

“AS”

(*The Lord's Prayer – 4*)

Matthew 18:21-35 (p. 952)

Jesus began this teaching on prayer by saying, “*This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father...*” From the outset he reminded us that this is a corporate prayer. As different as we are, we are told to pray it together. And nowhere are we more together than when we confess our sin – whether our prayer is silent or spoken. It is this common element of confession that surfaces in the Lord’s Prayer with the request: “*Father, forgive us as we forgive.*” So let’s look at this fourth petition and ask three questions. First: What are we asking God to forgive us? Second: Why does this request appear to mean so little to us? And third: Why is it so hard for us to forgive?

The first question that comes to mind when we recite these familiar words is: What are we asking God to forgive? Presbyterians, given our frugal Scottish heritage, would prefer to have our debts forgiven. The English, perhaps a bit more territorial (if not provincial) ask to have their trespasses forgiven. And some modern translators want their sins forgiven. Which term is the correct one? Conveniently, we are dealing with three different Greek words. Each word gives us an important clue about the full meaning of this particular confession.

The first Greek word, “paraptoma,” becomes “trespass” in English. In context, the Greek word means a “false step” or a “falling away.” It didn’t mean a “forbidden entry” – which is the common meaning of “trespassing” these days. This word may be the least close to the heart of this request, but it does bring something to mind that we dare not forget. Beyond being guilty of certain deliberate wrongdoings, we also need forgiveness for all kinds of unintentional, perhaps unconscious misdeeds. Let’s face it: If it were something we really could not help, I doubt that God would hold that against us. But isn’t it true that there are wrongs we have done of which we could have been conscious if we had asked God to make us sensitive? It seems appropriate that we should pray, “*Father in heaven, forgive us our trespasses.*”

The second Greek word, the one we find in Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer is “opheilemata” and it means “debts” – literally “money debts.” But it also means “duties” of all sorts, both known and admitted. That word “duty” has fallen on hard times lately. For many people the word has come to mean those tasks which, if they are done, will most likely be done grudgingly. It smacks of an attitude that says to itself, “*It’s obvious that nobody else is willing to do this job; so I guess it’s my duty to see that it gets done.*”

In the Bible a duty is a sacred trust, a thing of dignity. The Bible says that we are born “debtors.” We owe a debt of responsibility to our parents and our country; a debt of allegiance to our religious community; and above all we owe a debt of love to God. We’re even indebted to ourselves. We owe ourselves the best that we can be. That is how we were designed to operate. And maturity begins when we acknowledge these debts and willingly assume those duties.

But you and I need God’s forgiveness, don’t we? More often than we care to admit, we have neglected our duties – even our clear duties. And given our track record, most of us probably deserve to spend the rest of eternity in debtor’s prison because we have faulted on so many of our debts. But God wants to forgive us our debts, not bury us under them. He wants to renew our trust. So Jesus teaches us to pray, “*Father in heaven, forgive us our debts.*”

There is a third word, used in Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. The word is “hamartias.” And that word which we translate as “sins” perhaps comes closest to the heart of the matter. The implication of the word is that our sins are not so much the things we do (a slip-up, a trespass) nor is it a case of what we fail to do (a debt of neglected duty). It has to do with something we are. It is our basic human condition.

Sin is, in fact, a universal disease of the will that has infected every person in the world. And the clearest symptom of that disease, it would seem, is that what “comes naturally” to us, the thing we are inclined to end up doing is the cheaper, the easy out, even though we know better. You might almost say that human sin is a case of “knowing better, but getting by with less.” But that condition is such an elemental fact of life that none of us has been able to escape it. I know that I have a running problem with it. It’s a comfort to know I’m in good company.

St. Paul laid out the problem quite personally in his letter to the Romans. He wrote, “*I often find that I have the will to do good, but not the power. That is, I don’t accomplish the good that I set out to do, and the evil that I don’t really want to do I find I am always doing. It is an agonizing situation and who on earth can set me free from the clutches of my own sinful nature? I thank God there is a way out through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” That is the issue. And Paul reminds us that there is only one antidote in all of God’s creation strong enough to counteract the poison that is eating away at our lives from within. That antidote is the forgiveness we are offered in Jesus Christ.

But that raises a second question. If God’s forgiveness is so vital, so urgent, then why doesn’t this prayer mean more to us? Well as I said at the outset of this study, the sheer familiarity of these words could lead us to treat them more as ritual than as real. For example, if I bumped into you in a doorway I might say, “*I beg your pardon.*” Now, that is a ritual. It may be little more than a polite grunt: “*Hrrumph, Pardon me.*” But if I had done you serious injury, something that hurt

you badly and weighed heavily on my conscience, and if I were to come to you and say, “*I beg your pardon,*” that would be entirely different. They’re exactly the same words; but they would no longer be ritual, they would be quite real.

When we recite the Lord’s Prayer and come to the petition “*Forgive us our debts,*” what we are saying to God is: “*I beg your pardon.*” Is it ritual – or is it real? Our task today is to help what is inevitably ritual to become more and more real for us. But how? The answer lies in the words Jesus added to this request for pardon. Jesus told us to pray: “*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*” That is to say, “*Father, we beg your pardon for the wrong we have done as we pardon those who have wronged us.*” Jesus reminds us here that God’s forgiveness becomes real and alive and no longer a matter of ritual when we know what we’re asking for because we practice it.

This petition is the most unexpected part of the prayer; at least to the person hearing it for the first time. What would seem normal to us, or to the Jews who first heard these words, would have been something like: “*Forgive us our sins – because we are very sorry about them.*” Or “*Forgive us our sins – because we are truly penitent.*” Or “*Forgive us our sins – because we promise to try to do better.*” Not one of those thoughts is even hinted at here.

The words that Jesus puts in our mouths are quite explicit: “*...as we forgive those who have wronged us.*” And notice that it is as we forgive and not because we forgive. Jesus doesn’t invite us to claim God’s forgiveness because we have earned it by forgiving others. The word is “as” – which means that if, in all honesty, we cannot say that we are forgiving others, we have no business asking for God’s forgiveness. If we are not forgiving, then the first part of this petition is simply ritual and nothing happens. That is the startlingly plain meaning of this fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer.

Jesus backed up this teaching, you’ll recall, with a memorable parable recorded in Matthew 18. It concerned a servant whose Lord had forgiven his multi-million dollar debt. Then this already-forgiven debtor turned and, without any pangs of conscience, throttled a fellow servant who owed him a few bucks. “*You pay up what you owe me and you pay now!*” he said. He wouldn’t forgive. He wouldn’t even wait. And the enormous difference between the amounts owed by those two servants is, of course, our Lord’s way of telling us that the wrongs that people have done to us are miniscule compared to the wrongs we have done to God in the way we have lived our lives. Do you believe that – in any practical sense?

The end of the parable is as terrible as it is unmistakable. The Lord heard what the first servant had done and sent for him. “*You malignant slave,*” he called him. “*I forgave the total amount of your debt when you pleaded with me. Were you not bound to show your fellow servant the same forgiveness as I showed you?*”

And the master was so angry that he condemned the man to torture until he should pay his debt in full.

It's a rough story, and of course it's a parable – it's not an allegory in which we can make every detail speak. But the lesson of the parable is hardly softened by what Jesus added at the end. He said: *“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”* Those are hard words, and meant to be taken personally. But we all know in our hearts that they ring true. There is an inexorable torture, an unrelenting painful imprisonment we feel in our spirits, when we nurse a grudge and refuse to forgive our brother, our sister, from the heart.

Yet it is so difficult to let go of that grudge you've been nursing along for so many months – or even years. It's hard to forgive, isn't it? But why? Why is it so hard to forgive? Let me suggest three reasons. For one thing, forgiving is difficult because it demands that we restrain all those natural impulses that invariably surface whenever we have been wronged – or think we've been wronged. When we are under physical attack, self-defense isn't a conscious decision; it's a conditioned reflex. And we carry that conditioning over into our emotions. So the very idea that we might “turn the other cheek” isn't just far-fetched, it's downright unnatural. Our Lord's demand that we forgive from the heart goes way beyond the performance we would naturally expect from ourselves. But then, Jesus is never satisfied with what we naturally are. He wants us to discover how unnaturally good our lives can be.

A second reason why we often find it so hard to forgive is because forgiveness demands that we continue to deal with the person who has wronged us as a person; when we would really prefer to write the whole thing off by treating that offender as a non-entity, something sub-human. But the forgiveness that Jesus expects of us doesn't allow that easy out. He expects us to honestly attempt to understand the offender, the enemy, on the chance that he just might turn out to be less evil and more human than we thought he was.

I'm not suggesting that understanding someone will automatically make it easier to forgive him. Understanding doesn't even necessarily make it easier for us to like him. In fact you may come to understand just what a jerk he really is. But the command from our Lord is that we are to forgive – and love. And Christian love, agape, forgiving love, has nothing to do with liking. Love is a decision; it is an act of the will. But sometimes it's hard. It's hard to forgive and to love.

And here's one final reason why forgiving is so difficult. It's hard to forgive someone else because it demands that we expose ourselves to the possibility of further hurt. There's no assurance that forgiveness will “work” – in the sense that we can expect a heavy series of antibiotics to “work” on a case of strep. There is

no guarantee that forgiveness will unfailingly win over the person we have forgiven, convert a cunning enemy into a loyal friend. Do you know why?

It's because if it is hard to forgive, it is just as difficult to be forgiven gracefully. So when you forgive someone, don't rub it in. Forgiveness, rubbed in, itches with a deadly itch. Instead, when you forgive, do it honestly, gently; and then get on with your life. And be prepared to be hurt again; because you will be, just as surely as you will hurt others again.

Jesus taught us to pray, "*Father in heaven, forgive us **as** we forgive.*" This petition is the logical sequel to "*Give us this day our daily bread.*" Without daily bread we cannot live at all. But without forgiveness our living would hardly be human life. Forgiveness is like manna. It's just a more subtle form of manna. Everyone needs it every day; and if we don't get it, we die inside – our hearts starve to death.

So our Lord gave us this prayer, and this petition in particular, as a precious reminder that God is ready and eager to meet our deepest daily need, the need to be loved and forgiven. But he also reminds us that this need of ours can only be met if we help meet it; by doing what comes unnaturally – by forgiving each other from the heart.

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