

Scripture Reading for Sunday May 17th 2019

Matt 6:9-15 (NIV)

⁹ “This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Matt 18:21-35 (NIV)

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” ²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.

²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶ “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’

he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. ²⁹ “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ ³⁰ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

The Content of the Lord's Prayer (Part 2)

You will have heard the quote, “To err is human; to forgive, divine.”¹ We naturally make mistakes, sometimes pretty consequential ones, but forgiveness is *not* natural. And forgiveness certainly isn't trivial or easy – hence “to forgive is considered *divine*,” a super-human act of God. Forgiveness becomes particularly problematic when the offences are momentous, intentional, and especially when they're being repeated! I'm sure someone will say to me later, “It is all right for *you* to talk about forgiveness, but let me tell you what happened to *me* . . .” And, of course, they will recall some appalling story of suffering, injustice and tragedy - with the implication that it is therefore totally *unforgivable*! Forgiveness is, then, both a *personal* matter and a *serious* matter. Yet the Lord's Prayer has the line, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,”² and so the weighty topic of forgiveness is our subject for today.

Our reading this morning was Matthew's account of the Lord's Prayer. Of all the lines he wants to emphasise at the end, possibly because he appreciated how his Jewish readers would react, he only reiterates the phrase about forgiveness: “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”³ This sounds both stern and scary, even conditional – and I will explore that a bit later.

First, if you have a keen ear, you will have noticed that Matthew's repetition changed the terminology from “debts” to “sins” (NIV/NET) or “trespasses” (NRSV) or “transgressions” (NASB), depending on the translation. There are various different Greek words for “sin” in the New Testament.⁴ By far the most common is *hamartia*, (“*har -martia*”) which means “missing the target” or “falling short”; Luke uses this word in his version of the Lord's Prayer.⁵ Another is *paraptoma*, (“*par- rap-toma*”) which means “a lapse”; it speaks of being caught off-guard, hence, an “offence” or a “transgression.” Matthew uses this word when he clarifies what Jesus said. The word *opheilema* (“*o phi la ma*”) is very rarely used and means “a debt,” a failure or an inability to pay what is justly due, and this is the word used in Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer.⁶ Straightaway we see its meaning in a *financial* context and we should pause before we automatically regard this as a moral metaphor for sin.

One of things the gospel writers stress is the arrival, or coming, of the “kingdom of God.”⁷ Many of the parables begin with, “The kingdom of God is like . . .” Moreover, Luke makes a specific connection

¹ Alexander Pope.

² Matt 6:12.

³ Matt 6:14-15. See also Mark 11:25–26.

⁴ Another word is *parabasis*, means stepping across – as in crossing the line (hence, “trespass”). Related to this theme is the strong word *anomia*, which is knowing right from wrong yet deliberately breaks the law (hence “wicked” or “lawless”).

⁵ Luke 11:4. “Forgive us our *sins*, for we ourselves forgive everyone *indebted* to us.”

⁶ This word choice is deemed by scholars to accurately reflect the underlying *Aramaic* word in the original, (c.f. *Abba*).

⁷ In Matthew, it is the “kingdom of heaven,” which avoids the mention of the word “God” to pious Jews.

between the coming of the kingdom of God and the Old Testament concept of Jubilee,⁸ something that was meant to happen every 50 years and was the cancellation of *debt* and the *liberation* of slaves. Israel's history, where they had been overrun by one country or other, resulted in a *culture* of debt. The nation had always to pay their conquerors through heavy taxation, and this was certainly true of the 1st century Roman Empire. Indeed, some 30 years later, when revolutionaries took over the Temple at the start of the Jewish War against Rome, the first provocative thing they did was to burn the Record of Debt. Consequently, "forgive us our debts" is a yearning for God's kingdom come on Earth "as it is in heaven."⁹ Some of you may remember the Jubilee 2000 movement which lobbied Western governments and financiers to cancel the Developing World's debt at the beginning of the new millennium. Although this didn't achieve all of its ambitious goals, a hundred billion dollars worth of debt from some 35 of the world's poorest countries was cancelled. One of the things about those debts, and the economic system that we live in, is that they *could not possibly* be repaid. That aspect alone is why this is a good example to illustrate the prayer, "forgive us our debts." Like those in the first century, we long for a day when justice and peace have economic and social ramifications for *all* those trapped in financial bondage.

Even so, Matthew and Luke both make the transition from forgiveness of economic debt to that of moral sin. I mentioned last week that the Lord's Prayer takes *evil* seriously; it also takes *sin* seriously. If forgiveness can lead to *restoration* of a relationship, sin is therefore a *broken* relationship, alienation, and estrangement.¹⁰ This fracture can be a *rejection* of "God, the author of life; our neighbour, our partner of life; and creation itself, the context of life."¹¹ In thinking we ourselves to be "God," the arbiter of truth, the center of existence, "we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. . .", as it says in 1 John.¹² The assumption throughout the Bible is that of universal sinfulness¹³ and that every person who comes before the holy One in prayer comes as a guilty one who needs God's forgiveness and restoration. There are elements of this prayer that link the sought-for forgiveness with the Last Judgment,¹⁴ but, like the "give us this day our daily bread," there is also a plea for frequent forgiveness in the here and now. Indeed, one of shocking claims Jesus made throughout his ministry was that he had authority to forgive sins; an authority that he later passes on to his disciples.¹⁵ The seriousness of sin was obvious to Jews, as evidenced by their elaborate rituals involving sacrifice in the Temple. Because that is not a feature of Christian worship today, we can slide into thinking that sin isn't really all that serious.¹⁶ And, consequently, the cost of forgiveness is not so painful; God will forgive anything

⁸ Luke 4:16-21 (especially v19 – The "year of the Lord's favour" is Jubilee; Lev 25). This was a reminder that, after their experience of slavery in Egypt, they were going to live (as a nation) *differently*.

⁹ Matt 6:10. (This notion can be re-contextualised in the context of overwhelming, personal credit-card debt.)

¹⁰ Douglas John Hall, *Cross in Our Context*, 104.

¹¹ Douglas John Hall, *Cross in Our Context*, 105.

¹² 1 John 1:8-10.

¹³ Rom 3:23.

¹⁴ Forgiveness is one of the expected blessings of the Day of Salvation: Jer 31:34; Ezek 36:25–32; Isa 40:2; 55:6–7.

¹⁵ Mark 2:1-12; Luke 7:48-50. See the post-resurrection commission to the disciples: Luke 24:46-48; John 20:21-23.

¹⁶ After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the early church interpreted those events as changing the way that God's forgiveness comes about. It is *not* through sacrifices Temple, they saw Christ's death the final sacrifice and his resurrection as a great act of liberation - of forgiveness - although the only saw that with hindsight. (See the book of Hebrews.)

at a click of his fingers, just like that! In this season of Lent, we are reminded that this is not the case. Forgiveness arises because of the slow, cruel death of Jesus; grace is not cheap. Sin is a serious business, not just to forgive, but because – like evil – there is a *systemic* aspect to it and we *can't* save ourselves. Sin is more than just a list of our offences; as the prayer book reminds us, there are both sins of commission and *omission*. And not just as individuals, but as a society, indeed, the whole of humankind. Because of an emphasis on personal piety, we are conditioned to think that sin is simply a *personal* problem; but the most significant sins we commit are utterly corporate and communal. For example, when we buy our coffee, chocolate, and clothing – just consider the international supply chain, the farmers and the sweat shops. All sin is offensive to God. We have run up debt so large that all we can do is ask for God's forgiveness because we can never hope to pay it back. Yet, in our generation, genuine forgiveness is seen as a vague notion of mutual tolerance, which is often a way of sweeping the real issues of life under the carpet. Forgiveness is richer, higher, harder and more shocking than we normally think.¹⁷

When we pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we also have forgiven those who have sinned against us," this is *NOT* saying that we forgive those who have sinned against us in order to *earn the right* of God's forgiveness! Rather, it is a recognition that God forgives only the *penitent* and that the chief evidence of true repentance *is* a forgiving spirit.¹⁸ Fostering a forgiving spirit is a feature of being a participant in God's kingdom, and this is the opposite of a spirit of retaliation or holding a grudge.

Our second reading from Matthew illustrates this point. It begins by Peter asking, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"¹⁹ Peter probably thought he was being generous because the prophet Amos indicates only three times.²⁰ Jesus replies by effectively saying, "If you're counting, you have missed the whole point of forgiveness!"²¹ There is *no* reckonable limit to forgiveness. He then tells a financial parable in the context of a non-Jewish king.²² Briefly, an official had embezzled an *impossibly* large amount of tax revenue and repayment was equally impossible.²³ Rather than simply executing the scoundrel, the king determines to inflict a more degrading and protracted punishment. The man pleads for time to make restitution, which is ridiculous; he could never repay the amount – his situation was hopeless. The king's response is equally shocking; he magnanimously forgives the debt. But the man does *not* respond by sharing that compassionate spirit and thereby break the culture, or cycle, of oppression associated with debt. No, he tries to extract repayment of a relatively minor, but payable, amount from a person who owes him money. The story

¹⁷ Just re-read the story of the prodigal son; Luke 15:11-32.

¹⁸ On penitence: Put bluntly, there is no point of person begging for divine forgiveness for having beaten their spouse if there is no intention of with dealing with the underlying drinking problem!

¹⁹ Matt 18:21. The context of this chapter is the kingdom of God and the NRSV interprets "brother" as "church member."

²⁰ Amos 1:3,6,9,11,13; 2:1,4,6. And later, citing this evidence, some notable Rabbis suggest only three times.

²¹ Matt 18:22. Jesus is not playing math games with Peter!

²² (Or Matthew inserts – and adapts - that story here to support the point.) We know the king in the story is *not* Jewish because Jewish kings would imprison debtors, but not torture them or sell off their wives and children (likely into sexual slavery), and the man worships the king, which a Jew would never do.

²³ The amount of money involved would exceed the taxes for all of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria! (Eugene Boring)

ends with the official being hauled back to the king, who says, “You wicked servant, I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?”²⁴ That is where some scholars think the actual words of Jesus end and what follows are is an allegorising interpretation of Matthew.²⁵ Matthew’s emphasis, following on from Peter’s question, is to *not* be stingy or ungracious like the unmerciful servant, whereas the parable begins with “the kingdom of heaven is like . . .”²⁶ and its focus is on the generosity of the king, or God, who forgives an unpayable debt. In response to that, and as members of his kingdom, we should embody that same forgiving spirit and pass on what we have received. As it says in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”²⁷

Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offence against God, the injuries that others have done to us are small by comparison. Put another way, *if* we have an exaggerated view of the offences of others, we *may* have minimised our view of our own.²⁸ Now this does *not* mean that we should swallow all resentment and “forgive and forget” as though nothing had happened. Unlimited forgiveness is *not* to be confused with sentimental toleration of hurtful and abusive behaviour. Christians are often guilty of forgiving too much too quickly. Premature forgiveness is an easy way out that does little to help the offender and heal the damaged relationship.²⁹

In forgiving us, God is *not* saying, “Never mind, your sin is not really such a big deal after all.” Sin *is* consequential. What’s happening is this: in forgiving us, God is *refusing* to hold our sin against us, and God is *refusing* to let our sin be the last word in the way that the world is moving. In the same way, in our forgiving of others, we are *not* saying the injustice and suffering that we have experienced is inconsequential. Those sins have caused us *real* pain. What we are doing is *refusing*, with the help of Holy Spirit, to let that sin have the last word in our story. In commending us to forgive, Jesus is *not* producing a race-doormats; he has no interest in producing a new set of victims, the world produces enough. Rather, in commending us to forgive, Jesus is inviting us to turn the world around, to and break the cycle of revenge and retribution. And the courage to forgive one another begins with the humility of recognising that we ourselves have been forgiven by God. This is no easy lesson! Forgiving others who have wronged us is not natural; revenge is natural. The key thing is that one should never ever give up making forgiveness and reconciliation one’s goal. This is part of kingdom work, and experiencing forgiveness frees us and releases us in surprising and profound ways.

Let me make this more personal. As an adult, my relationship with my father was somewhat strained. From my perspective, my Dad always *had* to be “right” and have the *last* word in any discussion. He liked to talk and be argumentative on all sorts of topical issues: politics, religion, ethics, etc. It eventually

²⁴ Matt 18:33.

²⁵ Matt 18:35 (and possibly 34 as well); this ties in with Matt 6:14-15. Hence it seems, for Matthew, God’s forgiveness is revocable and that is one reason the prayer can be seen as seeking ultimate forgiveness on the final Day of Reckoning.

²⁶ Matt 18:23.

²⁷ Matt 5:7. (Again, in Matthew’s thinking – and Jewish context – that may refer to the mercy at the Last Judgement.)

²⁸ Alternatively, some foolish people try and go through life trying to avoid acknowledging that they owe anyone anything.

²⁹ See also Mat 18:15-20.

became pointless to talk about anything because, if I did not agree with his viewpoint, there was no space to simply agree to differ; he was right and I was wrong. I grew not to take the bait and so conversation became minimal. I found it very hard to forgive my Dad for his patriarchal and authoritative nature and, for what seemed to me, an unwillingness to respect any different viewpoints of his adult son. Only late in his life, when his own health was failing, was I able to forgive him. He did not ask for forgiveness; he probably thought he had done nothing wrong! And I did not say the words “I forgive you” out loud to him; but my behaviour towards him changed as I recognised he was simply a product of *his* generation and upbringing. I was able to genuinely pray *with* him and *for* him when he was in a nursing home. My forgiving him provided healing for me.

Let me end with some practical points on forgiveness. Without forgiveness toward others, the world moves on and we stay fixed, locked to that event where we were badly wronged. By holding on to that grievance, our suffering continues and can be amplified, spreading bitterness into other areas of our lives. We can also become ‘unlikable’; people may not want to hang around us because of our negative attitude. To move forward we must remember forgiveness is initially a decision, not an emotion or a feeling. Over time, and with the Spirit’s help, we trust our hearts will follow our heads and the fires of anger and bitterness will fade. This will seem like an impossibility at the outset and shows that forgiveness is a process, not a work of the moment. In the end, some sadness and scars will remain, but the fading of the bitterness demonstrates the injustice no longer holds us in captivity. If the other person has repented of their ways, that may aid our own healing. But if not, that can result in the forgiveness process taking longer, because it is one-sided. Forgiveness does *not* mean condoning or ignoring injustice – which may well involve law courts. It is saying, “By the grace of God, I will not let those words and actions impact negatively my wellbeing and future.” Forgiveness does *not* mean forgetting. Moreover, while reconciliation is the ideal; it is not always possible, especially if it one-sided. And so forgiveness may end with you wanting the best for them, while saying privately, “I do not trust you.” Forgiveness may be painful and revenge may be sweet, but forgiveness will do us lasting good, while revenge will only do us lasting harm. Just take a look at the world around us to see the reality of this cycle of violence and injustice fueled by revenge.³⁰

“Forgive us our sins, as we also have forgiven those who have sinned against us” is *never* an easy prayer to pray. Here and elsewhere in prayer, divine action and our action are not alternatives; *both* are needed. It is because “To err is human; to forgive, divine” that we need God’s help to forgive. It is not a sign of weakness, but of our humanity. We are *not* self-sufficient, but creatures of loving Heavenly Father who graciously has forgiven in in Christ. Amen. Let us pray.

³⁰ I acknowledge J. John’s *God’s Priorities: Living the Lord’s Prayer in the 21st Century*, (Victor Press, 2001) for this paragraph.