

Mark 11:23-25

Forgive us Our Debts

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This month our worship theme has been on the theme “How Do I Pray?” The sermons have all been based on the Lord’s Prayer. Why, because the Lord’s Prayer is more than a prayer; it is a lesson in how to pray. When the disciples noticed that Jesus prayed every day they started to realize that Jesus depended on prayer. He needed that time alone with God. Jesus drew strength and peace from those prayers, so Peter and Andrew, James and John asked him to show them how to pray. “Master, show us how to pray...” His answer to their request came in the form of a demonstration. He said- Pray like this, and then he bowed his head to say – Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. You know the words as well as your own name. We begin every service of worship with these same sacred lines. The Lord’s Prayer has become such a significant part of human history that it has been spoken at solemn occasions for 2000 years. It is one of the first prayers we know, and the last prayer we hear when we are dying. In times of trouble or confusion when we don’t know what else to do or say, we bow our heads and recite these precious words which Jesus gave us.

In this sermon series about how to pray each sermon has focused on a line in this prayer. Today we consider- “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” This pivotal line about forgiveness forms the centerpiece of the Lord’s Prayer. You work up to forgiveness but once you learn forgiveness, the rest is downhill. Forgiveness is a key to happiness; if you want to enjoy all that this life has to offer, you need to learn to let go of grudges and resentments. In fact forgiveness is so important to faithful living that it is even the key to learning how to pray. Why does this line form the centerpiece of this prayer, and what do these words mean to us, for our lives, today?

In the first place, Jesus reminds us that we need to forgive one another **every day**. Forgiveness is cited at the heart of the prayer because it is so central to human existence. Jesus tells his disciples to come open their hearts to God every day. Start each day with prayer and end it that way too. But even before they pray, they need to prepare to pray. In our scripture lesson today in Mark's gospel Jesus tells his disciples, that they need to forgive other people **before** they come to kneel down to pray.

Before you come to God to talk --take a personal inventory. If you are holding a grudge against your neighbor – then work it out. If you are mad at your colleague in the office,- then let it go. If you are nursing some old resentment against your spouse or partner - set things right **before** you kneel down to pray. Jesus tells us to pray every day, pray without ceasing. But you cannot really open your mind and heart to God if you are distracted by all those things on your list of resentments. You cannot listen to God if you are secretly nursing self-pity. You cannot bow your head to enter the gates of prayer's garden if you are full of self-righteousness.

American Experience did a recent show on PBS about the Amish. The Amish are a sect, once persecuted in Europe, and now locked in time or at least committed to a traditional lifestyle which they brought to these shores in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They are not perfect communities, and they struggle with jealousy and betrayal. But almost every week in their worship there is some mention of forgiveness. You might wonder why bonnet-wearing buggy-driving farmers have so much to forgive. The truth is that even the simplest human interactions can involve bruised feelings and slights real or imagined. The Amish understand that they cannot avoid one another so they have to learn to live together. Unless you live on an island – you probably have forgiveness issues.

Peter came to Jesus and asked him – “Lord if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” It was a logical question, and a practical one. I imagine Peter thought forgiving someone 7 times was very generous.

Jesus' answer is almost troubling in his expansiveness. He said- not seven times. You don't forgive someone in the church 7 times. You forgive them but seventy seven. Do it so easily that you no longer can count it. Don't count your forgiveness. **Be forgiving.** Shake off your bitterness. Release your anger. Let go of your defensiveness. And humble yourself before the folly of life. Jesus never tells us to grovel. He would never encourage you to allow someone to abuse you. This is different. Jesus says, get right with your neighbor. Forgive those who need to be forgiven – if only in your heart. Release them from your anger, and release the toxins of hatred that will eat you up, otherwise. Let these things go and take a weight off your shoulders. If you cannot find it in your heart to forgive, just give these people to God, so you don't feel so determined to get even. Release them; that is the essence of forgiveness.

In the second place God's forgiveness is connected to our own. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. God can forgive just about anything we do. But God has trouble forgiving our inability to forgive others.

In ancient times when people could not pay a debt if they defaulted on their loan they had to give up collateral, and lose the family farm. But if they were laborers and got into debt they had to indenture themselves as slaves. But the ancients had strict rules about how long you could be enslaved for a debt. The Hammerabi Cod requires that indentures servants serve no more than 3 years. The Bible forbids charging interest on family loans, so that people don't enslave their relations. The Torah actually forbids charging interest against another Israelite because it was too easy to incur debt that might enslave you.

When Jesus says give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts, he is praying the pray of every peasant prayed each day. Every poor person in Galilee prayed – Dear God grant me enough food to survive today, and pray I may find work and the crops I plan may yield food so I can feed my

family and avoid going into debt. When we pray give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts – we pray in solidarity with the poor.

When we say these words, that we are all vulnerable. We remember how precarious life can be. In this moment we become like those Hebrews in the wilderness- we see that everything we have belongs to God. Everything we have built up in our own little kingdoms is temporal, and fleeting, and it comes from gifts that we have been given. When we see how vulnerable life makes us it is hard to judge others so harshly for their mistakes or misfortune. Forgive us our debts as we forgive others.

Finally, the bible says the reason you can and must forgive others is because God has forgiven you. It is God's nature to forgive. We get confused about that. We focus on God's temper and so often forget God's tender mercies. When Cain slew his brother Able, God forgave him. When Jacob stole his brother's birthright, God forgave him. When Joseph's older brothers all sold young Joseph into slavery God forgave them. When David committed adultery with Bathsheba- and then manipulated his army to have Bathsheba's husband killed in battle- God forgave even this. When Elijah turned on God in anger God forgave him. When Peter betrayed Jesus 3 times, God forgave him.

When God sent Jesus to live among us and people killed him, God forgave the world. It is God's nature to be magnanimous and open-hearted. No matter how foolish or vain we may be when we turn to God with humble hearts God forgives us all our mistakes. Like a father who sees a prodigal son or daughter afar from the porch of the house, God runs out to hug us. God holds us before we can speak. God quits our weary hearts with soothing words. When we remember how much we have been forgiven, then we can forgive.

There has been a lot in the news this week about a jury trial of Dwayne Moore and Edward Washington who are accused of killing 4 people in Mattapan in 2010. One article caught my attention. It was a story about Diann Moore, mother of one of the accused. Up from Virginia where she lives, she has

been living in the Pine Street inn. Her family won't keep her for fear of retaliation from people who believe Moore is guilty. She thinks he is innocent and the evidence is not clear. At the end of her bus ride to the court house, she files into the small courtroom, and sits next to an unlikely new friend. A grandmother of one of the victims saves her a seat as together they listen to the proceedings. Both the mothers of the accused have found their only real comfort in the kindness of some of the family members of the victims.

Forgiveness is not optional for these folks. They are breathing the same air every day. What distinguished them is that they are wise enough to know that they are stuck in a small courtroom and must find a way to co-exist.

The truth is there is only one difference between these people whose lives are locked together in a murder trial, and the rest of us. That is that they realize how much that they need to forgive one another. Most of us imagine that no one will notice if we fail to forgive. Most of us think no one sees the hatred in our eyes, but our children do. Most of us imagine we can nurse a little grudge and chew on it like a cow with a cud, but it comes up like sour food and ruins our digestion of life's wonderful tastes. Plus, God knows and you know.

Let us pray ----that step toward forgiving others can be the hardest step we take. Forgive us for our hard hearts. Forgive us for shoring up our defenses. Forgive us for finding specks in others eyes and ignoring the log in our own. Forgive us for being so stubborn. Wash over us this day with an awareness of your grace. Set us free to pray the Lord's prayer in earnest.... Our Father...