have difficulty living out the promise to forgive those who sin against us, because our human nature bends toward vengeance.

Why is forgiveness so difficult for us? In order to understand the challenge and power of forgiveness, we have to understand what it is and what it isn't. First, forgiveness is not condoning the behavior of the other person. It doesn't mean excusing the action or pretending it wasn't bad. If someone wrongs you, it's still wrong, even if you forgive them. We are called to be forgiving, not to be doormats.

Forgiving is also not forgetting. In some instances, that would be irresponsible. A lot of times we can't forget what someone has done to us, which is exactly why we need to forgive. Forgiveness also doesn't mean reconciliation. It's great if it does, but sometimes the person we need to forgive is dead, or moved away, or no longer in our lives. Or maybe they're not interested in reconciliation.

That's what forgiveness is not. So what is this forgiveness we pray about? The Greek word is *aphiemi*, which means to let go or release. And when we first hear that, we probably think it means letting the other person go from the debtor's prison in our mind, releasing them from the penalty of the sin they committed against us. It feels quite magnanimous to say, "Even though you have terribly wronged me, I am releasing you by forgiving you."

But we know better, don't we? Forgiving the other person has nothing to do with the other person. What's being let go is not them, but us. We're letting go of our pride, our anger, our desire for revenge. And that's scary, because that means we no longer have any power over the other person. After all, one of the great benefits of having an enemy is that you get to look good by comparison, right? Mary Gordon wrote, "To forgive is to give up the exhilaration of one's own assailable rightness." That assailable rightness can feel exhilarating, right? One writer said, "Of all the deadly sins, resentment is the most fun." But the consequences of not forgiving can be self-inflicted wounds.

To forgive is to admit that not all the mistakes that were made were by the other person. It means seeing the other person as more than their errors. It means admitting they are fallible

human being. They make mistakes, at times they are weak, insensitive, confused, and in pain. They're faulty, fragile, lonely, needy, and emotionally imperfect. In other words, it means admitting they're just like us. Writer Anne Lamott said, "I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of the Christians who is heavily into forgiveness – that I'm one of the other kind. But even though it was funny, and actually true, it started to be too painful to stay that way. In fact, not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die."

Remember, Jesus talks a lot about forgiveness in the gospels. He forgave tax collectors and adulterous women and his own disciple who denied him. At the Last Supper, when Jesus breaks the bread, he tells his friends that this represents his body, which would be broken for the forgiveness of sins. He even forgave the people who sentenced him to die. From the cross he prays, "Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing." If Jesus can do that, maybe there's hope that we can forgive those who have put trash in our baskets.

Jesus talks a lot about forgiveness, not only because he knows it's hard for us, but also because he knows it's the only hope we have for finding peace in this world. As long as we hold grudges and wish ill will, we stifle the beloved community of God we are called to model. That's why true forgiveness is not just about looking backward to the exoneration of guilt; it's about looking forward to the restoration of community. It's not forgetting the past; it's making the bold statement that our future does not have to be defined by our past. It's saying to the other person, "I love you more than this moment. You are more than this wrong. There is more to our story than this hurt." Because that's what God is saying to us each time we come to this table. "Forgive us our sins..."

One author wrote, "Forgiveness is richer and higher and harder and more shocking than we usually think." We can be so focused on justice, on retribution, on an eye for an eye. But the reality is people will hurt us, they will disappoint us, they will not see things from our perspective. And we have the choice of either holding on those rocks as they grow heavier and heavier, or of letting them go. Life is heavy enough, isn't it? Forgive us, God, as we try our best to forgive each other. Let's empty our trash baskets and instead let our cups overflow with God's daily mercies.