

## FORGIVE US

The next-to-last petition in the Lord's Prayer is about forgiveness. "*And forgive us our sins, for we too forgive all who have done us wrong.*" We do not always think we need forgiveness. But we all need forgiveness. This Lord's Prayer, at the core of the Christian Way because it was prayed by the faithful at least three times a day, suggests that we all need forgiveness at least three times a day. Some of us would up that quota considerably.

It is interesting that this series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer should have wended its way, through the weeks, to confront us with the theme of forgiveness at a time when some of us are struggling with that very thing. Since this is going to be in the back of a lot of minds, we might as well get it up front. This is not a prayer about life on the Moon or on Venus. It is about here and now, and real life. Christians keep gathering to face the Word of God together. That is one way God heals and teaches us, if and when we allow it. If we stop doing that, we all keep getting more and more wrong.

Hopefully there are some people here today who do not feel embroiled in any unpleasantness anywhere in their lives at the moment. Sometimes we experience such seasons, and it's wonderful. But life keeps changing, and we seem to live with our problems until we outgrow them, work them out, or die with them. So this prayer is about real life. When we come to this part about forgiveness, there are usually issues and people somewhere in our lives that come to mind and bother us. We need to keep them in mind and deal with them. But first we need to know and understand our prayer. If forgiveness were as simple a precept as some people try to claim, it would not have remained such a major problem throughout all earth history. The truth is, it is easy to handle forgiveness if we are talking about somebody else forgiving or being forgiven. It is not always so easy when it's our turn. So let us each get back to our own forgiving and being forgiven.

The first thing we encounter is no longer a surprise: Forgiveness is important. We all need it constantly, coming and going. True forgiveness is not easy to give or to get, and the world shows this shortage in all of its ugliest parts. It is no surprise, then, that forgiveness is part of our most basic prayer, or that forgiveness is one of the greatest

precepts of the Christian Life. This is not a kid's game! This is meant to transform us. Hit or miss – that is, doing what comes naturally – is not going to make it.

We must, I think, add that Jesus seems to be more adamant on this subject of forgiveness than He is on just about any other subject. Self-righteousness and writing other people off are variations of “a failure to forgive” that also draw Jesus' fire with great consistency. But the precept that God forgives us on the condition that we also learn to forgive others is pretty point-blank. It comes across strongly enough in the Lord's Prayer, but also read Matthew 18:23-35.

God forgives us on the condition that we extend to others the same forgiveness that we receive from God. And how much forgiveness have we received from God? It depends on how close we have gotten to the Cross. Now, while that is absolutely true, such phrases can exist among us in our day without meaning what they really mean. We have to get it very clear – we have to search our memories for the actual experiences we have had of God's forgiving us. Pat phrases are not enough when we come to hard realities.

I do not like to assign too much “homework,” but sometimes there is no choice. I cannot do this for anybody else. It's hard enough for each of us to do this for ourselves. But this prayer cannot be well-prayed unless we are clear about how God has actually forgiven us in our own lives and experiences. This is the forgiveness we are required to extend to others.

We are still only summing up the framework of forgiveness – the centrality of the precept. We are forgiven on the condition that we extend the same forgiveness to others. We are unable to forgive anybody – meaning, we are flat-out *incapable* of forgiving anybody – beyond the level of forgiveness we ourselves have received from God. Large portions of humanity are incapable of very much forgiveness because they have been too proud to receive very much forgiveness from God. People who focus a lot on being “good” – on chalking up good deeds – frequently find it hard to admit that they need very much forgiveness.

By the way, there is still a lot of talk about “unconditional love” in our day. I keep reminding you that God has lots of conditions on real love. If that were not true, we would all be rolling in it – only, it would not be worth anything. We are forgiven on the condition that we will also forgive. How much love is there without forgiveness?

Jesus was much more poignant: “*He who is forgiven little, loves little.*” Or put another way: “*He loves little who has been forgiven little.*” Now *there’s* a meditation for a Sunday afternoon! It is one of Jesus’ most basic precepts. And no matter what the popular slogans say, those who discover God’s love know that they had better start learning how to love others.

Now we come to the hard part. Everything I have said thus far should be fairly familiar if you have been around the Christian church for very long. How do I now gently suggest that what we have boiled this all down to, in terms of a working “rule of thumb,” is not correct? What most often goes under the name of “forgiveness” today is not true forgiveness, nor does it work very well. Rephrase even that: it works to some degree and we would be worse off without it, but it usually falls far short of – and sometimes even gets in the way of – *true* forgiveness.

What am I talking about? We think of forgiveness mostly in terms of our getting rid of anger or resentments that we are carrying toward others. If you hurt me, I think the Christian Faith requires me to forgive you. The forgiveness may have nothing to do with you; you may not be in any way involved. I am just supposed to get free from whatever anger or resentment I have toward you. That is what many, many people think this is all about.

It is an important point. Will you remember that I said so? We do all have to struggle with cleansing ourselves from past wrongs, injustices, resentments. If we do not find some way to let go of that material, it makes us sick. You do not have to read the Bible to find this out. Psychologists deal with such issues constantly. There are all kinds of articles and folk-wisdom dealing with this very important subject all the time. And it *is* very important. So I have been fair and acknowledged that this familiar idea of forgiveness is very important. Will you now leave that subject for a while and come consider with me the *biblical* concept of forgiveness?

It comes clearest faster if we think of the purpose or function of real forgiveness. The purpose of forgiveness is to *restore a relationship*. After genuine forgiveness has occurred, a relationship is at least as strong, whole, affectionate, and trusting as it was before whatever trouble came along. If the relationship is not totally restored, true forgiveness has not taken place. All genuine forgiveness is a two-way street.

If you forgive me but I do not receive the forgiveness, then you have unloaded the poison from your own soul but our relationship is not restored. There will still be no trust between us. Our relationship can bear no weight. Are you beginning to see my concern? We have people talking about “I forgave so-and-so,” but they do not really want to have any more to do with that so-and-so. That is not forgiveness. That is not what the Lord’s Prayer is about. That is not what the biblical precept is talking about. Any person you have truly forgiven, you have invited back into your life with at least as much commitment and caring and love as you ever had before.

Think about it the other way around. What do you think Jesus means with the claim that we are forgiven by Christ, by God? Does it thrill you a lot to think of God sitting up in heaven saying, “I really forgive you, but I sure don’t want any more to do with you”? Who would get excited enough to live or die for a forgiveness like that? The purpose of forgiveness is not just to give you peace of mind – it is to restore relationship. Forgiveness is not just against stress and tension – it is *for* community.

When Jesus says “I forgive you,” that means: “You and me, kid, back together and all the way – without any double-mindedness or subterfuge in me whatsoever – clear to the Cross again, if that’s what it takes.”

If the debt is money and it is forgiven, how much is still owed on the account? Nothing! That’s the clearest illustration. Would you loan money to the same person again? Gets tougher, doesn’t it? If you would not loan money to them again, then the debt is forgiven but the person is not. Do you see the difference? If the person is forgiven, you would loan them money again just as fast as you would have the first time. (But no faster!)

You remember the biblical precept about sin washed white as snow? (Isaiah 1:18; Psalm 51:7) See? No piddling around. If you are forgiven, you are back IN! We have to get beyond this modern notion that as long as I can keep my own mental balance, keep from getting ulcers, keep a little serenity, well, that’s what it’s all about. That is *not* what it’s all about. The Bible is talking about community, about love, about a constant and continuing total restoration of relationships.

Forgiveness therefore requires a restoration process between two people. You cannot forgive alone. We really need another word for letting go of our own resentments when another person will in no way

enter into the restoration of true forgiveness. If you offer forgiveness and the other person will not receive the forgiveness, you have saved yourself from ulcers, but no forgiveness has taken place.

There are also necessary parts to forgiveness. They have traditional names, but we need not be wooden. It's the process that matters, though some of the traditional names are good for reminding us. First, a person must feel sorrow, regret, remorse – so much so that they are repentant (penitent). Very often, this does not happen until or unless the injured party complains, confronts – says what is hurting them, and how.

I am particularly poor at this. I do not like to tell people when I think they are abusing me. Maybe I'm wrong about the abuse; maybe it will pass; maybe it was my imagination or paranoia; maybe it will make things worse – and all the rest. So I let it go until it is huge within me. That is not Christian, like I try to tell myself. It's just chicken. (Silence is not always golden; sometimes it's just yellow.) Some of you are almost as poor at confronting as I am; maybe we deserve each other. In any case, if there is little confronting, there is little chance of forgiveness. Occasionally a person will see their error and feel remorse without being confronted. But most of the time, without confrontation the situation will get way out of hand before anybody begins to deal with it. Most of us do not intend any evil, so we do not see it unless somebody complains.

For forgiveness to take place, there must first be remorse or penitence. Secondly, a person *asks* for forgiveness. That is what we are doing in the Lord's Prayer, at least one or more times a day. Do you keep dubbing-in the specific things you are asking forgiveness for? If not, this part of the prayer is just rote – noise without meaning.

This second step is where the wrath of Christendom really comes down. It is terribly hard to ask for forgiveness. But if a person asks for forgiveness and we deny it, then we are truly in trouble with Christ. If a person asks for restoration into our friendship and love and we say "sure" but only intend to be civil and keep them at arm's length, that is when we are in trouble with Jesus. Christianity is *not* running around pretending we love and forgive people no matter what they do, no matter what their attitude. But if somebody does repent – does ask for restoration and reconciliation – and we will not grant it, then we are the ones who are OUT and they are the ones who are IN, so far as God in Christ is concerned.

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After forgiveness is asked for (and most often, *both* parties need to request and receive forgiveness), there is another step of great importance. The old language called it “penance.” So thirdly, penance must be set. It is best if both parties work out the penance together. If one person sets penance, it is at least necessary that the other person agrees to it. Penance is not punishment! (Though often it is construed as such.) Penance is a genuine effort to repair whatever damage is repairable – to make amends – or sometimes to do alternative good where restoration is not possible.

If I break your chair and you forgive me, I must still make every effort to repair the chair or replace it. Otherwise the whole basis of forgiveness is phony. And so often today it is. No self-respecting, caring person wants you to sustain damage on their account. If you will not receive their penance, it is a scornful and degrading put-down. If they do not want to do penance, then their request for forgiveness is just hot air. (And that needs to be made clear.)

Fourthly, after the penance is set and agreed to (though not completed), forgiveness is declared. Restoration and reconciliation are pronounced and lived by from that moment on. This needs to be clearly stated by both parties so that both can return to trust and cooperation again.

Some of you have been trying to forgive people who have not asked for your forgiveness – who have no intention of remorse, repentance, penance, or a true relationship. And you have blamed yourself and thought you were somehow wrong or not quite Christian. Stop feeling badly. It is a misunderstanding of the concept of forgiveness – a misunderstanding of what Jesus is asking. Jesus says we must forgive “seventy times seven,” but that assumes the person we are to forgive means business: that they are asking for our forgiveness – for a restored relationship with us. Conversely, if somebody wants real forgiveness from us and we give them the anemic, trustless truce so common today, that’s when *we* are in trouble with our Lord!

So we can still get clear of our own resentments and stay “on watch” (if appropriate) in case there is a change of heart. But we are not required to pretend anything, or to risk or trust or get involved with a person who is not willing to enter into a true process of forgiveness with us. (Never mind the exact language, we seek the intent.)

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Sometimes we have unwittingly turned off people seeking our forgiveness because we have wanted to be “nice.” We will not allow others to do penance for us. Or we give the impression that we are too self-contained or self-sufficient to be concerned about the foibles or failures of others: We can handle it. We can sustain the damage. “It’s no big deal for a strong saint like me.” We may not intend it, but if someone has wronged us, it is a big deal to them. There is no restoration of a relationship where damage is neither acknowledged nor healed.

So I have suggested that our generation is distracted by a shallow forgiveness, or at least a one-dimensional second cousin to true forgiveness. And we have lost touch with the biblical precept that requires a full restoration of relationship with anyone who wishes that with us – as we wish it with God.

Which reminds me: To pray the Lord’s Prayer means we get willing to go into this process and through the steps of genuine forgiveness with God on a daily basis. New Life – restored relationship with God – every day. Is that marvelous or is that marvelous! We never have to be even one whole day away from forgiveness with God. We never have to live with more than one day’s guilt. Isn’t that something? HE came to free us!