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Title: Teach Us to Pray: Forgive us, as we forgive

Date: March 10 & 11, 2018

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Scripture: [Psalm 103:8-13](#)

Text: [Matthew 18:21-22](#)

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We are at the fifth petition of The Lord's Prayer and I warn you, it may be the most difficult to pray. Maybe it is why it is the longest of all six petitions. If you thought we got personal last week, you haven't seen anything yet.

We are looking carefully at the Lord's Prayer, taking it apart, examining the words and petitions to unleash its power. We've repeated the words out loud as we've taken it apart. We'll do that again and can practice with a quick review. First, let do the salutation. Repeat after me. 'Our Father in heaven.' It is more than a simple opening. It acknowledges our adoption, an intimate address to our Abba God, while at the same time, calling upon the power of the creator of heaven and earth, the Lord God Almighty.

Then the prayer is divided into two sets of petitions, a set of three for God and a set of three about us. Jesus teaches us to first pray about God's program and plan before we address our wants and needs. Let's say together the first three together. 'Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done.' They are about God's name, God's reign and God's will and the qualifier that separates our petitions from God's petitions is connected to all three, on earth as it is in heaven. May your name be holy, on earth as it is in heaven. May your kingdom come, on earth like it is in heaven. May your will be done, here on earth, as it is up there in heaven. May up there come down here.

Our set of petitions are about our hunger, guilt, and fear. Let's say the hunger petition together which we studied last week. Repeat after me. "Give us our daily bread." It seems like a straight forward prayer, like a prayer for a loaf of Wonder Bread and perhaps some peanut butter and jelly to spread on it. But when we unpacked it, we discovered that it is more than a request to feed your individual, physical hunger. It is also about the physical hunger of the world, the spiritual hunger that every human has and the final elimination of all our hunger when we sit with Jesus at the great banquet in heaven.

Now, we come to the fifth petition about our guilt. Let's take it apart. 'Forgive us.'

One of the greatest things about being a Christian is forgiveness, isn't it? It is so wonderful. You come to church sing everybody's favorite, Amazing Grace. It's this big sin dump. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." All of my chains of sin are broken, the new version goes. I've been set free. Put in an hour and then go home a new person, forgiven, right?

In truth, it doesn't work that way. Forgiveness is tough. The German-American theologian Paul Tillich many years ago said, "One of the hardest things to accept is the fact that we are forgiven, that God is ready for us to move on with our lives." Jesus was sent to die for our sins so that we can move on with our lives so that we can experience his amazing grace. Most of us eventually get there although some never do. A few years ago, a mental health research study indicated that 75% of Americans eventually do acknowledge that God forgives them for their past sins. That leaves a fourth with questions, 25% wondering about their sin.¹ It is my experience the number might be greater. Or at the very least, for most of us, acknowledging forgiveness in the head is very different than accepting in the heart. There is always that nagging feeling of guilt. If we are forgiven already, why then do we have to pray, "Forgive us?"

When we pray, forgive us, we acknowledge that we are sinners and have fallen short of the grace of God. We come to admit our failure and pray with David, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin" (Psalm 51:1-2).

The principle behind this is you can't accept something you don't think you need. Even though we hear far too often in our personal lives and in the public sector, "I have nothing to be forgiven for", that very statement is an indictment. John says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8) Self-deception is, in and of itself, a sin. But John goes on to say, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

When we pray, "forgive us" our sins, we accept our identity as sinners. We come to put aside all self-deception and admit who we are. One of my friends says it is like going to bankruptcy court. As the court begins, before the cases are heard, the bailiff cries out, "All debtors rise."² That's us. To

pray, "Forgive us" is to rise collectively and say, "Guilty as charged!" It is to say with David, "...I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me." (Psalm 51: 3). Do you? For what do you need to be forgiven? I think we'd be well benefited by taking a good 10-minute time-out every week, at this point of the prayer, and think about what we are praying for because you can't accept something you don't think you need. Say "Forgive us" in that context, acknowledging your sin and what you need forgiveness for. Say it with me now. "Forgive us."

Now, add to forgive us... what do you want to add? We've come to the stumble word. What should it be? Trespasses? Debts? Sins? Let do a little informal survey. How many first prayed the Lord's Prayer used the word, "Trespasses?" How many grew up with "Debts." How many "sins." I grew up sinning and I'm still sinning." Our stumble word is trespass/debts/sin.

There is a reason why we stumble over the word. Most people think that the first English Bible was the King James Version, published in 1611. Actually, there were earlier translations and one was by William Tyndale in 1525. He started the trespass phenomenon when he got to Matthew 6:12. Instead of translating the Greek word for debts as debts, he made a mistake and used the word, 'trespasses', "Forgive us our trespasses..." (Matthew 6:14a) and continued the mistake by saying "trespass against us." Twenty years later, the first Anglican Book of Common Prayer was produced, and it used Tyndale's translation of "trespass." And that very Book of Prayer influenced Anglicans, Episcopalians, and Methodists and those from that branch of the church tree pray trespass.

But ninety years later, when a group scholars created the King James Version, they corrected the error, trespasses became debts and churches like the Presbyterian Church, followed accordingly praying "Forgive us our debts". Where did the whole sin thing come from? The gospel of Luke. "Forgive us our sins." (Luke 11:4) This is why we stumble over the word.

Even though I grew up sinning when most of you were trespassing or debt-ing, I didn't force that on our congregation. We took a vote before we launched our church in 1985. Debts or sins? We had six families and the vote was 4 to 2 for sins and that's why we are sinners, not debtors. A few months after that vote, a family worshipped with us for the first time. They said, "We love everything about your new church but The Lord's Prayer. You say it wrong. Sins? Really? It is so in your face."

But sin isn't just in our face, it is in God's face. In some ways, it doesn't much matter how we pray it. When we pray for forgiveness, we acknowledge our guilt that we have trespassed over God's authority and

walked on God's ways. We have run up a debt with God that is so large that there is no way to repay it. Our account is in the red and we are personally responsible for our sins. It is a stumbling word because we all have stumbled whether we use trespass, debts or sin. So, let's acknowledge our guilt when you repeat after me. And since we are all sinners, let's say it that way. "Forgive us our sins." Now, "As we forgive"

Anyone want to get up and get a cup of coffee right now? Have you ever stopped and really thought about what you are praying, forgive us as we forgive. Anybody feel uncomfortable? Matthew uses the phrase, 'as we also forgive?' Do we? Luke uses the phrase, "for we ourselves forgive." Not much better. "How good are we at forgiveness? If this is a model prayer, just what is Jesus trying to teach us? Jesus wants us to understand that there is no practical way that we can experience our own forgiveness unless we are willing to make it a two-way street, to forgive those who have sinned against us.

Forgiveness was a big deal for Jesus and the disciples knew it. In first century Jewish society, it was understood that you were to offer forgiveness. The rabbis taught that one should forgive three times for the same offense. But after that, you were off the hook. You didn't have to extend forgiveness anymore. Peter, sensing that Jesus was suggesting something greater, decided to test a theory. He says to Jesus. How many times should we forgive someone? "Seven times?" "Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:22)

The disciples were scratching their heads, trying to figure out how in the world you could keep track of forgiving seventy-seven times when Jesus tells them this story. At first, they probably thought it was funny. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a slave who owes the king, ten thousand talents. Do you hear the disciples giggling? Is it funny to you? The amount is outrageous. It is the equivalent of one day's pay for 100 million laborers.³ No one had that much money. There weren't 100 million people in the Roman Empire. There wasn't that much money in Palestine. Jesus might have well said, "This slave owed the king a zillion dollars." Then it gets funnier because the slave falls on his knees and begs, "Have patience with me, give me a little time and I will pay you everything." The only way he can pay him back is to work every day for 27,397 years. You have to admit this guy is really in debt and he is super optimistic. And Jesus keeps the jokes coming. So, the king says, "Okay. I forgive you. You are free to go."

But then the story isn't so funny. The forgiven slave goes out and immediately runs into someone who owes him money, only 100 denarii, or about three month's wages. It's not an insignificant amount for a slave, but

it is manageable, a debt that could be paid off. What happens? The scene is recreated with the indebted slave begging the one who had just been forgiven. He too asks for patience and mercy, promising to pay the debt off. But instead of offering forgiveness, he grabs the man by the throat and literally say, "Pay up" and then has him thrown in jail. Sad isn't it?

The king hears of it and has the forgiven but unforgiving slave brought in. He is so bothered by his behavior that he throws him back in prison to be tortured until his entire debt is paid. I suspect there was a giggle or two then. Again, there isn't that much money anywhere and you can torture the guy forever and it won't do any good. But I'd guess all the giggling ended when Jesus added the punch line.

"So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matthew 18: 34) This is, Jesus says, how the kingdom of God works.

You can make this a hard passage, make it about the condition of salvation. But that would deny the cross. It would turn forgiving others into something we do to earn grace and we don't earn our salvation. And it wouldn't help us understand forgive us our sins as we forgive the sin of others.

Our forgiveness isn't contingent upon our forgiving others. God will never hold back. God, after all, sent Jesus to die for us. God didn't hold back. We are the ones holding back. We wall off ourselves from truly receiving God's gift of forgiveness when we refuse to give it to someone else.⁴

The debt that we have with God is unthinkable, enormous. In Jesus, God forgives us of everything, past, present, future. Another's sin against us is small in comparison, tiny compared to what and how God has forgiven you. Please note that Jesus isn't diminishing the pain that you have. Jesus isn't ignoring the hurt that someone might have put on you. Some of us are struggling with some terrible injustices, some horrible pains. Jesus isn't invalidating the sins against you that you have experienced. Rather, Jesus is saying that the only way you can fully experience God's forgiveness is to forgive others.

The truth of the matter is not forgiving others is painful. "Un-forgiveness" makes you miserable. It can feel like torture. It can put you in a prison and squeeze the life out of you. The longer you hold on the longer it holds on to you. The chain isn't broken. You aren't set free.

We pray that we will forgive because it affects our relationship with God. We don't pray forgive me 'as I' forgive. It's not 'forgive me' in order 'for me to' forgive others. It's not even 'forgive me and I will forgive others.'⁵ It is

“forgive us” so that I can try to do for others what you've done for me. Only then can I fully appreciate and accept the forgiveness that you have given me.

I told you it was personal, a tough petition. It is more about who we need to be than what we want to get. We pray forgive us our sins, not because we haven't been already been forgiven on the cross but so we can acknowledge our sins, recognize the gift of grace and be motivated to offer it to others. So, pray it with me that way, won't you? Pray that you will try to do for others what your Abba Father has done for you.

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

¹ Forgive our debts, not our debtors, poll says. *The Christian Century* [serial online]. January 2, 2002;119(1):15-16. Available from: ATLASerials, Religion Collection, Ipswich, MA. Accessed March 9, 2018.

² Lord, Teach Us. Willimon and Hauerwas. Abingdon. Page 79.

³ Interpretation, Matthew. Douglas Hare. John Knox Press. Page 217.

⁴ The Lord's Prayer for Today. Carl, William J. WJK. Page 65.

⁵ Hultgren A. Forgive Us, As We Forgive (Matthew 6:12). *Word & World* [serial online]. 1996 1996;16(3):284-290. Available from: ATLASerials, Religion Collection, Ipswich, MA. Accessed March 8, 2018.