

And Forgive Us Our Trespasses, As We Forgive Those Who Trespass Against Us

Luke 11:2-4

He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

We hear Martin Luther in the Catechisms, teach us: “And remit our debts, as we remit what our debtors owe. What is this? Answer – We ask in this prayer that our heavenly Father would not regard our sins nor deny these petitions on their account, for we are worthy of nothing for which we ask, nor have we earned it. Instead we ask that God would give us all things by grace, for we daily sin much and indeed deserve only punishment. So, on the other hand, we, too, truly want to forgive heartily and to do good gladly to those who sin against us.¹ This petition should serve God’s purpose of breaking our pride and keeping us humble. We sin, constantly. God has reserved to Godself this prerogative, to forgive us. Those who boast of their goodness and despise others should examine themselves and put this petition uppermost in their mind. It is by no accident that in Matthew, Jesus immediately follows up the Lord’s Prayer with the teaching of forgiveness, ‘If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.’ (Matthew 6:14) Luke states, ‘Forgive and you will be forgiven.’ (Luke 6:37)”² Remember, this is the community’s prayer. Lack of forgiveness always brings destruction to a community. And so this petition in the prayer that we say together, calls for reconciliation. Liturgically, we have the Passing of the Peace, which is meant to be a time of reconciliation, not greeting.

Debts/Sins/Trespasses – There is a significant difference between Matthew and Luke on this petition. Matthew says, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Luke says, “Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” We have various translations and traditions of the Lord’s Prayer that use the words sin, debts, and trespasses. What are we really talking about? The first verb in both versions we translate “forgive” is APHIEMI – let go, send away, give up, cancel, pardon, abandon, put some distance between, set something free that has been tied up or bound. In Matthew, we have “debt” – HOPHEILEMATA – debt, what is owed, one’s due. And then “Debtors” – HOPHEILETAS – debtor, one who is obligated, be under obligation, one who is guilty, one who is capable, at fault. In Luke, we have “sin” – HAMARTIA – sin, sinful deed, sinfulness, a body ruled by sin. Luke then has this all inclusive word, “everyone” – PANTI – everyone, everything. And Luke finishes with “indebted” – HOPHEILONTI – owe, be indebted, bound, commit a sin. Matthew puts our current request for forgiveness because of our past actions – Forgive us debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.

¹ Small Catechism

² Large Catechism

Luke puts our current request, forgiveness, because of our current actions – Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. Luke believes we should be in a current state of forgiving if we are going to ask for forgiveness ourselves.

Forgive us our (_____) – We are all debtors. The books are in the red as far as our understanding with God goes. We have run up a debt that we will never be able to repay. We acknowledge our dependence on God to provide us with the necessities of life. Here, we acknowledge that we have a dependence on God to forgive us a debt we cannot repay. We would like this petition to say, “Teach us to forgive others, so that we might be forgiven.” But it doesn’t. We would love to present ourselves as forgivers first, but we are not. We are debtors first, who need forgiven. We are at God’s mercy, first and foremost.³ Remember that this is, once again, a corporate petition. The word “Forgive” is for US. Too often we think sin is a private thing. It is not, it is a corporate thing. We know that we corporately participate in sins because of the groups we are in, or the actions we take (or fail to take). So often we are quick to say, “I didn’t, I never, I, I, I.” The easiest one to point to in this country is whites holding black as slaves. So often I hear whites say, “I never had slaves. My parents never had slaves. Blah, blah, blah.” But the truth is, we gain from a system that promoted whites, to the detriment of blacks. We still gain from the sin of those who came before us. And truth be told, we still like it that way. Men, we gain because for millennia, it has been a male-dominated system. To say, “I don’t” is not accepting the consequence of corporate sin. And this petition calls us to collectively reverse it. But even deeper, is the understanding that personal sin affects the community. When we do something that is against the way God desires, it affects the community. It negatively affects the Kingdom of God, with everyone and everything in it. A large reason we are called to be in a community is to keep each other in check. Everything is a spiritual matter. So what you think, say, and do, in every matter, affects the community and the Kingdom. And so we say US.

This petition comes right after the one about “bread”, necessities. This underscores the placement of forgiveness in the scheme of living. “Bread” make life possible, forgiveness makes life bearable and worth living. Need proof? Look at the number of people who have “bread” to the extravagance, more than they could ever consume, yet who are weighed down by the guilt that their lives seem like a nightmare. It is forgiveness that is offered that allows us to not become hypocrites, as Jesus accused many “religious people” of becoming. The word hypocrite comes from the ancient Greek stage, where the “hypocrite” was an actor who played two or more roles in a single play. As the actor changed characters, he would wear different masks to symbolize the different persons that were being played. The masks would provide a different face, a different voice, a different character, a totally different person. The fact is that these masks were heavy, and sometimes, the “hypocrites” would have to be carried from the stage because they had fainted from the exhaustion that occurred from keeping up with the multiple personas. The same thing happens today. We spend a lot of time wearing different masks, and trying to keep up with the faces we present. We should realize we need to stop wearing masks, stop being hypocrites, and live Kingdom lives.⁴

³ Willimon/Hauerwas, pages 78-86

⁴ Seilhammer 46-50

As We Forgive Those Who (_____) Us – When we refuse to forgive others, what we are saying is, “I would like you to stay out of my life, and I do not want to be involved in yours.” Is that what God intends? Our sin has cosmic consequences. Are we just willing to spin the wheel and not care? Christian forgiveness is not cheap, nor is it easy. Forgiveness is not natural. But it is required, it is what God commands.⁵ Forgiveness has two necessary elements. The first is that we need to give up the notion of revenge. The second is that we come with the desire for the well-being of the other, over ourselves.⁶ In the biblical story, debts lead to slavery. We see many times that someone owes someone else a debt, and they become their slave. The same is true now. Irish indentured servants coming to America. We may not have indentured servants today, but we are bound by the debts we owe and the people we owe them to.⁷ This is a prayer of gratitude. This is a prayer that measures out grace. This is a prayer of reconciliation, not revenge. Forgiveness is not optional. It is foundational to living in the Kingdom. Jesus teaches us to ask God to forgive our sins. But Jesus added the word “AS”. The Greek word we translate to “as” means, “in proportion to”. We ask God to forgive us in the same manner as we forgive others. You can’t pray these words without examining your own life. This petition truly exposes our deficiencies. What if God really listened to us here? What if God forgave us in the same manner that we forgive others? And remember, we are expected to forgive everyone, everything! How would we do? Self-righteousness is such a seductive sin. The sexy sin of self-righteousness teaches us to glory in our own goodness and point to the heinous sinfulness of others. We are taught to withhold forgiveness because they don’t deserve it, because they are not as good as us. When we pray this prayer, we acknowledge that we have something in common with even our worst enemies. We both need forgiveness. How sexy is that?⁸ The entire biblical story is about forgiveness. In Matthew 18:21-35, Peter asks to forgive seven (7) times? Remember, seven symbolizes perfect. Peter asks if he has to perfectly forgive. Jesus’ response is seven times seventy: perfect beyond all perfection. The theme of forgiveness runs from Genesis to Revelation; from creation to new creation; from God to God’s Kingdom. In Matthew 18:21-35, we hear Jesus say that we are always to forgive. When we ask how much are we to forgive someone, Jesus’ answer is to forgive perfectly beyond all perfection. We hear Jesus in Matthew 5:21-26, say that if someone has offended you, you are to go to them and be reconciled. We hear Jesus say that reconciliation has to occur before our offerings mean anything. Go and be reconciled, then come back and place your offerings at the altar. This is the purpose of the Passing of the Peace in our worship. Again in Matthew 18:21-35, we hear Jesus teach the parable about the servant who was forgiven their full debt, then failed to forgive the debt of their slave. Jesus teaches that behavior is not acceptable kingdom living. Our full debt has been wiped off the books. We are expected to offer the same release that we have received ourselves. So, take some time today. Who have you not forgiven? Who do you refuse to be reconciled with? Who is Jesus telling you to go to? Who is God telling you to forgive? Who is the Holy Spirit pushing you toward?

⁵ Willimon/Hauerwas, pages 78-86

⁶ Bondi, pages 93-94

⁷ Crossan, pages 144-162

⁸ Mulholland, pages 89-107

How do we live with others, in broken relationships? The foundation has to be forgiveness, reconciliation, and repentance, regardless of how big the break is. Sometimes we have to work at recognizing brokenness. We don't always see it or realize it. That is why in Matthew 18, Jesus says the offended party is the one to initiate the reconciliation, because there are times we don't realize we have offended someone. We are called to always be active in repentance, reconciliation and forgiveness. Remember, repentance is about change. We are constantly changing ourselves to meet God's desire for us. A key component in repentance is forgiveness. Forgiveness frees us and others to work wholeness from brokenness. Forgiveness may then provide a contagious hope. Once we forgive/ or receive forgiveness, we might provide hope in other brokenness, or in other people, that they may also be healed by forgiveness. With the work of the Holy Spirit, it may become contagious. We might not be able to stop ourselves once we get started. This contagious hope may lead to a lasting peace.⁹

The symbol of this petition is the cross, the most recognizable symbol of our faith. It is at the cross that we believe we receive forgiveness. It is the cross that allows us to forgive all things to everyone. It is the cross that was marked on our foreheads at baptism. It is the cross that reminds us that we are forgiven, our slate has been wiped clean. And so we go out into the world, forgiving everyone, proclaiming the cross of Christ. And praying..... FORGIVE US OUR SINS, AS WE FORGIVE EVERYONE WHO IS INDEBTED TO US.

⁹ David Westphal, "Thy Will Be Done", pages 66-79