

BEING FORGIVEN AND FORGIVING (Lord teach us how to pray)

Matthew 6:12; Ephesians 4:16-32 - May 17, 2020 - Immanuel ONLINE - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

One thing that this pandemic has done for some people is to help them remember the value of relationships - not virtual ones but real ones. We all know the expression - *"It's better than nothing"* right? That is not a very ringing endorsement! I am grateful for seeing family members and church members in zoom meetings, and for drive through things at church, and talking with people over the phone, and social media interactions, and having air hugs with our granddaughter though a screen door or at a distance. It's better than nothing - and it's apparently necessary - but that doesn't make it very good. Do you know what I mean?

In too many cases we've taken for granted having ready access to being with friends and family members and loved ones. I hope we will come out of this being more grateful for our relationships, and more willing to give people a greater priority than things or work.

It is harder for some than others, people with a spouse or children at home at least have some company in their quarantine - but others are more alone than they'd like to be. I've heard that dating and marriage websites have seen an 88% increase in visits in the past few weeks. I suspect people are thinking, *"I'm going to find someone to live with, in case we ever have to go into a lock-down again!"* Well, it also hard on people who are feeling **"locked in"** together.

Relationships are the most valuable things in our lives, but some people haven't developed healthy ones and now they are paying the price. Some relationships have what you might call "deferred maintenance." That is where you put off making repairs and investing in improvements because you don't think you can afford it at the time, so things start to get worn out, or broken down, or just don't run as well as they should. I read these funny comments on Facebook from some couples discovering relationship problems during this pandemic,

- *Quarantine Day 2, Hour 689 - I've become very aware of my husband's toenails and I'd like to be voted off the island now. (Imagine how that woman is doing after 6 weeks now!)*
- *Day 5 without sports. I found a woman sitting on my couch. Apparently she's my wife. Seems nice*
- *Married 20 years and I'm sitting here with my wife on day 3,768 of quarantine and she says, "I mean I like you, but not 24/7 quarantine kind of like you."*
- *My wife and I are on the "Why do you have to chew so loud?" day of quarantine.*
- *"My wife and I play this fun game during quarantine, it's called 'Why Are You Doing It That Way?' and there are no winners."*

I'm fortunate, because I enjoy my wife more, the more time I spend with her, as opposed to when we're only catching each other coming and going. My main point is this - enjoying healthy relationships takes time and effort - but there is no better investment in your life. In the end, relationships are what matter the most. I believe we were made by God to enjoy healthy relationships - both with God and with other people. We can't be complete without them.

If that is true - one essential ingredient for healthy relationships is this: FORGIVENESS.

I believe there are sets of three important words at the center of any good relationship. Of course we need to hear and say the three words, *"I love you."* But just as importantly, we need to learn to say, *"I'm so sorry."* And, *"Please forgive me,"* and we need to learn to reply *"I forgive you."* Forgiveness is essential for healthy relationships.

In teaching His disciples how to pray, Jesus focused on how faith is to be lived out, not only in relationship with our heavenly father, but also in our relationships with other people. If we're going to enjoy healthy relationships with others then **forgiveness** must be included.

So we come to Matthew 6:12 in Jesus' lesson on prayer. Jesus says, when you pray to your heavenly Father say, *"forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."*

From that prayer I want to talk about some essential and powerful truths for living as a Christian. I want us to focus on three things - our problem, our need, and our challenge.

First - our problem. We begin this part of the prayer saying, **"Forgive us . . ."** Whether we say, forgive us our trespasses, or forgive us our debts, or forgive us our sins, it all reminds us of the same thing - we stand in need of forgiveness. That is something we dare not forget. This prayer reminds us of what the Bible makes clear from cover to cover - each of us is sinful and that is why maintaining healthy relationships is so hard.

Every person is a sinner by nature and a sinner by choice. In big and small ways each of us has rebelled against God's authority and tried to run our own lives. Each of us, in our own way, has said or done things we should not have said or done, or we've remained silent when we should have spoken up, and we've stayed still when we should have acted up.

In the process we have piled up a debt to God that ought to cost us our lives. We have fallen and we can't get up - at least not on our own. This is the supreme problem of all humanity - the combination of our sinful nature, and our sinful choices. They separate from the love and will of God which leads to unhealthy relationships with us and with others. If you want a simple answer to the question, *"What is wrong with the world?"* It is this - SIN - both in us and others - and all the billions of ways that brokenness plays out in the world.

Various Scriptures make this clear. For example, **Romans 3:23** says, *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* The key word there is "ALL" for "all have sinned."

Romans 3:10-11 says, *"There is none righteous, not even one."*

That leads us to our need. Our sin problem creates our need for forgiveness - first from God, and then from others. If we have any honest self-awareness, then we ought to make sure that our prayers always include this simple plea, **"God forgive us."** We need to be forgiven to be right with God, and we need to be right with God before we can enjoy healthy relationships.

Deep down I think most people realize there is a problem. They may not know that what is missing is a reconciled relationship with God - but they know there's a problem and it is often manifested in a deep sense of guilt and shame.

People try to cope with these feelings of guilt in different ways. For example, I heard a funny story of a person who felt so guilty about his income taxes that he wrote a letter to the IRS. It read, "*Gentlemen: Enclosed you will find a check for \$150. I cheated on my income tax return last year and have not been able to sleep ever since. If I still have trouble sleeping, I will send you the rest. Sincerely, A Tax Payer.*"

Unfortunately, you can't really heal your guilty feelings so easily. Guilt feelings are there for a good reason. They are intended to motivate us to change - to alert us to a need to modify our behavior, to lead us to repentance, and humility and to goodness. Unfortunately some people wallow in guilt - or get stuck in it - but that was never God's intention. God wants our sense of guilt to help us recognize our need for grace - from God and other people. We're all guilty and we need a real solution to our problem - and it is found in the grace of forgiveness.

One of my most favorite stories about our need for forgiveness was first told by Ernest Hemingway in his short story, "*The Capital of the World.*" He tells about a father and his teenage son in Spain. In the story, the relationship had become strained and then shattered so the teenage son ran away from home. His father began a grueling search for his rebellious son that lasted several years. The boy's name was "Paco" a very common name for boys at that time. Finally, in Madrid, Spain, in a last desperate attempt to find the boy, the father put an ad in the local newspaper. The ad read: "*Dear Paco, Please meet me in front of the Hotel Montana - Noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.*" According to the story, a squadron of the civil guard had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men named Paco who answered the ad. They were all seeking the forgiveness and love of their father.

All of us stand in need of forgiveness. There is no point in denying it - instead we need to confess our sin, repent of it, and then ask for forgiveness.

Are you like one of those Pacos - carrying around a load of guilt, wanting forgiveness, but not knowing where to find it? Your heavenly Father, who loves you very much, has made the first move. Just as Paco's father ran an ad in the paper, so God sent Christ to tell you the good news that all can be forgiven and your heavenly Father is waiting for you to come.

It sounds too good to be true - but it is true. Jesus comes to deliver a message, it reads, "*Dear (insert your name), meet me in front of the Cross today. All is forgiven. Papa.*"

In this prayer we are reminded of our problem, and our need, and implied is how Christ serves as the solution to our problem and how Christ meets our deepest need.

There is one more part. It is a challenge. Jesus said we should pray, *“Forgive us... as we forgive...”* This is the hard part of this prayer. If we really think about it, it’s a very sobering part of this prayer - maybe even a frightening part. I’m always tempted to pause when we get to this part of the Lord’s Prayer and ask everyone, *“Are you sure you want to pray this? Are you sure you want God to base His forgiveness of you on how well you forgive others?”*

C.S. Lewis said, “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.” Most of us can relate to how much we need to be forgiven - but Jesus doesn’t want us to stop there. Jesus also wants us to realize that all the people around us also need to be forgiven both by God and by us, so Jesus raises the stakes to make sure we get it.

According to this prayer of Jesus, there is a stipulation to our request for forgiveness. It is repeated several times in other passages of the New Testament. The stipulation is this: there is a direct correlation between God’s forgiveness of us, and our forgiveness of others. In other words, Jesus teaches to pray something like this, *“God, please deal with my sins, in the same way that I deal with the sins of others against me.”* Wow!

To underscore the importance of this issue, Jesus revisits it at the end of the prayer in vs. 14-15. The Bible says Jesus immediately transitions from the Lord’s prayer by saying, *“for if you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.”*

What I think it means is this - if we are a forgiving people, we can be forgiven, but, if our hearts are closed, and hard, and we refuse to forgive, then we will not be forgiven. The gift of Christ on the cross is freely offered to all - it has been made available to all - but in order to receive that gift - we have to let go of some things and one of those things is hardened heart. A heart that won’t let love out is the same kind of heart that won’t let love in. People remain unforgiven by God, not because God is unwilling to forgive them, it is just because they are too full of themselves to receive it. Unforgiving people are full of pride, or fear, or bitterness, or anger, or a desire for vengeance, or all of these things and more, and that hardens their heart against other people and against God.

If your heart is so hard that no forgiveness can come out, then there are some other things you need to pray about before you get to this part of the Lord’s prayer.

Listen to a couple of quotes about this passage from some famous Christians.

Charles H. Spurgeon, the great preacher of last century said, *“Unless you forgive others, you read your own death-warrant when you repeat the Lord's Prayer.”* **Ouch!**

St. Augustine called this part of the Lord’s prayer *“the terrible petition.”* He said, *“If we pray with an unforgiving heart, we are actually asking God NOT to forgive us.”* **Double ouch!**

What must realize that we are commanded to forgive because forgiveness is all about love - and God wants us to grow in His love which will grow our love for others. Remember that the two greatest commandments of Christ are to love God and to love others. There is no way to forgive without loving, and there is no way to love without forgiving.

If we're going to enjoy a good relationship with God or anyone else then we must learn how to practice forgiveness - both the giving and the receiving of it. Love and forgiveness - you can't have one without the other - they are two sides to the same coin - a coin of grace that God gives us to carry and enjoy, but also to spend freely every day.

We should remember that Christian love and forgiveness have something in common. They are not just a matter of emotions. In fact sentiment and emotions may not be involved at all - though they often are. But in every case Christian love and forgiveness must be intentional, an act of the will, a choice. We are not called to love others just when we feel like it. We are not called to love only the lovable, or only those who love us, or only those who have never hurt us. We are called to love everyone who needs our love. We are challenged to choose love.

This principle applies for forgiveness as well. You can't just wait until you feel forgiving toward a person; you might never forgive in that case. I know that there are people watching or hearing this sermon who don't feel very forgiving toward someone who has hurt them - I get it. You hate what they did, and you don't feel like loving or forgiving them. You think that forgiving them means you are saying their sin doesn't matter - but that is not true.

You need to know that God never stops hating our sin, he doesn't condone it or excuse it, or blow it off. Instead God has made a costly decision to place the Cross between the sinner their sin. In place of condemnation God chooses to offer love and forgiveness as an act of grace. Jesus goes on to tell us to follow God's example in all our relationships. God chooses for His grace to be greater than our sin. God chooses love and forgiveness and so must we.

There is another reason we need to forgive. Forgiveness has as much benefit for us as it does for the other person. You can't truly be happy in life if you are carrying a grudge. When you carry a grudge, it is only your back that gets sore, not the other person's. Forgiving others is a way to bring freedom to your life by removing the burden you are carrying around.

Robertson McQuilkin, a Christian author and college president, once said, *"The sin of unforgiveness is a cancer that destroys relationships, eats away at one's own psyche, and - worst of all - shuts us off from God's grace."* That's true. God wants to spare us that pain.

Ephesians 4:31-32 states, *"Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of malicious behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."*

Colossians 3:13 says, *“You must make allowances for each other’s faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.”*

Now, let me share a dose of reality - as you well know it is very hard to forgive like we have been forgiven. Most of us are not nearly as gracious and good as God - not yet. What I’m going to say next may help us with difficult situations a little bit.

The great theologian John Calvin taught that there are two basic kinds of forgiveness.

The first is the kind where the person who did the wrong admits it, truly repents, and comes to you asking forgiveness, which you grant and then the relationship is restored. That’s the best kind. That’s the ideal. With confession, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and healing - everyone wins. But not all relationships work like that.

There is another kind of forgiveness. It is for people who don’t want to be reconciled with us. It is for people who have hurt you and don’t know it, or who don’t care about it, or who blame you for the problem, or who won’t repent or change so they just keep on hurting you. Everyone struggles (even strong Christians) with those kinds of people and relationships.

However, if you’re going to pray the Lord’s prayer, or ask God to forgive you, you must still choose to forgive those people. How? We can choose to forgive in the sense that we let go of our end of a rope - a rope that has tied us to anger or bitterness or a desire for vengeance. We can choose to let it go (from our end) and refuse to let the hurt dominate our life anymore. We can set the cross between us and that person, and give them over to God to deal with.

True, the relationship may remain broken - but not from our end. The relationship may never be healed - but not by our choice. We can decide to purge our heart of any hatred or anger so that we can be free from bitterness, and we can move on. All the while we hold grace and forgiveness in our hearts, ready to share, should they ever choose to repent and accept it.

Again, that is what God has done for us. The Bible says, *“While we were still sinners Christ died for us.”* The gift of forgiveness was offered to us by God long before we recognized our need for it, long before we repented, and for many people the gift remains unclaimed, but not by God’s choice and God will keep the gift of forgiveness on offer for as long as they live.

Let me close with three simple keys for living this part of the Lord's prayer.

First, pray for your own forgiveness. Confess your sins to God. Acknowledge your problem, admit your need, turn away from your sin, and place your faith in Christ. Christ is God’s solution to our problem - accept His grace and be reconciled to God.

Second, decide to forgive others. Are there people you have not yet forgiven? If there are, you need to willfully and deliberately choose to do so. If you will not, you harm yourself the most. Forgive others. Tell God you forgive them. If appropriate, tell them you forgive them.

Third, ask God to give you the ability to maintain an attitude of grace - which means the ability to choose to give others the love they don't deserve but desperately need (just like you and God's grace). We can't do this on our own - so we need to pray and ask God to help us learn to love as He loves, and how to forgive as we have been forgiven.

As we learn to live this way, we will find the blessing of God's grace being poured over our lives more and more. We will enjoy what we most need - a healthy and growing relationship with God - and that will enable us to pass on God's grace into all our other relationships.

God wants His grace to transform us so we can be bold enough to pray,

"Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Amen.