

RTO™ School of Prayer

The Prayer of Forgiveness *Matthew 6:12, 14-15, Luke 23:34*

by Dave Mozdin

. . . and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. . . . 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.

And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

The Matthew 6 verses of this lesson, as we all know, are the words spoken by our Lord and Savior Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as He teaches us this pattern of prayer in vv.9-13. Although Christ taught it as a pattern, “Pray then like this.....” (v. 9), it is also good to pray it word for word, and many of us who grew up in the church, especially in the ritual liturgical churches prayed it as a congregation at every Sunday service as well as individually or in other group settings. All this to say it can become overly familiar and the impact of the words and content may be lost over time.

Christ’s teaching of this is perfect (as is everything He does) and the purpose of this lesson is to drill down to one important element of this prayer for which I believe we have lost the wonder of the awe of God through His forgiveness of us and how we respond to Him and to each other as a result. Do we truly know the substance, the gravity of what the forgiveness of God is, and how it is absolutely a necessary part of our salvation and our ongoing sanctification?

C. S. Lewis has said, “Forgiveness is seen as essential for the reconciliation and restoration of broken relationships.” Sinner’s violations of God’s law cause broken relationships with resultant consequences. Relationships, I believe, are the essential place to start to unpack the subject of forgiveness.

Vine’s Bible dictionary defines the word “forgive” as “‘to send forth, send away’, denotes, besides its other meanings, ‘to remit or forgive’ (a) debts, Matt 6:12...., these being completely cancelled, (b) sins, Matt 9:2, 5, 6...., Acts 8:22 (“the thought of thine heart (may be forgiven thee)”). In this latter respect the verb, like its corresponding noun, firstly signifies the remission of the punishment due to sinful

conduct, the deliverance of the sinner from the penalty divinely, and therefore righteously, imposed; secondly, it involves the complete removal of the cause of the offense; such remission is based upon the vicarious and propitiatory sacrifice of Christ.” In other words, forgiveness is the cancellation of the debt owed or the punishment or penalty deserved for breaking God’s laws, which decree the terms of relationships, first in our relationship with God, then in our relationship with each other. When the definition mentioned “complete removal of the cause of the offense....based on the vicarious and propitiatory (satisfying to God) sacrifice of Christ”, it means that Christ paid the debt, and absorbed the punishment for our offenses (More on this later).

Relationships in the Bible are noted at its very beginning in Genesis 1:1 with the Trinity itself. “In the beginning God (Father), created the heavens and the earth.” “And the Spirit of God (the Holy Spirit) was hovering over the face of the waters.” (v.2). In the New Testament gospel of John, chapter 1, we read “1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” (vv.1-3). “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (v. 14). These are references to Jesus Christ the Son and His presence at the start of creation with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This is all tied together in Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’”. Note the use of the words “*us*”, “*our image*”, “*our likeness*”. This is evidence of God as the Trinity existing in relationship.

After God creates man and woman, and because God is relational and man and woman are made in His image, He has a relationship with them, as they have a relationship with each other as well as with God. He tells them to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it”. (Gen 1:28). He also commands, ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Genesis 2:16-17). God walked with them, “And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day”. (Genesis 3:8).

The first incident of a broken relationship in the Bible occurs in Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve violate God’s law to not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and sin enters the world. While forgiveness is not directly mentioned or fully enacted, the sinful actions of Adam and Eve show the necessity of it. God exacts righteous punishments upon the serpent who tempted them to sin, and upon Adam and Eve. (Genesis 3:14-19). He shows mercy, however, by not allowing them to die

immediately, as He had decreed in Genesis 2:16. He provides physical as well as spiritual covering for their shame and awareness of their nakedness, “And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.” (Genesis 3:21). This is also the first mention of the high cost of forgiveness, as the animals who God used to provide the skins had to die (the first account of death in the Bible), had to be sacrificed. Hebrews 9:22 says, “...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” (More on this later, too).

The first mention and direct illustration of forgiveness in the Bible is seen in Genesis 50, between Joseph and his brothers, who are the sons of Jacob. Joseph was “the son of his (Jacob’s) old age (Gen 37:5), and Jacob showed favoritism toward him, making him “a robe of many colors” (v. 3). “But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him”. (v. 4). Subsequently, they conspired to kill him and throw him into an empty pit. At Reuben’s insistence, however, they did not kill him, but eventually sold him into slavery to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt. They stripped him of his many-colored robe, dipped it in goat’s blood, and lied to Jacob, saying, “A fierce animal has devoured him.” (v. 33).

While in Egypt Joseph rises to prominence, encountering and overcoming many unjust circumstances, is elevated to second in command after Pharaoh, and with divine help, receives a prophecy about an impending famine and helps to prepare the nation for it. This famine affects Joseph’s homeland, and his brothers come to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, but they do not recognize him. After a while he reveals his true identity and reconciles with them.

After their father Jacob died, the brothers were fearful that Joseph would enact vengeance upon them because of what they did to him, and that Jacob would not have to bear the grief of what would befall them. ¹⁵“When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.” ¹⁶So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died: ¹⁷‘Say to Joseph, “Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.”’ And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.” ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.” (Genesis 50:15-20).

As described earlier, this is an illustration of the definition of forgiveness as “the cancellation of the debt owed or the punishment or penalty deserved for breaking God’s laws.” This is a foretaste of the forgiveness we receive from God through Christ.

The High Cost of Forgiveness. Also as described earlier, forgiveness is “complete removal of the cause of the offense....based on the vicarious and propitiatory (satisfying to God) sacrifice of Christ”, and when God killed the animals to provide coverings for Adam and Eve after their sins, that instituted the necessity of the shedding of blood to forgive sins. When Israel had entered the Promised Land after their exile in Egypt, and as the prescription for proper order of worship, God commanded Moses and the leaders to perform animal sacrifices for sins through specific instructions as shown in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, chapters 1-7. These sacrifices continued for centuries, since the Israelite people continued to sin, needing to atone for their sins, and the blood of the sacrificed animals was insufficient to satisfy a perfectly just and holy God, who cannot look upon sin (Habakkuk 1:13).

During these same centuries, the prophets of the Old Testament proclaimed that there would be One who would perform the ultimate once-for-all sacrifice, taking away the sin of the world. (See Isaiah 53). That One, of course, is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. (John 1:29). The action of using a lamb as a sacrifice goes back to the night before the exodus in Exodus 12. This was known as the Passover, as the blood from the slain lambs of the Israelites that was spread of the doorposts of their homes caused the Lord God to pass over the occupants of those homes to preserve the lives of their firstborn, so they did not experience God’s wrath and die as did the first born of the Egyptians. They were covered by the blood of the lamb.

Jesus Christ was known as the Lamb of God because of His perfection of the Old Testament sacrifices, as we read in Hebrews 9:22-28, **22**”Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. **23**Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. **24**For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. **25**Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, **26**for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. **27**And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, **28**so Christ, having been offered

once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”

Yes, it has been clear that from the time of the first sin of Adam and Eve, the penalty for sin is death, “For the wages of sin is death,”. (Romans 6:23). It is also clear from God’s word, the Bible, that Jesus Christ paid that ultimate price for all who would believe in Him by dying on the cross. ¹³“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:13-14). What those verses mean is that during the first century in Rome, when a person had to undergo the penalty of death by crucifixion, the charges against them were written on parchment and nailed to the cross to give public notice as to the reason(s) for this sentence. In our case, the record of ALL our sins was nailed to the cross of Christ, where HE paid the price for us. This is the high cost of forgiveness, the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross, for us! Praise His Holy Name! ¹⁸“knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, *like* silver or gold, from your aimless conduct *received* by tradition from your fathers, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.” (1 Peter 1:18-19 NKJV). Yes, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world indeed!

Our Problems with Unforgiveness, and What Christ Has to Say About It

While we are indeed saved by grace alone through faith alone through Christ alone, we are still sinners, dealing with the remaining sin nature in us (see Romans 7:14-25), and forgiveness is one area where we are prone to fall short. C.S. Lewis has famously said, “Everyone thinks that forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive.” The biggest culprit here is the sin of pride, which produces bitterness, resentment, and anger.

Pastor Toby Sumpter has said, “Sometimes people really do wrong you, sometimes they may ask your forgiveness, sometimes they don’t. And when they don’t, when everything has not yet been put right, it’s not bitterness to know that something’s dislocated here, there’s something off here, there’s something wrong here, it’s not bitterness to know that, but it is bitterness to resent that...” “It’s bitterness to stoke anger about it, to seethe over it.” “...but pride can tempt you to hold on to some offense, some resentment whether it was made right or not because there’s this little voice in the back of your head saying ‘How could they do that to *me*, how could they do that to *me*?’ (especially if the offender claims to be a believer and should know better!).”

But here's the thing you need to remember: You're pretending, that voice is pretending that you are so great and high and mighty, but you're not *that* important." Remember what Joseph said to his brothers when they feared he might act out his anger against them after all the horrible things they did to him, "... am I in the place of God?" (Genesis 50:19). Remember the high cost of Christ's forgiveness towards you, that He gave His very life for you on the cross, and He was completely innocent! Follow Christ's example, "When he was reviled, he did not revile when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." (1 Peter 2:22). Please note, "...entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly." God is perfect in all His attributes, if the offense is not resolved here on earth, it will be when He judges the offender after death. I often like to say, "God will square the books." We *will* give an account to Him at the judgment seat of Christ, 2 Cor 5:10, also Romans 14:12, Hebrews 4:13.

Another form of pride that is our problem with forgiveness is what we'll call negative pride. Pastor Sumpter: "...some of you are tempted to go over your own (offenses) and failures because you are full of (negative) pride." Let me add here, do not say "I can't forgive myself; I'll never forgive myself!" True you can't, but *God can and will forgive*, "For You, Lord, *are* good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You." (Psalm 86:5, NKJV). Sumpter continues, "This second (type of pride) can be more insidious because it feels more pious." "It's actually full of pride because if you've confessed your sins and have repented.....but if you're wallowing around in your disappointment, if you're kicking yourself down the stairs over and over again, carrying around a backpack full of sorrow and fuss and whine because you messed up so so bad." "It is really high-handed pride in the face of the gospel...." "God says you're forgiven, He says Jesus died for your sin, he died for their sin...." "...but when you carry on whining, and fussing and complaining about yourself, you're in effect saying that the blood of Christ is not good enough..." God says you're forgiven and you're saying 'No, not yet I need to suffer....more'" "...God says His blood cleanses every stain and you're saying 'No it doesn't', that's pride, that's (actually) arrogance and that needs to die! Smash your pride, humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up." (1 Peter 5:6).

Remember, if you have repented and confessed your sin, God *has* forgiven you! Unless you've committed the one unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, Matthew 12:31-32, (and if you did, you wouldn't be interested in forgiveness at all), you need not think that God won't forgive you, and remember, HE is the supreme authority of forgiveness, not you!

Does Christ deal with unforgiveness in His teachings in the Bible? Absolutely! And if you've been around the biblical church for any length of time, you're probably familiar with the Parable of the Unforgiving

Servant: Matthew 18:21-35, **21**”Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ **22**Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. **23**”Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. **24**When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. **25**And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. **26**So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ **27**And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. **28**But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ **29**So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ **30**He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. **31**When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. **32**Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. **33**And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ **34**And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. **35**So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” This parable expands upon one of our key verses, Matthew 6:14-15, God’s unforgiveness of us if we do not forgive others.

The point of this parable and Matthew 6:14-15, as John MacArthur has written, is that “The Lord Jesus’ example is a powerful motivation for us to forgive others.” “In view of such divine graciousness, our forgiveness of another’s sin expresses one of humanities highest virtues: ‘A man’s discretion makes him slow to anger, and it his glory to overlook a transgression.’” (Proverbs 19:11). I would add here that for all the times we see God’s glory referenced in the Bible, this is one of the few rare times we see man’s glory referenced in a way that honors God.

“Believers should forgive others because they have received forgiveness from God themselves. We can’t claim to know God’s parental forgiveness—that which keeps our fellowship with the Lord rich and open—apart from forgiving others in heart and word.” “The sin of an unforgiving heart and a bitter spirit forfeits blessing and invites judgment.” “To receive pardon from a perfectly holy God and then refuse to pardon others when we are sinful is the epitome of the abuse of mercy. “For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” (James 2:13).

The Process of Forgiveness as a Christian, How to Practice It.

Of first importance, make sure you understand God's forgiveness to you through Christ. You cannot have a proper understanding of this apart from being saved. If you have not already done so, please, repent from your sins, confess them to God, embrace Christ by faith for the forgiveness of your sins, to be spared from God's just forever wrath for punishment for your sins and be forgiven and be secure that you will forever enjoy Him in the bliss of heaven. Remember the price He paid for your forgiveness, the sacrifice of His own very body and blood. Remember, we do not deserve it, could not earn it, could never pay it back. Remember the warning of Hebrews 10:29, "How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?" Remember His example and His commandment, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32). Show Him you love Him by joyfully obeying His word. (John 14:21).

If someone comes to you to say they have something against you (especially a believer), "go and be reconciled" (Matthew 5:24). Take responsibility for your wrongdoing, tell them you are sorry for the offense, identifying the sin/offense, then ask "Will you forgive me?" If you are a believer, please grant forgiveness, remembering the very things we have discussed here, and you can discuss any necessary restitution as you continue. You are encouraged to do this for an unbeliever who comes to you to reconcile an offense against you too, modeling God's forgiveness, as this may be helpful in a situation where God opens a door to you to give this person the gospel.

In the case of an unbeliever (or even a believer) who offends you and doesn't understand forgiveness or doesn't take responsibility for committing an offense against you, please carefully consider how you navigate this. *Please* do NOT automatically and freely grant forgiveness. Consider this true example: A biblical counselor was counseling a Christian couple concerning some struggles they were having in their marriage. The major sin problem was the husband's unrepentant adultery against the wife. As the biblical counselor was trying to exhort the husband to repent, the wife suddenly blurted out, "I forgive you!" The husband then turned to her and replied, "You fool! Now that you you've forgiven me, I can continue to do this, knowing that you will forgive me." A similar example occurs on those true story murder trials shown on television where the victim (or the victim's family members) of a crime is allowed to make what is called a victim impact statement to the guilty perpetrator at the time of sentencing. This person will

come right out and say, "I forgive you", when the guilty one takes no responsibility for the crime. The same dynamic can apply here, what motivation does the perpetrator have to repent or offer to do something to try to restore the broken relationship? On a side note, sometimes the victim or family member will immediately say "I hope you rot in hell". That's not a gracious Christian witness, not gracious from any perspective. The person who says that may well rot in hell next to the perpetrator if that person has not trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of his/her sins and does not at least have a heart of forgiveness.

So how do you handle forgiveness with the one who doesn't understand it, does not take responsibility for the offense, or would not appreciate the grace of God that is in it? As was just mentioned, have a heart of forgiveness. Follow the example of Christ on the cross. As He was in unspeakable pain and suffering, bearing the weight of the sin of the entire world for all time, He turns His attention to those who have condemned Him, those who are crucifying Him, those who are mocking Him, those who have put Him on the cross (and that includes us!), and says, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34 one of the key verses cited at the beginning of this lesson). Please note that Christ did NOT look at them and say, "I forgive you." None of them, including us, were worthy of being forgiven. But Christ wanted them to be forgiven, wanted them to understand the beauty and freedom of God's forgiveness, so He prayed to the Father for their forgiveness. And the Father answered that prayer! Wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that many of them who were there that day and witnessed His death DID come to saving faith after Christ died (beginning with the centurion at the cross Mark 15:39), after He rose again and ascended into heaven? Wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that the answer to that prayer also included you and me (Romans 5:8)?

Have that heart of forgiveness towards the unrepentant, pray for that person to come to saving faith in Christ, to fully understand the forgiveness in Christ. Remember, praying for others to repent and to be saved is a part of praying God's will, "who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4). God's will is also that all will come to repentance, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:9). Remember 1 John 5:14-15, **14**And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. **15**And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him."

If you fervently pray that way for such a person, understanding your own forgiveness in Christ, you will begin to have God's heart for that person, you will be on the same page with that person as God is, and you will be developing a heart of forgiveness for that person. And if that person comes to saving faith in Christ, understands forgiveness and wants to reconcile with you, you will be more than ready to forgive, and rejoice in this! As Christ Himself has said in Luke 15:7, "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

To summarize, forgiveness is recognized as being from God, even by some who don't know Christ as Lord and Savior. "He has put eternity into man's heart". (Eccl 3:11). The 18th century poet Alexander Pope has written a saying that many of us have heard, "To err is human, to forgive divine."

John MacArthurⁱ writes: "We must seek to manifest the forgiving spirit of Joseph and of Stephen (Acts 7: 60), and as often as needed (Luke 17:3-4)." "Even as we have been forgiven, we need to forgive. This is the character of righteousness.....Harboring an unforgiving attitude is just plain sinful and invites God's chastening....But forgiving others brings God's forgiveness and nothing in the Christian life is more important than that. Puritan Thomas Merton said, 'There is none so tender to others as they which have received mercy themselves, for they know how gently God hath dealt with them.'" Amen and Alleluia!

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ⁱ For summary/conclusion, Hebrews 2 Commentary, especially v. 3 or MacArthur devotional for May 27.