

Text: [Ephesians 4:21-32](#)

Date: March 22, 2020

Title: The Lord's Prayer 4: "As We Forgive"

Theme: The Lord's Prayer is a call to relieve the world of the burden of guilt.

Intro

We're still following our series on the Lord's Prayer, and today we're talking about forgiveness.

1

"And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

The problem with forgiveness is that it's a gift everyone wants – no, actually needs – to receive. And yet it's something that almost all of us struggle to give away. When we're hurting, there's a piece of us that feels like we're gaining power by refusing to forgive. That's understandable.

But it leads to a problem. What ends up happening is that in the world economy of forgiveness, the giving and receiving are not in balance – the demand far exceeds the supply!

Why is this a problem? Well, what do you call an imbalance between the forgiveness we need and the forgiveness we actually receive? I'd call it guilt. Think about how much guilt there is free-floating in the world, how much each one of us carries around with us all the time.

It's heavy. It's awkward. It's hard to walk around with it on our shoulders. And it's incredibly damaging to our spirits and corrosive to our relationships. It causes us to wildly misjudge one another, because we see other people's actions through the lens of our own guilt and shame and then we misinterpret and misjudge their intentions. So long as we're stuck in that place, we really can't be free, and we really can't be happy.

2

The basic concept of forgiveness embedded in the Lord's Prayer is that it acknowledges the need for there to be BALANCE between the forgiveness

we seek and the forgiveness we share with others. “Forgive us our trespasses, AS WE forgive those who trespass against us.” Balance.

Now different people pray this prayer differently – Catholics, Episcopalians and Methodists say trespasses, Presbyterians say debts. Others say sins. The word “debts” is the most accurate translation of what Jesus actually says, and is consistent with how Jesus talks about sins in other places in the gospels. He uses the concept of debt to talk about sin a lot. The differences between the words different denominations use arise from which early English translation of the Bible they used to build their liturgy. One of the first to translate the Bible to English, a guy named William Tyndale, translated the word as trespasses, which made its way into the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, so that’s why we say it that way - because we’re descended from the Anglicans. As an aside, Tyndale was executed for having the audacity to translate the Bible to English. But people saved his work – ironic, huh? “This is dangerous! He needs to die! We’d better hold on to this stuff, it might be important later!” In a few years, it became the basis for several official and authorized translations.

But let’s come back to the content of the prayer itself. When we say forgive us as we forgive, I believe there’s an important statement God is making about guilt – specifically about our need to live free from it. God doesn’t want us to live with guilt, and definitely doesn’t want us behaving in ways that add to the burden of guilt in the world. There’s plenty to go around as it is.

To me, some of the most powerful words in the whole of scripture are what Jesus says from the cross: “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” To me this says everything I need to know about the lengths to which God is willing to go to relieve us of our guilt. And how much it matters.

3

All of us regret things we’ve said or done, or have relationships where we carry guilt over the ways we’ve allowed little hurts to accumulate or distance to grow. But let’s admit the obvious: it’s the nature of humans to hurt each other. We don’t mean to. It’s just that we are frequently not at our best. I mean, think about it. Being tired, being hungry, being stressed – every little thing affects us.

How many of you have been at your best this week?

Listen, I can't see you, but if any one of you put your hand up, I guarantee you are lying. Have you seen that meme that says, "If I'm talking to myself, don't mind me, I'm just having a parent-teacher conference"? I think that's real for a lot of parents, especially parents of young children, this week.

And the longer we have to live in close quarters with our families, we're going to experience more and more moments like that. So it's going to take some serious understanding and patience over this next little bit of time. It's going to take a whole lot of understanding, and a whole lot of forgiveness.

4

Which brings me to today's scripture. There are several New Testament scriptures like this that we might call exhortations or admonitions about how to live a holy life. They make a distinction between an old way – before you knew Jesus – and a new way of living after you've met Jesus. They invite us to renew our way of thinking about ourselves, about the world, about what's important.

I saw an [interview the other day in the paper](#) with a cloistered nun, from Summit, New Jersey, who was offering her thoughts to guide those new to being shut up at home. And she should know: the sisters in her order never leave their convent, except for medical appointments. She had three pieces of advice. First, she said, you need structure in your days. If no one is imposing it on you, you have to choose a structure that works for you and your family. Everyone needs a rhythm in order to feel productive. Second, be intentional about loving the people in your life right now. Check in on neighbors. Spend time playing a board game with your family. Get out in the woods for a hike. You have a some time now – share it. Third, she said, use this lull for reading, prayer, reflection, and rest. Don't be afraid to build an afternoon nap into your routine. But one thing that struck me in what she said was that in order to live in a small community like this – she's one of only 18 sisters – you need to "learn to listen, forgive, and accept each other."

The letter to the Ephesians puts it the same way: "Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth." Specifically, the word foul means "rotten." Don't

Speak words that will rot away your relationships. Only say what is helpful for building up the connections with people. Put aside bitterness and anger, and instead seek kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. You're not who you once were before you met Jesus. Now he's calling you to live like meeting him has made a difference.

5

When we pray "forgive us our trespasses AS WE forgive those who trespass against us," it sounds a bit like a quid pro quo. Like we're only asking God to forgive us to the extent we've forgiven others. It might be helpful to think of it that way, if you need a bit of motivation.

But here's the reality – God has already made the choice to forgive. Remember "Father forgive them, they know not what they do?" The decision to forgive has already been made. There's no question about that. It's done. Nothing we do or don't do can diminish that.

But when we decide not to forgive, it diminishes us. It diminishes our relationships. It takes away something that we all desperately need – to be forgiven – and allows guilt to fill that space instead. Now a little guilt can be good, it can help to motivate change in us. But if it's not at some point released and let go – which can only happen when we're offered and accept forgiveness – then it becomes toxic.

The best thing that God has to offer us is an unconditional love that says, "no matter what, you are forgiven." No matter what. You are forgiven and loved. You still matter, no matter what you've done. This is freedom. All that flows from the cross of Jesus.

And so when we pray, forgive us as we forgive, we can also talk about it as a challenge. A challenge to grow in our forgiveness. To learn to forgive as God has forgiven us. To not allow guilt to grow in the world, but instead to wash it away – replacing it with freedom, and lightness, and love.

Let this be your challenge this week: to forgive as God as forgiven you.

Amen.

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