

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Saturday, April 13th, 2019
Palm Sunday, April 14th, 2019

Sermon: Forgive Us Our Debts (Fifth Petition)¹

Text: Matthew 6:12; Philippians 2:5-11; John 12:12-19

Focus Statement: God forgives our sins for Christ's sake, even though we don't deserve grace.

Function Statement: That they would forgive one another's sins out of thanksgiving to Christ.

Doctrinal Locus: "We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them.... So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us" (SC III, 5).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. In continuation of our meditations on the Lord's Prayer, our sermon text for today is the fifth petition: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12, ESV).² C.S. Lewis wrote that "everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive...."³ We may chuckle, but unfortunately, that is true of most of us, including myself. What we are concerned with this evening is not only whether or not we are forgiven, but whether we are *forgiving*.

¹ This is a major revision of a Lenten midweek sermon originally preached at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in Sullivan, Missouri, in the Spring of 2007.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1943; Reprint, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 104.

Many of us have people in our lives who are difficult to forgive. New research by the Barna Group shows that 27% of American Christians admit that they can “identify someone who they don’t *want* to forgive, and nearly a quarter of all Christians (23%) say that they “identify someone who they *can*’t forgive.”⁴ This is despite Christ’s strong warning: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14-15). But forgiveness is never easy.

We’ve all been wowed by stories of amazing grace: parents who forgive the man who killed their son or daughter; enemies in ethnic wars of genocide who embrace tearfully on battlefields turned into burial grounds for the dead. Holocaust survivors, victims of *Apartheid*, and Hutus and Tutsis learn to love despite the loss of life, limb, and loved ones. Our hearts thrill at these tales of truth and reconciliation, but when it comes to our own broken relationships, grace does not come so easily. Our circumstances are less dramatic yet more pressing and personal.

⁴ https://www.barna.com/research/forgiveness-christians/?mc_cid=329af911e9&mc_eid=4ae5ead55c

People hurt us. “Sticks and stones...” the saying goes, but words really *do* hurt. Jesus says that harsh words are the same as murder in God’s eyes (Matt. 5:21-22). The friend who reveals your secrets embarrasses you beyond compare. The office gossip who costs you a promotion or even your job is hard to ignore. The parent who never says, “I love you” or doesn’t approve of anything you do becomes a tyrant in your mind. The brother or sister who defrauds you not only of your toys and videogames but your share of the inheritance tears apart the sibling bond. The hardened spouse or headstrong child who abandons you is all too prodigal to welcome back. And then there are the deeper wounds of adultery, ruined reputation, abuse, and neglect.

It can be difficult to forgive. We want to love the other person. We want them to love us. But fear, doubt, mistrust, and resentment salt the wounds that won’t heal. Our broken hearts and bodies turn these evil acts into worms of bitterness that gnaw at our guts and madden our minds. Or maybe we lash out with forked tongues and both fists. We know we should forgive, but we can’t—or just don’t.

There is much in the world—indeed, in our very lives—that needs forgiven. And God expects us to forgive. But why must we forgive others their trespasses when we are the victims of so much injustice? God wants us to forgive for two reasons. First, as a loving expression of our faith; and, second, because, as God’s children, our character should reflect his character. “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *as God in Christ forgave you*” (Eph. 4:32).

Christ died for us while we were yet sinners (Rom. 5:8). He didn’t wait for us to apologize or get our act together. Rather, while we were hateful rebels full of selfish pride, even then Christ died for you. He made the first move. In the words of our epistle lesson, Jesus “emptied himself, by taking the form of a [slave], being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8-9). Jesus forgave your sins not because of anything you did or deserved but only because of who he is. He became nothing, so we could become everything.

A forgiving heart follows as the fruit of faith. Annie Dillard describes God's grace like filling a cup beneath a waterfall. Forgiveness overflows the cup and gushes out into the lives of the other people around us. How can we claim that we believe in God's grace if we are unwilling to give it to others? We can't. Jesus says, "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you *do not* forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive *your* sins" (Matt. 6:14-15).

These words are hard to ignore. Forgive, or you won't be forgiven. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Yet this is not some kind of "works righteousness," some way to *earn* God's forgiveness. God doesn't forgive us only after we first forgive others. Rather, God expects us to forgive others because he has *already* forgiven us. As Luther explains, "We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them.... So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us" (SC III, 5).

Jesus wants you to experience an abundant life full of grace. He wants you to experience life under the “waterfall.” If you are chained by your bitterness, hatred, and self-pity to another person’s sin, how does that help you or the other person? It won’t mend the relationship; it won’t heal your soul. The other person might not even know that they have wronged you or that you haven’t gotten over it. You could go weeks, months, *years* punishing the other person, and they wouldn’t even know it. The only one you’re really punishing is yourself. As Anne Lamott once said: Refusing to forgive somebody is like you drinking rat poison and then waiting for the *rat* to die. How’s that working for you?

So how do we forgive people who have wronged us? By praying this little prayer the Lord has given us. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Jesus forgives you for all of your sins. Indeed, “if God does not forgive without stopping, we are lost” (LC III, 91). So not only do we pray this petition for ourselves, but we pray for our friends, family, neighbors, and enemies who hurt us.

We pray that God’s mercy, grace, and blessings—all the “good stuff”—will also be theirs in Christ Jesus.

We never stop needing God’s grace. “For we daily sin much” (SC). But God’s grace is bigger than our sin. His forgiveness never stops flowing. The waterfall never runs dry. At this beginning of Holy Week, we are reminded that the same Jesus welcomed by crowds with shouts of “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday was rejected on Friday with cries of “Crucify him!” People are fickle in their love. Yet Jesus prayed for the Roman soldiers who gambled for his garments and the Jewish religious leaders who hurled insults at him even as he bled out for them. “Father, forgive them,” he prayed, “for they know now what they do” (Luke 23:34). According to the Greek grammarians, Jesus most likely prayed this prayer not just once, but over and over again.⁵ “Father, forgive them! Father, forgive.” And even now, seated at the right hand of the Father, Jesus *still* prays for us: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34; cf. Rom. 8:34). Father, forgive *us*. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

⁵ Imperfect tense, not present tense.