

March 11 – Forgive Us Our Sins

Matthew 18:10-14, 21-22

As we look at this particular phrase, it is probably a good idea to do a little explaining about words and how we translate them. Some churches, in saying this prayer pray, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” We say, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Some now say, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.” Why, you might be asking, all these different terms for the same phrase? Here is where it gets a little complicated. In Matthew, the prayer Jesus gave his disciples uses a word that is best translated “debts.” The King James Translation used that word. But there was a problem. That term was always used, until Jesus, for monetary debts and had nothing to do with the moral culpability of humans. Then, to add to the confusion, the version of the prayer found in Luke uses a Greek word that is most closely translated as sin, but is an archery term with means miss the mark. So we are told to ask God to forgive us our sins, or where we missed the mark, as we forgive those who are indebted to us. That last term is used only here in the New Testament and harkens back to people owing us money. So where did the term “trespass” come from? One of the earliest translations of the Bible into English was by William Tyndale. His was before the King James Bible. He translated, not from the Latin Bible that was in use at the time, but from the original Greek and Hebrew. He was the one who translated this phrase “forgive us our trespasses.” Most scholars believed that he deliberately mistranslated the phrase using a term that he believed expressed what Jesus was trying to say, instead of a literal translation, because already there was confusion about why Jesus was so concerned about who owed money to whom that he put it in the prayer. This translation made it into the earliest Church of England Book of Common Prayer. We as United Methodist, who came from that denomination, have kept that version. Scottish Presbyterians, who wanted to make sure they were known for not being Church of England, specifically used the word debts. So, which term a church uses today has often much to say about their history. And today, some think the word “sin” gets closer to what Jesus meant and so modern translations use that term. It doesn’t really matter which word is used, I think we get the general idea about what Jesus’ meant.

This part of the prayer comes with the understanding that we are all sinners. Again, we hear the call to see ourselves as part of a community of faith. We use the words “our” and “us.” It is a reminder that when we sin we hurt the community of faith. It is a breaking of trust with God and each other. We are asking for forgiveness for all our sins and brokenness. We are also reminding ourselves that a sin against one is a sin against all.

For us to really receive the forgiveness we are seeking we need to first acknowledge that only God has the power to forgive. We can't make things right between us and God. But, as Jesus reminds us, when we turn to God we find that which we seek, forgiveness. Contrary to many people's perspective, the God Jesus shares is not a God who holds a club over us waiting for us to make a mistake so that we might feel God's wrath. Instead, Jesus proclaims a God of grace and love who freely offers forgiveness. A God who does not hold grudges and resentment.

But to receive that forgiveness we need to confess our sins. Confession should be a key part of the Christian faith life. Confession requires us to face the truth about who we are, what we have done, whom we have hurt and what we are becoming if we don't change. Because we are offered forgiveness, confession reunites us with God. It allows us to experience God's grace, love and forgiveness. Until we confess, we are trying to hide something from God or from ourselves or denying that we have done anything wrong. That creates a spiritual unease in our souls.

I was recently given an image of what unconfessed sins are like. Have you ever been in a swimming pool and tried to keep a large beach ball under water. It takes all of your energy and concentration to make it happen. You push down on it and it turns and slips and tries to break free. When you let it go it shoots skyward. Now instead of a beach ball think about an unconfessed sin. You are doing your best to keep it out of sight. You don't want to admit what you did was wrong. You might have to work very hard to keep up that pretense. You get defensive if someone suggests your actions hurt another. It is creating pressures inside of you spiritually. Confession is like letting go of that beach ball. The sin skyrockets to the surface of your life. In letting the sin see the light of day we can honestly admit our mistakes, strive to live a new and different way, and, when possible, seek to heal the wounds that our sins caused in other's or the community's life.

Now, no one likes confession. It is painful, at times, to really look at our lives and admit just how badly we messed up. But God is good. God loves us. God doesn't ask us to confess so God can punish us. God doesn't do it so we will feel bad. God asks us to confess and seek forgiveness because it releases the pressure of keeping that sin hidden and draws us closer to God.

We will talk about the challenges of forgiving others in a moment but one last thing about this first part of the phrase. We have talked about our need to confess, our need for forgiveness and God's willingness to forgive. What we don't always recall is that this petition also challenges us to forgive ourselves. All of us feel badly for things we have done or left undone, said or not said, and for hurts we have caused, either intentionally out of anger or inadvertently. We will usually finally lift them to God because it is just too difficult to keep them down any longer. We embrace the message that we are forgiven, but we find it hard, if not impossible, to release them. We continue to beat ourselves up. We ride that "could of, should of, would of" train long, long miles. We should ask, "Is there anything more I can do in the way of restoration?" and if so do it. If not, then release it, forget it and move on. Forgiving ourselves is really hard.

We are also called to forgive others even if they don't want to be forgiven or don't think they need to be forgiven! We don't have to withhold forgiveness waiting until someone repents. Jesus showed from the cross that we offer it freely. Forgiveness allows us to see the good in others in spite of the hurts they may have inflicted, and to pray honestly and earnestly for God's best for them. Forgiving does not mean that we allow evil and the destructiveness of hate and violence off the hook. While we are expected to forgive those who would harm us, we are not expected to live in a harmful situation.

And what I said about forgiving ourselves also applies in part to those we forgive. It is hard to forgive. We think about the hurts and the pain. We hear the words of forgiveness for our enemies but we honestly are not ready to sincerely ask that God forgive them. We keep our pain and anger under the surface. We say this disciple's prayer but it is only words. It then is no longer their sin against us. It has become our sin of refusing to forgive. It becomes another beach ball we are trying to keep down and it separates us from them, from God and disrupts the community. I understand why sometimes it takes a long time before we are able to

forgive. Forgiveness is often a process not something that happens in an instant. The hurts were so deep. Even admitting that we know we are to forgive but we are not ready is better than ignoring it as if it has been resolved. When we have finally dealt with all the negative baggage related to an incident and finally prayed sincerely for God to forgive someone we have to let it go and move on. They may never ask for forgiveness but if we truly ask God to forgive them and bless them we cannot hang on to the past mistake. We might need to remember what they did to stay safe but that is different from hanging on and reliving the hurt and pain. Asking God to forgive someone and releasing it is hard but freeing.

We have all had those times where we finally couldn't keep our anger going any longer. We finally let the words "forgive them" crack open that icy spot in our heart. The release is awesome, isn't it? Sin is ugly and destructive. Sin destroys us. Sin destroys community. That is why God hates it. And that is why God forgives our sin and woos us away from it—because God does not want us to be destroyed. That is why God asks us to forgive others as well.

The last reminder is that we limit God's forgiveness of ourselves if we refuse to forgive others. It is that sin that separates us. When we know God is a God of grace and love and we refuse to live graciously and lovingly we create distance. Forgiveness is not cheap. It costs us. Forgiveness often is less an event than it is a process. But with God's help we can pray this part of the prayer with resolve.

Your challenge this week is to continue to pray the prayer "our." Also, pray, "Lord Jesus, today I release\_\_\_\_\_." You will fill in the blank with whatever is blocking you from fully receiving God's love and grace. It might be something you need to confess, it might be where you finally need to forgive yourself, or maybe you are ready to finally offer up someone to God's love and forgiveness, even if they haven't reciprocated, because you are no longer willing to carry that angry burden anymore. Or if you have forgiven them it might be that now you are willing to release the memories that cause you pain. Lord, help us to forgive.