

June 14, 2009

Matthew 18:21-35 / Ephesians 4:29-32 / Luke 11:1-4

Luke (#60) – Making the Lord's Prayer Our Own (#4) – Forgiveness

Today (in my opinion) we come to ONE OF the most important petitions in the Lord's Prayer — maybe even THE MOST IMPORTANT petition in the whole prayer — if we're talking about the potential it has to transform human lives. Because there are few things that can bring more liberation to a person's soul than the grace of forgiveness.

Few things have as much potential to bring joy where there was sadness / peace where there was inner turmoil / or freedom and deep liberation of soul where there was bondage to guilt and shame and a sense of condemnation, than the knowledge and assurance that God has forgiven us for ALL our sins.

Yet it's not just the knowledge that we've been forgiven by God that transforms us. That's where it starts. But for the transformation to continue it must go further, to include the gifts of our being forgiven by others and our offering forgiveness to others. All three are necessary to complete the cycle or redemption and healing spoken of in this verse of the Lord's Prayer.

It's a lot to cover, but that's what I want us to focus on this morning — forgiveness in all of its various forms — beginning **FIRST** with our most desperate need of all — the need to be forgiven by God.

I'll never forget reading one story (I don't recall which magazine it was in) where a grown man shared his intense life-long struggle with guilt, because before he was even a teenager, and was helping his dad on the family farm in the Mid-west, by hauling stuff around with the tractor, he mistakenly stepped on the GAS instead of the BRAKE; ran the tractor up onto the porch of their house where his little brother was playing; and pinned his younger brother against the side of the house — causing internal injuries which he died from on the way to the hospital.

The guilt, he said, was unbearable to live with. And though he still struggled with it on occasion some 20 plus years later, the only thing that helped him get through, he said, was the assurance from the Bible that he could be, indeed had been, forgiven by God.

And it's not just forgiveness for our unintentional mistakes (as in that man's case). It's also forgiveness for our conscious acts of purposeful rebellion and our sinful thoughts and selfish ways and unloving attitudes and so much, much more that also need to be forgiven by God as well.

And even that isn't all. We also need to be forgiven, not simply for the sinful things we do, but the right things we don't do that we know we should do! Our sins of omission as well as our sins of commission — since they are BOTH, in the eyes of God, equally wrong and equally worthy of condemnation.

And although I wouldn't have needed to say this just a few short years ago, it is necessary to remind people today that the reason they desperately need to be forgiven by God is because all sin is ultimately sin against God.

After committing adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband Uriah killed, David writes a Psalm of Repentance (Psalm 51). And in it he says to God: ***“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.”***

How can he say that when it was Bathsheba and Uriah he had harmed? Because he rightly understood what people today often forget — that all sin is sin against God simply because it is a violation of the moral precepts and commands God has written in His Word or upon the human heart and conscience by virtue of being created in His image.

The thing that makes adultery and murder wrong is the fact that God forbids it! Committing adultery or lying or stealing or gossiping or murdering or valuing things more than we value God or being self-righteous or vindictive or greedy or any other sin you can think of — is wrong simply because it is a violation of the moral Goodness and perfections of God.

All sin is against GOD, even if it is people (or ourselves) that we hurt by our sinful thoughts, words, actions, omissions and attitudes.

In fact, there is probably no greater proof for the existence of a personal and just God than the existence of the human conscience! That's what turned C. S. Lewis from Atheism to a belief in God. He had rejected God because of all the injustice he saw in the world.

And then it struck him: If there is no God, where did that sense of justice and injustice come from? If there is no God, and thus no ultimate standard of good by which good or bad, justice and injustice could be measured, how could anyone say what was right or wrong in the first place?!

You see, we need to be forgiven by GOD, because it is GOD who has established (not only in His Word but in the very fiber of the universe and the souls of people) the innate conviction that some things are just plain right and others are just plain wrong.

And it's the violation of those innate moral convictions – those things we know are just plain right or just plain wrong — that cause guilt and shame and fear and condemnation (even self-hatred) to accrue in the conscience and issue forth our need of forgiveness from God.

A forgiveness we need not only to put us right with the God we have offended by our sins, but a forgiveness we need because that guilt and shame and fear and condemnation (or self-hatred) can lead to mental, emotional, relational and even physical ailments.

Which is why I say that forgiveness has the potential, like nothing else, to bring liberation to the CONSCIENCE, rest to the afflicted MIND and SOUL and healing to the BODY.

Maybe that is why the very first promise made to people, in the very first Christian sermon ever preached, was Peter's promise of forgiveness on the Day of Pentecost when he declared:
"Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

The primary need of all human needs is met by the primary gift offered to us in the Gospel! Before anything else, we as breakers of God's law, are promised the forgiveness of every sin we have ever committed against Him! And not only does the Bible tell us they are against HIM, it tells us they are INNUMERABLE!

That's one of the many things we can learn from "The Parable of the Unmerciful," or better yet, "Unforgiving Servant." The purpose of a "parable" is to enable each person to see themselves somewhere in the story. And in this particular story, we are all represented (in the beginning) by the unmerciful servant.

The "king" in the story is God, and we are the servant who has accrued a debt so large that we could never pay it off no matter what we did, or how long we did it! (And by the word "debt" it means a "sin-debt" in relation to God. In the Lord's Prayer *"forgive us our debts"* means *"forgive us the enormous sin-debt we have against you."*)

That's why Jesus uses "10,000 talents" as the sum that this man owed the king. It was *"the largest monetary unit employed in the ancient Near East,"* says Schweitzer. It's essentially an immeasurable sum!

Or as Leon Morris puts it: *"It's used in the sense of 'numberless.'" It's a sum too big to be counted, which is why "several commentators suggest that 'a billion' would convey the thrust of it."*

This man, who represents all of US, owes the king a sum he could never pay back — ever!

And we desperately need to remember that! Because only when we do, do we come to understand the uncanny degree of grace and kindness God offers to all in the Gospel!

Because only then do the hearts of the forgiven melt in joyous gratitude and love toward God for forgiving such a huge and immeasurable debt of sin!

And as we'll go on to see, only then, when we see the enormity of the forgiven sin-debt we had piled up against God (which is the point of the parable) do we come to see our need to forgive the infinitely lesser sin-debts that others have piled up against us. (The ant hills others accrue against us, as compared to the Mount Everest we've piled up against God.)

And you know what the Gospel message is? God offers to forgive that Mount Everest of sin-debt that any person has accrued against Him — completely erase it forever — if they will only look to Jesus in faith as the substitutionary sacrifice who paid in full the penalty for all of it.

That whole mountain of debt will be forgiven for any person who repents of their sin and trusts in Jesus Christ to save them.

That's the unbelievably Good News! Through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, God has provided a way for all our innumerable sins to be forgiven! *"He forgives all our sins,"* says the Psalmist of believers. *"As far as the east is from the west,"* he says, *"so far has He removed our transgressions from us."*

"When you were dead in trespasses and sins, in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins...", says Paul in Col. 2:13.

Not just some of your sins; not simply the lesser sin's or the seemingly more forgivable one's, but all of them! Even the most horrid, vile or unimaginable ones which cause us to cringe just to think about them!

"I write to you dear children," says the Apostle John of all believers, *"because your sins have been forgiven on account of His name."*

THAT'S what God wants us to KNOW and be THOROUGHLY CONVINCED OF! Because only then can you truly be at peace with God, and only then can the forgiveness He gives you have its fully redemptive and intended healing effects upon our soul!

You see, if I could accomplish only one thing in my time here as a pastor, that one thing I would hope to accomplish is somehow, by some means, to convince you beyond any shadow of a doubt that as a believer in Jesus you have been totally and completely forgiven for all your sins.

Why? Because as Jeremiah Burroughs points out, *“The more assurance God gives of pardon, the more the heart melts before God... You grow fuller and fuller in God’s fullness (as) you grow more into a fuller assurance of pardon of sin.”*

The more you are convinced that you ARE forgiven, the more your heart will melt with love God. And the more you are convinced of the enormity of the sin-debt you’ve been forgiven for, the greater the intensity of that love for God will be.

That’s the message we saw from the “sinful woman” in Luke 7. Looking at that “sinful woman,” (most likely a prostitute he had met at the party Levi threw on His behalf) Jesus says: *“Her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loves much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”*

LISTEN: Your affections for Jesus will be in direct proportion to how much you believe He has forgiven. The Pharisee who self-righteously believed he hadn’t sinned much, loved Jesus little, but the prostitute who knew she’d sinned immensely, loved Jesus intensely!

Thus, your love for Jesus is not simply dependent upon being convinced you’re forgiven, it’s also dependent upon your being convinced you’ve been forgiven MUCH — you’ve been forgiven a sin-debt so large that unless God had graciously forgiven it as a gift through faith in Jesus, you know you’d be hopelessly and irretrievably lost forever.

Yet it’s not just the promise and conviction that God has forgiven us through Christ that changes or transforms our lives. It’s also the reciprocal act of forgiving and being forgiven by others.

That’s the **SECOND** thing this petition of the Lord’s Prayer tells us. To truly experience the redemptive healing of forgiveness, we must not only receive forgiveness, we must also give it, and Jesus says, *“to everyone who sins against us.”*

If there is even one person in your life (in your past or in the present) that you have NOT forgiven (and I would ask you to consider what person just popped into you mind) then you are thwarting the redemptive effects of forgiveness in your life.

You cannot, according to Jesus, enjoy the full benefits of the one without doing the other! They are so intricately interwoven that they actually hinge upon each other. As Jesus phrases it in this prayer: *“Forgive us our sins as we also forgive everyone who sins against us.”* That is, *“forgive us... as we forgive.”*

He expresses this petition in such a way that we actually find ourselves asking God to make our own forgiveness by Him conditional, or in some way dependent upon our determination to graciously extend that same forgiveness to everyone who has ever sinned against us.

The version of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew puts it this way: *“Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.”* That is, forgive the sin-debt we have accrued against you, as we also have (past tense) forgiven those who have accrued any degree of sin-debt against us (large or small).

It’s even more stark in Matthew, for immediately following the prayer there, Jesus adds: *“If we forgive men when they sin against us, our heavenly Father will also forgive us. But if we do not forgive men their sins (against us) our Father will not forgive our sins.”*

That’s the other thing we learn from *“The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant”* in Matthew 18: The gracious forgiveness of the king, in forgiving our immeasurable sin-debt against Him, brings with it a reciprocal obligation to graciously forgive ALL who have ever sinned against us (difficult as it may be to do so - and it is often excruciatingly difficult).

Byron Paulus, for example, director of Life Action Revival Ministries, writes in his article, *“We all have a Story,”* *“Have you ever heard the scream of a mother as she opened the door to discover two army officers standing on the doorstep? I have. It cut to my heart like nothing before or since. Knowing it was my favorite brother who was killed only caused the pain to cut more deeply. How could I forgive those who urged my brother to enter the army when the Vietnam War was raging? How could I forgive the Vietcong? For that matter, how could I forgive God? But it wasn’t until I did that God’s presence (in my life) was restored.”*

In fact, looking back at 40 years of leading a ministry that seeks to bring revival in churches he writes: *“After reaching out to over 4,000,000 believers in 6,000 churches during the past four decades, our team of revivalists would unanimously concur that the number one problem they encounter is unforgiveness... You cannot experience (personal) revival until*

you learn how to forgive... Because revival is all about restoring a relationship with Jesus, you cannot experience it in your own heart, family or church until you learn to forgive — until you are set free from the shackles of bitterness.”

That’s what often fails to be stressed in so many churches and thus hinders or quenches the work of the Holy Spirit – Preachers often fail to stress that the gracious kindness of God in forgiving us for all our many sins, whenever we ask with the eye of faith on Jesus, lays upon us the reciprocal obligation to graciously forgive others — all others — “everyone” as Jesus says, who has ever sinned against us — no exceptions!

Yet for most of us (and it depends a great deal on the degree of sin-debt a person has committed against you) it’s much more difficult to forgive every person who has ever sinned against us, than it is to believe or have the assurance that God has forgiven all our innumerable sins against Him.

Some of you have been wounded very deeply by others. And I don’t want to make light of that in any way — the hurt you feel is real, and may still be intense, yet as difficult as it is (and I know it is as I’ve shared my own struggles in this area) at some point we MUST forgive.

That’s Jesus explicit teaching on numerous occasions. *“And when you stand praying,”* He says in Mark 11:25, *“if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive your sins.”* Your prayers for forgiveness are hindered, or will go unanswered, until you *“forgive your brother from the heart,”* says Jesus.

You see, Jesus tells us about as plainly as He can that it is a SIN to refuse to forgive others who have sinned against us. Which means that for God to bless us with all the healing effects of forgiveness, while we sinfully continue to hold unforgiveness in our hearts toward others, would be for Him to condone sin — and He will not do that!

Therefore, as Jesus makes clear: We don’t have a choice! We may fight it, or delay it, or wrestle with it, or wait till the emotional turmoil has subsided a bit. We may agonize and continue to wonder how we could ever do it! But in the end WE MUST forgive! Sooner or later WE MUST forgive! For to fail to do so is somehow, in some way, to hinder the reception of the gracious benefits of forgiveness in our own lives.

And here, as a way of summing things up, I’d like to read you a story. I’ve had a book on my shelf for years, but just yesterday, and just by “chance” (if you believe in chance) as I was thumbing through it, I found a story that so perfectly describes what this verse speaks about.

It's the personal story of a man named Bruce Johnson, a heavyweight wrestling champion in the Navy's Third Fleet, and a black belt judo champion, who taught combat Rangers survival techniques. A very athletic person who even survived a 10 foot shark attack.

"In December of 1976," he says, "I had a stiff neck that bothered me a lot so I went to see a chiropractor, who turned out to be incredibly inept. He had me on a table while he manipulated my neck with his hands. 'That help?' he asked. 'Doesn't seem to,' I answered. 'Well, try to relax completely,' he said. Suddenly he twisted my neck vigorously. The pain that blazed through me was so great that the ceiling light spun crazily. I was nauseous as he helped me down from the table. 'You'll be ok in no time', he assured me, handing me some vitamin tablets he said would ease my condition. I drove home using only my right arm since the left had lost its coordination. When my wife Shari, who is a nurse, saw me stagger through the front door, she thought I'd had a stroke and called an ambulance."

When the tests came back, the neurosurgeons determined that the manipulation of his neck had damaged a vertebral artery causing loss of blood to the brain and he had what the doctors called *"a brain stem infarction."*

"I had gone from a healthy, physically strong person to what seemed an invalid, in a quick snap of the neck. I'd lost my sense of balance and coordination on my left side. My heart rate, blood pressure and bladder function were affected, and I suffered from choking spells. I had no feeling on my right side when pricked with pins. When standing the room seemed to spin... After two hospitalizations, totaling six weeks, he says, "I had much time to think about the man who had put me in this condition. When I remembered how he nonchalantly handed me those vitamin tablets, anger swelled within me. I had a burning hatred for him, which was unlike me, as I had never carried before....Weeks dragged by into months, but instead of improving I discovered that now I had double vision... Depression set in as I tried to cope with my limitations, wearing a black patch over one eye to improve the double vision, and a cervical collar to lessen the severe headaches. I even had to use a cane because of my loss of balance."

He then shares how his wife, a Bible-believing Christian, bought him a Bible and he began to read it and attend church with her, until in early April of 1978 he went forward to receive Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Then one night, while listening to Christian radio, the preacher read a prayer request sent in by a man from Oregon who seemed to have had the same injury as he did.

"I felt sorry for him," he says, "forgot about my own condition, and lifted up my hands and began praying for the man. As I did, I thought of the Scripture that our pastor had repeated so often, "And when you stand praying, forgive anyone anything you have against them." It struck me that here I was praying for God's help when I hadn't forgiven the man who hurt me. And so, my hands still raised, I relinquished the hatred. 'O Father, ' I said, 'I forgive him because I know you have forgiven him and You have forgiven my sins too.'

"As I lay there, hot tears on my cheeks, a startling thing happened. My hands, still above my head, suddenly felt as if they'd touched a bare electric wire. It seemed as if a jolt of lightning shot through me. An excruciating pain seared my neck, so intense that, gritting my teeth, I started to get up to get a pain pill. Wincing, I put my feet on the floor and reached for my cane. Then, as I stood up, I got another shock. The pain was gone. I had no more dizziness! My vertigo had disappeared. For the first time in a year and a half the room was not spinning. I stood transfixed. I wasn't dreaming... My legs felt strong again. I gingerly walked across the room, testing them. I didn't limp! I stood on one foot and then the other and didn't fall!

He even put jogging shoes on, and after going outside, and starting out slowly, was soon running down the street, *"moving rhythmically, painlessly and freely."*

The message was clear (at least to him): Forgiving the other man and letting go of his bitterness and anger and hatred toward him somehow released the redemptive effects of God's forgiveness in him as he forgave the other man.

You see, you don't necessarily forgive others for their sake (some may be long dead). You forgive them for your sake — so you can be free from all the anger and bitterness and internal poison it creates in your own soul! All the hurt and the desires to hurt the one who's offenses caused you to suffer. All the guilt and self-pity and hatred you've justified for so long.

Forgiving others isn't so much an issue between you and the offender, it an issue between you and God. It's a choice you must make — a difficult choice to pay the cost of another's sins against you.

"Forgive one another," says Paul, "as God in Christ forgave you." And how did God in Christ forgive you? He took the consequences of your sin upon Himself. That's what forgiveness is, as Neil Anderson rightly notes: *"Agreeing to live with the consequences of another person's sin."* In that sense, *"Forgiveness is costly. You pay the price of the evil you forgive."*

You're going to live with those consequences whether you want to or not. Your only choice is whether you will do so in the bitterness of unforgiveness or the freedom of forgiveness."

So I ask you again: Is there anyone you need to forgive for anything? Forgiveness is a choice. It isn't forgetting. It isn't denying the pain. It's confessing that it hurts a lot even to the emotional core of your being, and then deciding that you will forgive and live in the freedom of forgiveness rather than the bitterness of unforgiveness.

Don't wait till you FEEL like forgiving to forgive! That may never happen! Feelings are what usually follow our decision to forgive. Do it for your sake and leave the other person to God. Do it because you cannot be truly free until you do.

Do it because you will be harming yourself until you do. You will be carrying unnecessary loads until you do. In fact, you will be sinning, nurturing the fruits of bitterness, poisoning the fruit of the Spirit, hindering your prayers, quenching the Spirit fire in your life and even thwarting physical healing until you do. So FORGIVE!