

Sermon Series: *The Lord's Prayer for Today*
IV. "Forgive Us Our Debts and Deliver Us From Evil"

Matthew 6: 5-15

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Atlanta, GA

February 11, 2007

*"And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one." Matthew 6:13*

In anticipation of Valentine's Day, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* ran a story featuring several high-profile couples in Atlanta who have been married over forty years. One smiling twosome, a minister and his wife, were pictured pedaling a tandem bicycle. The wife of another couple said that the secret of "going the distance" for her and her husband was that they made sure to take a cruise at least three times a year – I thought that was an excellent idea – and made a note to mention it to Al. There was a lot of advice given, everything from never going to bed angry to something new: tossing a basketball back and forth while you talk things over. What I found missing was mention of an ingredient essential to all human relationships. That ingredient is forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the oil that makes the machinery of a marriage, or of any other significant relationship between human beings, go around. People who love one another will inevitably disappoint, demean, or be mean to one another, whether consciously or not. Sometimes, even betrayal becomes a reality. Like daily bread, forgiveness is a daily necessity. Our receiving forgiveness from God and our capacity to offer it to others is a sign that God's great purposes of reconciliation and mercy are alive and well in the here and now. In other words, forgiveness is a key sign of the presence of the kingdom of God.

Jesus taught us to pray saying, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." He named the inseparable connection between God's forgiveness of us and our willingness to forgive those who have "done us wrong, or who have failed us in one way or another." (1) Jesus makes the point again, and more emphatically when he returns to the subject of forgiveness at the conclusion of the prayer he teaches his disciples to say. He says in the most unequivocal way imaginable - *if you forgive, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not, neither will you be*

forgiven. There is a connection between our willingness to forgive and the gift of divine forgiveness.

Remember the story of the prodigal son and how the father forgave the son who had been in the far country and had betrayed himself and the good that he knew? Remember how, upon his younger brother's return, the elder brother stood with his arms folded and his brow furrowed, unable to forgive? His unwillingness to forgive excluded him from the circle of mercy and celebration. (2)

“After he had been reviled and persecuted and had all manner of evil done against him,” Jesus prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Before his death, he had been asked how many times must a person forgive another? “Seventy times seventy,” he had said.

I remember reading a commencement address given at Pittsburg Theological Seminary by Fred Rogers, as in *It's a beautiful day in your neighborhood* Fred Rogers. Fred Rogers had gone to that seminary, and in his address, he spoke of a visit he made one day to the bedside of his favorite theology professor, Dr. William Orr. It was a Sunday afternoon when Fred Rogers went to see Dr. Orr in the hospital, where his teacher lay paralyzed from a stroke but still shining with intellect and human spirit. As they talked together, Dr. Orr asked Fred Rogers to tell him about church that morning. Fred Rogers told him about the sermon and the music. He said, “We sang Martin Luther's great hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. There is one thing in the hymn that puzzles me, Dr. Orr. It's the line that goes like this: ‘The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him. His rage we can endure, for lo! His doom is sure; one little word shall word shall fell him.’ Dr. Orr, what is that one little word?”

After a few quiet seconds, the professor answered, “The word is ‘forgive.’” Forgiveness is the one thing evil cannot tolerate. (3)

The redemptive power of mercy lies at the heart of the Christian faith, and yet it is so difficult to practice. Indeed, it is even more difficult to accept. Forgiveness from God, unearned, freely given: we want to be able to do something to earn God's favor, and yet, the gospel tells us God does everything that has to be done.

I have a friend who was being examined by a Presbytery about his beliefs as he was going through the process of ordination. At the Presbytery meeting, an elder stood up and said, “I would like to know if you have any problems with the tenets of the Christian faith as expressed in the Apostles’ Creed?”

My friend said, “Well yes, I do, I have a problem. I have a hard time believing in the forgiveness of sins. I want to believe it, but I just cannot imagine that God has canceled out all I owe. I know how deep and wide my need for forgiveness is.”

Dr. Karl Menninger, whose family founded the famous Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, “once said that if he could convince the patients in his psychiatric hospitals that their sins really are forgiven, 75% of them could walk out the door the next day.”(4)

Each week in worship, the good news of God’s forgiveness is proclaimed. “Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the cross that we might be dead to sin and alive to all that is good.” If those words can make the journey from our ears to our souls, then we can truly be at peace.

Al Winn is a thoughtful theologian and President Emeritus of Louisville Theological Seminary. He writes helpfully on what it means to be forgiven by God. “To forgive is not to condone. To forgive is not to say that sin is unimportant, minor, nonexistent. To forgive is not to pat us on the head and say, ‘Forget about it.’ To forgive is to establish justice and then to transcend justice with mercy. God says, *Your sin is real but I have decided not to allow it to stand between us. I will not take revenge on you; I will not exact payment. I will cancel the debt. I want the past to be finished and gone because I want you to be alive to the transformed life that I am giving you in Christ Jesus.* (5)

You have probably noticed by now that I am using interchangeably the words “sin” and “debt” and “trespasses.” What is the deal with these different versions of the Lord’s Prayer? It has been suggested that because of our Scottish heritage, many of us would rather have our debts paid than our sins forgiven! But the actual reason for the difference in wording goes back to The Book of Common Prayer of the Church of

England, which translated the Lord's Prayer from Matthew using the word "trespasses." Thirty years later, the King James Version of the Bible translated Matthew 6:12 using the word "debts," rather than "trespasses," "debts" being, the King James translators believed, closer to the meaning of the original Greek. There was a great assembly called the Westminster Assembly in 1647, which has influenced Presbyterians the world over since its convening. (6) It followed the King James Version – "debts" – rather than "trespasses," which was the Anglican way of doing it.

For 350 years there has been a difference in the way western Christian traditions translate the Lord's Prayer. I personally like the version of the little kid who was overheard praying, "...and forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our basket." That's not a bad prayer actually, when you think about all the things in our lives we must address, deal with and overcome that other people have put there. There is your father's addiction gene; there is your friend's betrayal; there is your sister's selfishness. A lot of people put their trash in our baskets. Jesus says that how we deal with what others have done to us is a matter of eternal importance. Finding within ourselves the wherewithal not to let our hearts be poisoned with revenge, finding within ourselves, through the grace of God, the will not to return evil for evil – these are the great spiritual challenges. It takes work and time. It's unrealistic to expect that forgiveness comes quickly or easily; emotions must run their course. Nothing is worse than to have someone smile and say, "Oh, oh, I forgive you," when you know it is not so.

I remember when a friend betrayed a confidence. I found out about it and asked her about it. She told me she was sorry, but I was hurt. I was irritated. I spent weeks being upset about it. Then she called and said, "I am going to come to see you." She came and sat in my living room. She said, "Joanna, we are friends. You have to forgive me, for your sake and for mine." When she said that, it was as if something inside me cracked open. You know what it was? My sense of moral superiority. I would not, for weeks, release my friend from her guilt. She had let me down; yet, had I never let a person down? Had I never hurt someone else? Of course I had and have and will again. We forgive, and we are forgiven, and that is what keeps us human in the way God intends.

I have spoken thus far in personal terms, but the Lord's Prayer is fundamentally a communal prayer. As theologian Helmut Theilicke puts it, "We bring to the Father the whole mountainous burden of sin that weighs upon the world and like a nightmare haunts this present historical hour." (7) We sin personally, and we sin corporately, as a church, as a nation, as a human society. We truly have no hope save in God's sovereign mercy. Our world is bloody with war today. Our world is dark with hatreds, both ancient and new today. Our world is starved for the truth. We must confess our brokenness and humbly pray for forgiveness, trusting that God will hear our prayer and is willing to cleanse us of every kind of unrighteousness.

I know that some of you have been deeply betrayed and terribly hurt, physically abused, sexually abused. Terrible things have happened to you. I am often asked, "How can we forgive acts of depravity?" I don't know the answer, other than to say that with God's help anything is possible. Finally, we do have to forgive.

I have learned a lot about serious forgiveness from a friend in Chicago. She is an attorney, a defense attorney now, having once been a corporate lawyer. She works tirelessly against the death penalty. Do you know why she does? Because her sister and her brother-in-law were murdered by an intruder, who broke in to their suburban home in 1990. Nancy, my friend Jeanne's sister, was three-months pregnant with her first child when she was killed. Jeanne's sister was "left to bleed to death on the floor of the family room. Blood and marks on her body revealed that in her final moments she had tried unsuccessfully to crawl upstairs for help. Finally, she must have understood that she was dying, because, the last thing she did was to drag herself back to her husband's body, and to write in her own blood the symbol of the heart and the letter "U" inside. It was how she had always closed her letters to members of her family – LOVE – U." Jeanne, the attorney, said, "I had a choice. To hate. Or to heal. I chose to heal. Does healing require forgiveness? As a Christian, it does. Let me be clear. I forgive my sister's killer not because he had an excuse. He had none. I forgive him not because he asked for it; he hasn't. I don't forgive for him. I forgive for the One who asked and taught me to- for God. For the author and perfecter of my faith, Jesus Christ. I forgive for Nancy's sake and I forgive for my own sake. I can't see that God gives me another choice."

Consider Kathleen Norris's poem "Imperatives".

Drink ye all of it
Ask
Seek
Knock
Enter by the narrow gate
Love
Forgive
Remember me.

These are the imperatives of our faith. Drink ye, all, of it. Christ's blood, shed for the remission of sin. Take, eat. This is my body broken for you. Why? Because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory God.

I really wish I could live a holy life, one in which I could escape from all the meanness and trials of human existence. Sometimes I fantasize: If only I had gone into the mission field, or entered a convent. Then, I could really be the kind of person God wanted me to be. I'd be sweet and pure, like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. But you and I live in the real world, in the world where Jesus lived and died and faced down demons. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "It is only by living completely in this world that we learn to have faith."

"Lead us not to the time of trial, but deliver us from the evil one," we pray. Deliver us from wanting to escape the world, from sitting in church and having our committee meetings and counting our communion cups and arguing over what color the carpet ought to be, and avoiding the world and its ambiguity and complexity and dangers, its spiritual challenges. I believe that God has placed within us the capacity to resist the temptation to withdraw and the potential to stand up to the forces of darkness. I believe that with all my heart.

One last word, a word about the evil one. Is it a he or a she or an it? I don't know. All I know is that the forces of darkness are real; they are there. They are working against God and against the good in human society and in the human heart. You remember how it was that Cain, out of envy, murdered his brother Abel. But he didn't have to do it! The Lord had said to Cain, "Sin is lurking at your door; its desire is for you.

But you must master it.” God would not have said it if it were not possible. We must master evil. We can, with God’s help, resist it. We cannot do anything about evil’s showing up, but we have everything to do with whether or not we will be its victim. God gave us free will and the courage to exercise it.

From evil and its sneaky ways, from evil and its presumptions of power, from evil and its banality, from evil and its seductive powers, may the good Lord deliver us.

There is good news today. It was broadcast from Calvary, where the forces of sin and evil met their match in the power of vulnerable love. Christ’s body broken. Christ’s blood shed. What more do you need in your battle over the forces of evil in your life? Thanks be to God for the victory. Amen.

(1) William J. Carl, *The Lord’s Prayer for Today*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, p. 62.

(2) Albert C. Winn, *A Christian Primer*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1990, p. 66.

(3) Fred McFeely Rogers, Class of ’62.

(4) As quoted by Carl.

(5) Winn, p. 68.

(6) Winn, p. 64.

(7) As quoted by Carl.