

“Teach Us to Pray—The Cost of Forgiveness”

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Matthew 18:21-35

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church[g] sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” 22 Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven[h] times.

23 “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents[i] was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii[j] and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister[k] from your heart.”

Our sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer continues today. This is the fourth week of our series and so far we’ve gotten through a good chunk of the prayer. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name – check. Thy kingdom come –

check. Give us this day our daily bread – check. Which brings us to “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”, or as I like to call it, “the part of the prayer that leads to awkward moments at weddings”. You see, there’s an art to leading the Lord’s prayer in an ecumenical setting that you may not realize. When you say this prayer at a wedding you need to make sure to pause just long enough after saying debts that other people can finish saying “Trespases”. And having a microphone makes it much easier, so when you say “as we forgive our debtors”, you lean into the mic so that way people can really hear your silence while everyone else forgives those who trespass against them.

Difficulty in saying this part at weddings aside, this is still a hard petition to pray. First of all, we need to understand what these debts are? What debts do we owe each other? How do we accumulate these debts? What does it mean to be forgiven these debts? The notion of our indebtedness to one another is one of the main ideas behind one of my favorite television shows: The Good Place.

One of the most silly and philosophically nuanced shows on television, The Good Place is about a group of four humans who, after dying and going to the afterlife, want to make themselves better people. The first three seasons are on Netflix right now if you’re curious, the fourth season premieres on Thursday, so you have time to catch up if you move fast. I’m going to engage in some hopefully gentle spoilers, so if you’re halfway through the series, I’d recommend finding your favorite book of the Bible and reading that instead of listening to me.

In the first episode of the Good Place the system is described to the denizens of the afterlife as such: “During your time on earth, every one of your actions had a positive or negative value depending on how much good or bad that action put into the universe ... every single thing you did had an effect that rippled out over time and ultimately created some amount of good or bad”

According to the cosmology of the Good Place, anything and everything we do creates good or bad, which then reflects on our total points at the end of our lives. The higher the score, the more likely we are to get into the Good Place, and if we don’t have enough, then we go to the Bad Place, which is as bad as it sounds. As you can see, there are plenty of ways to earn or lose points. Remaining loyal to the Cleveland Browns gets you 53.83 points, whereas rooting for the Yankees loses you 99.93 points. The whole system is about the ways in

which we are indebted to each other and the ways that we can make the world either better or worse for one another. All of this seems rather simple, but in a later season they point out exactly how difficult it has become to gain any points.

“In 1539 Douglas Wynegarr gave his grandmother roses for her birthday, picked them himself, walked them over to her she was happy, boom 145 points. Now, in 2009 Doug Ewing also gave his grandmother a dozen roses, but he lost four points. Why? Because he ordered roses using a cellphone that was made in a sweatshop. The flowers were grown with toxic pesticides picked by exploited migrant workers, delivered from thousands of miles away which created a massive carbon footprint and his money went to a billionaire racist CEO”.

The conclusion: Every day the world gets a little more complicated. And when we think about the debts we owe to each other, we need to remember that it is virtually impossible to live in this world without some degree of harm being done to our neighbors, often without our consent, but always with our participation. In that way, we all owe each other some sort of debt, we are all indebted to one another, and by being indebted to one another, we are therefore indebted to God. Matthew 25 says “whenever you did to the least of these, you did also to me”. Humans are created in the image of God, and so when we sin against one another, we also sin against God. So when we petition to God to forgive us our debts, we are asking for forgiveness for the ways in which we have harmed God through harming each other.

And I have good news – we are forgiven! That’s what we mean when we say that God is merciful. Christianity has long thought that the crushing weight of the debt we incur against God and each other is forgiven through God’s grace and mercy. What a lifting of a burden that is! How wonderful is it that we don’t live in the rigid cosmology of The Good Place, weighing the fate of our eternal souls against the actions that we undertake in the short time that we have here on earth. When we pray to God to forgive us our sins, we are throwing ourselves on the mercy of a God whom we know will forgive us. Asking for this forgiveness relieves us of our debts and places our ledger back into the positive. Think about the master forgiving the slaves debt in the parable we heard earlier. When Jesus said the slave owed 10,000 talents, that was a well-known euphemism to mean “essentially limitless”. His debt was so much that there was no chance of him

ever repaying, but he threw himself on the master's mercy and his debt was forgiven.

Such a simple concept, and such an important thing to learn to pray. That's why we confess our sins every Sunday, to remind us of our humble debt owed to God, and to remind us of God's magnificent mercy in granting us that forgiveness. But that's only the first half of what we pray for. That's only the first half of the parable. Because, you see, we ask God to forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. This can make it seem like God's love is conditional, as though we aren't forgiven until we forgive those who have sinned against us, until we've forgiven others' debts. But I don't hold to that thought. When I look at the breadth of scriptural witness, I see a God who, especially shown in the person of Christ, was endlessly forgiving and graceful, who did not let other's sins prevent them from receiving God's grace. Rather, I think this is an inspiration; a call to us to exhibit the characteristics of a God who we see as endlessly loving, endlessly forgiving, endlessly merciful. God's forgiveness for us is not conditional on our forgiveness towards others, but rather frees us of our debts and giving us an understanding of how to forgive others.

Ultimately, we are asking God for the ability to be forgiving people. In this prayer we are asking God to help us to forgive those indebted to us. If confessing our sins and being granted forgiveness is the simple part, this is the part that makes life hard on us. Because forgiveness is not easy. Forgiveness is hard for us to grant, because we are conditioned with a sense of right and wrong, because we are conditioned with an idea of justice. But what is forgiveness if not a rescindment of justice in favor of mercy?

Robert Enright is a psychologist who has studied forgiveness for decades and wrote the book "Forgiveness is a Choice". This landmark text lays out some of the important things to know about forgiveness, and he starts by defining forgiveness as this: "forgiving is an act of mercy toward an offender, someone who does not necessarily deserve our mercy. It is a gift to our offender for the purpose of changing the relationship between ourselves and those who have hurt us". And it is precisely for this reason that forgiveness is so hard. Forgiveness is a gift we give to our offender. When we've been wronged by a person, that is the absolute last time that we would want to give them any sort of a gift. Additionally, it feels as if

forgiveness means that by extending mercy for the offense means that we are erasing the offending event. That is not the case. Forgiveness does not mean that the hurt party needs to forget the offense and stay in unsafe situations. For some, forgiveness means that we are tacitly condoning the offensive behavior, but that also isn't the case. Dr. Enright outlines some very important points as to what forgiveness is or is not. He says that forgiveness is not "Condoning or excusing, forgetting, justifying, calming down, pseudo-forgiving". What does that mean? It means that by forgiving someone you are not letting them off the hook, nor does it mean that you merely say that you've forgiven someone without doing the hard work. Rather, forgiveness is a part of the story of your relationship with that person, whatever that relationship may end up looking like.

One other misconception about forgiveness is that people confuse forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. Let me repeat that, because this is important – forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. How many lives have been ruined in the name of forgiveness – forgive your abuser, forgive them and give them another chance. Jesus tells you to forgive people, Jesus tells you to love people, but Jesus does not tell you to put yourself in harms way for no reason. Reconciliation is when a severed relationship reunites, but forgiveness is something that one undertakes for their own benefit. In drawing this dichotomy Enright says "reconciliation is the act of two people coming together following separation. Forgiving, on the other hand, is the moral action of one individual that starts as a private act". Forgiveness liberates the self to move past the wounds of the past towards a more whole and healthy future. In an ideal world, forgiveness would lead towards reconciliation, but reconciliation takes both parties moving past the offense and changing the behavior that leads to the hurt. Sometimes, that's only possible for one party, and while it's difficult to do, forgiveness can and should come hand in hand with severing a relationship.

We pray to God for forgiveness and for the strength to forgive. We do not ask this because it is easy, but because it is hard, because we need God's help, strength, and example to aid us in the process of forgiving. Forgiveness for deep wounds is a long and arduous process. It can be soul-wrenching, traumatizing, and exhausting. In many cases, forgiveness can only happen after periods of grief, anger and resentment. And I will also say, you do not have to go through the

process of forgiveness alone. If you are able to, finding a good therapist is an important step towards processing forgiveness. Finding trusted friends, partners, people who you know you can turn to who can listen and help and essential to help process the work of forgiveness.

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. We know that our God is endlessly forgiving. The miracle of our forgiveness is an unburdening of our own sins that then frees us to focus on those who have sinned against us. This is never easy, but always important. As we pray these words in the Lord's Prayer, let us pray in a spirit of humble hope, that God may help us in our own forgiving, even as we have been forgiven.