

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
February 25, 2018
Dr. Steven P. Eason

*The Lord's Prayer;
"Forgive Us Our Debts, As we Forgive Our Debtors."*

Matthew 6: 9a,12

*"Pray then in this way;...
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."*

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Be careful what you ask for, because you might get it. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray and he goes and puts forgiveness in there! Oh, we love to receive it, but we struggle to give it. It would be just like him to put forgiveness in the prayer. It's huge!

In fact, this petition gets more words than all the rest. Twelve words in the main prayer, and Matthew has an add-on statement from Jesus at the end;

"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses." (6:14-15)

Forgiveness is reciprocal.

Jesus told a parable about a king who forgives a slave a sizable debt, 10,000 talents, which would have never happened. That slave goes out and holds another person by the throat demanding he pay him a much lesser debt of 100 denarii. The king finds out about this and calls the slave back and says;

'I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he paid his entire debt. (Matt. 18:23-35)

Divine *forgiveness* inspires human *forgiveness*, or at least it should. How can I receive the grace of God and not dispense it? How can I ask for *forgiveness* and yet not give it? Who am I to hold you by the throat when the king has forgiven me such an overwhelming debt?

But this is complicated.

Forgiveness does not mean we are called to turn our heads from justice. People can be forgiven but still go to prison for their crimes. There are consequences to all behavior.

Without justice we would have turmoil and chaos. How could you say you love your neighbor if you turn your eye from the injustice that harms your neighbor?

Whatever forgiveness is, it is not what Bonhoeffer called, "*cheap grace*." It cannot be indulgence, as if to say, "*It doesn't matter*." It does matter. There's been an infraction; pain has been inflicted on another. Something is broken and shattered. Damage has been done. Somebody has crossed the line, intentionally. All of that matters. So whatever forgiveness is, it can't be *cheap grace*. It's complicated.

Even so, it's in this prayer. So apparently, forgiveness requires a lot of prayer. And apparently, forgiveness is possible. But we cannot do it on our own power.

How does a parent *forgive* a person for murdering, or harming their child? Thirty-one families have to struggle with that today in Parkland, Florida.

How does a husband or wife *forgive* their spouse for breaking their vows and crossing a line that never should have been crossed?

How do Jewish people *forgive* the Holocaust?

How do African-Americans *forgive* prejudice and racial discrimination?

How do families *forgive* a drug addict, or an alcoholic for the pain they have caused in that family?

Is it even possible to *forgive* a terrorist?

Oh, at the heart of the Christian faith is the word *forgive*. Of all the words Jesus could have put in this prayer, he chose the word *forgive*? It wouldn't have been my first choice. It's too expensive. Where do you get the power to do this kind of *forgiveness*?

Let's make it even harder. Peter once came and asked Jesus how many times he should forgive a person. Jewish law said 3, so he thought 7 would be over the top. Seven represented a perfect number, so, to forgive someone seven times would be complete forgiveness.

Jesus ratcheted it up to *seventy times seven* (Matt. 18:21-22). That's 490 times! Another translation has it as 77 times. Either way, we cannot do that. How could you forgive someone who repeats the same infraction 490 times? Or even 77? Does the burden fall on me to overlook your indiscretions? Is Jesus asking me to be a doormat?

I can't remember who it was, but somebody suggested that this could be 490, or 77 times, for just the one infraction. It takes us that long to get there. We

say we have forgiven them but it circles back. It might take 490 times to finally get there!

You bet forgiveness is in this prayer. How else will the world be healed? How else do we move forward, not stuck in the past? How could we receive the forgiveness from God and yet refuse to forgive others?

I would dare say the only impetus I have for forgiving someone is my awareness of how much God has forgiven me. Otherwise, why would I do it?

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You want to know how big this forgiveness thing is? On the evening of the resurrection, Jesus shows up in a house in Jerusalem where the disciples had gathered behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. Of all the words he could have brought into that room, he chose the word "*forgive.*"

'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' (20-23)

That's one of the first statements out your mouth after you have been crucified? Maybe "*revenge,*" or "*retaliate,*" or "*retribution,*" but not "*forgive.*"

Yet, that is the only word that unlocks the past.

...as far as the east is from the west, so far (God) removes our transgressions from us. (Ps 103:12)

How else would things change?

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The king *forgives* the slave an enormous debt. That happens first. But that can be a difficult part for many of us. You have to **receive** forgiveness. You have to be aware of your need of it. That requires a certain amount of humility. Sometimes it's more difficult to be the receiver than it is to be the giver. Givers have power and strength. To receive forgiveness puts me in a different posture.

So where does this forgiveness begin? Perhaps it begins in prayer. Where do I need it? Can I receive it? Can I, in turn give it? Maybe it'll take 490 times to get there, but I'll never get there if I don't start.

Let us pray; *Empower us, O Lord, to receive and freely give the forgiveness that is needed to change this world.*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: **Amen**