



Sermon, October 30, 2016
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

The Prayer That Changes Us #9: “Forgive Us Our Debts, As We Also Have Forgiven Our Debtors”

Matthew 6:9-13

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

9 You should pray like this:

Our Father in heaven, help us to honor your name.

10 Come and set up your kingdom, so that everyone on earth will obey you, as you are obeyed in heaven.

11 Give us our food for today.[\[a\]](#)

12 Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others.

13 Keep us from being tempted and protect us from evil.[\[b\]](#)

Footnotes:

- a. 6.11 *our food for today*: Or “the food that we need” or “our food for the coming day.”
- b. 6.13 *evil*: Or “the evil one,” that is, the devil. Some manuscripts add, “The kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours forever. Amen.”

Preparation

Have people ready to read the following scripture readings when indicated during the sermon:

- Luke 11:4: “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” (NRSV).
- Exodus 22:25
- Matthew 5:23–24,
- Matthew 6: 14–15
- Mark 11:25

Opening Story

If you have ever gone to interfaith gatherings where you may have Catholics, United Methodists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians worshipping and praying together, you may have experienced that interesting moment when we all pray the Lord’s prayer together, and we do really well until we come to the line, “Forgive us our trespasses as we

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forgive those who trespass against us,” or “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” or as in a new version, “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” It can be hard to keep track of who says what some times. Bobbie McGarey, a Presbyterian pastor, tells the following story:

Years ago I was preaching at a Local church as a supply (pastor). It was not a Presbyterian congregation. My son, about 7 years old at the time had gone with me several times and other weeks had gone to his Dad’s PCUSA. As we were at the door he said, “WAIT!, Mommy is this a debting or sinning church?”

“Oh honey,” I replied, “this is a sinning church.”

A member who was passing by said, “You got that right.”

Sins, Debts or Trespasses? A Brief Look

Well, United Methodists in this respect are a trespassing church. But what is the difference between all these versions? To answer this, let’s take a look again at this morning’s scripture reading from Matthew, and compare it with the parallel passage in Luke, which is found in Luke 11:4:

Someone Reads Luke 11:4

[“And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” (NRSV)]. Matthew reads: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Luke uses a different word from Matthew in the first part of the phrase, ἀμαρτίας, which means sins, or those things we do that fall short of what we should be doing. (The word *amartias* is a term derived from archery, and literally means to fall short of the target). But both Matthew and Luke agree that we should forgive people who are indebted to us, because they both use the noun cognates of the Greek word, ὀφείλω, which means to owe something or be in debt to someone.

The differences between churches when praying the Lord’s Prayer dates back to the Protestant Reformation when the various branches of Protestantism developed their Prayer Books, and what versions of the Bibles they were using that had just been translated into the vernacular of

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the various countries. In English-speaking liturgies, you had Catholic influence and Calvinist/Zwinglian influence. When the Anglicans under the leadership of Thomas Cranmer first created the Book of Common Prayer during the reign of King Henry VIII (1549), they were using the current English translation which, following Tyndale, used "trespasses" in Matt. 6:12. When John Knox and others put out the Book of Common Order (1560), for Presbyterian worship in Scotland, it followed the Geneva Bible, which was the first translation to go with debts and debtors. "Debts" appeared first in the Geneva NT of 1557, and then in the revision of the NT with the OT in 1560. The King James Bible, which was finished in 1611, chose the more literal debts/debtors in the Geneva. But by then, the use of "trespasses" was fixed in the Book of Common Prayer.

John Wesley utilized the Book of Common Prayer, so "trespasses" remained in Methodist usage as well. The newest translations of the Lord's Prayer have attempted to bring these two traditions together by using what is believed to be the intent of Jesus, that we should ask God to "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." So there you have it. Some churches are debting churches, some are trespassing churches, and some are sinning churches.

Forgiveness sets free

But let's look at what Jesus wants us to do with this indebtedness of sins and trespasses. The idea behind all of this is *forgiveness*. The Greek word he uses for this is very forceful: ἄφες **and** ἀφήκαμεν. These words mean literally to send something away, release or banish it. The idea here is that if anyone is indebted to us in any way, we are to release them from this indebtedness, whether financial, emotional, or relational.

The practice of forgiving debts brings into stark focus the social nature of this prayer. Not only are we to forgive the interpersonal rifts and infringements we visit upon one another on a daily routine – seventy times seven times, says Jesus – but we are not to hold anyone in any sort of financial enslavement. This is an extension of the commandment in the Torah not to charge interest on money that is lent out.

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(Someone reads Exodus 22:25 or Leviticus 25:36-37).

Forgiveness is necessary because we are connected

By living in community together, whether the intentional community of church or the more accidental community of where we happen live in a geographical sense, we are bound together in a web of relationships. In the course of any human relationship, someone is bound to hurt someone else. It is just the way of things. Sometimes that hurt is inflicted deliberately, other times it may be inadvertent or even done unawares. But when we hurt someone, we incur a sort of indebtedness in which we owe someone some sort of reparation, an apology or even financial remuneration. Relationships that are strained actually engender a form of bondage or enslavement to anger, hurt, grudges, vengeance, and broken communication. The practices of forgiveness and reconciliation seek to rebind the relationships that have become strained or unwound through injury or hurt. What forgiveness does is to replace bonds of enslavement with bonds of community.

South Africa and Desmond Tutu

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa speaks about how the practice of forgiveness was central to rebuilding South Africa after the white terrorist reign of apartheid was ended there:

Malusi Mpumlwana was a young enthusiastic antiapartheid activist and a close associate of Steve Biko in South Africa’s crucial Black Consciousness Movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s. He was involved in vital community development and health projects with impoverished and often demoralized rural communities. As a result, he and his wife were under strict surveillance, constantly harassed by the ubiquitous security police. They were frequently held in detention without trial.

I remember well a day Malusi gave the security police the slip and came to my office in Johannesburg, where I was serving as general secretary of the South African Council of Churches. He told me that during his frequent stints in detention, when the security police

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routinely tortured him, he used to think, “These are God’s children and yet they are behaving like animals. They need us to help them recover the humanity they have lost.” For our struggle against apartheid to be successful, it required remarkable young people like Malusi.

All South Africans were less than whole because of apartheid. Blacks suffered years of cruelty and oppression, while many privileged whites became more uncaring, less compassionate, less humane, and therefore less human. Yet during these years of suffering and inequality, each South African’s humanity was still tied to that of all others, white or black, friend or enemy. For our own dignity can only be measured in the way we treat others. This was Malusi’s extraordinary insight.

I saw the power of this idea when I was serving as chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. This was the commission that the postapartheid government, headed by our president, Nelson Mandela, had established to move us beyond the cycles of retribution and violence that had plagued so many other countries during their transitions from oppression to democracy. The commission granted perpetrators of political crimes the opportunity to appeal for amnesty by giving a full and truthful account of their actions and, if they so chose, an opportunity to ask for forgiveness—opportunities that some took and others did not. The commission also gave victims of political crimes a chance to tell their stories, hear confessions, and thus unburden themselves from the pain and suffering they had experienced.

For our nation to heal and become a more humane place, we had to embrace our enemies as well as our friends. The same is true the world over. True enduring peace—between countries, within a country, within a community, within a family—requires real reconciliation between former enemies and even between loved ones who have struggled with one another. (Desmond Tutu, “Truth and Reconciliation,” http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/truth_and_reconciliation)

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Communion as a celebration of forgiveness and Freedom

When we gather as Christians to celebrate communion, we are partaking of a meal of forgiveness.

Someone reads Matthew 5:23-24

In Matthew 5:23–24, while Jesus is giving his Sermon on the Mount, he says, "So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

Then, just a few verses after Jesus' prayer, in Matthew 6: 14–15,

[Someone reads Matthew 6:14-15.] ...he says, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Finally, in Mark 11:25... *[Someone reads Mark 11:25]* Jesus says, "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

In one of the churches I first served, my Lay Leader told me that several years prior, she and another member of the church had a falling out. She felt so bad about this that she refused to come to communion until she went to that person, asked for forgiveness and worked things out. She told me that since that point in time, they had become very close.

This is what forgiveness does - it replaces bonds of enslavement with bonds of community. It reweaves us together after we have torn or frayed the cloth of community. When the bonds of love are strained, forgiveness strengthens and repairs the ties that bind us. And when we human beings displayed the depths to which we could sink by crucifying Jesus on a cross, he asked God to forgive us. This is the mind of God. The prayer of Jesus asks us to put on the mind of God and to release everyone around us by forgiving them. If Jesus did this for us, can we do any less for one another?