

\*\*\*\*\*

Matthew 6:12

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

What does this mean?

We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will sincerely forgiven and gladly do good to those who sin against us.

\*\*\*\*\*

If there was ever a section of The Lord's Prayer that needs considered reflection, it is the Fifth Petition. On the one hand it is simple and obvious, isn't it? We know of God's great grace and forgiveness in Christ. We know of His incredible love for us. We rejoice in that love. And as we live in the light of the love God has shown us in Christ Jesus, we seek to reflect that love to others. "Forgive as you have been forgiven." It's simple and obvious, isn't it?

And yet over the years I have seen this section of the Lord's Prayer 'weaponised' to such an extent that many do not want anything to do with 'the church' anymore. They have been told that they 'must' forgive someone who has committed horrible abuse and harm towards them. And they have been told in such a way that the person who has experienced the most horrific harm is somehow a perpetrator of abuse, and the one who has caused the abuse is a 'victim'. A person who has caused harm says in a moment (but with a life that quite honestly does not reflect that moment), "I know I did something wrong, but I didn't mean it. I am sorry. So you must forgive me." And it is done with such a look or slight action that most people cannot see the subtle cues that still point to one who truly does not care about the other person.

What is 'forgiveness' all about? Have you ever had a time where you found it hard to 'forgive' someone? If so, what has been the basis for that? Has it been on the basis that your feelings have somehow been 'hurt' or offended? Or is it based clearly on a broken commandment of God where a person has not displayed genuine repentance? Have you also had a situation where someone seems to have taken offence at you, and you feel that nothing has actually been done 'wrong', but they say you must say you are sorry?

What does it mean to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"? Here I think it's important that we define what forgiveness is not before we discuss what forgiveness is. Forgiveness is not ignoring or overlooking the wrong. Forgiveness is not saying, "I see that but I'm going to look the other way and pretend like it didn't exist". In fact, genuine forgiveness requires and demands just the opposite. One Christian writer has said "Genuine forgiveness demands that we name the wrong that was done against us. We cannot forgive if we are not first willing to condemn." This should make sense. If we will not name something as 'wrong', then why is there any need to 'forgive'?

Second thing it doesn't mean: It does not mean that we forget the wrong. We cannot wipe certain things from our memories (and sometimes to attempt do so can lead to greater challenges down the track). The challenge, however, is this: There are many people that say they could never forget what someone did, and therefore they cannot forgive. The reality is that we all have memories of some sort. And some things that happen in life will always hurt. We cannot pretend that certain things haven't happened. But this should not be a barrier to genuine forgiveness at work in our hearts.

Forgiveness does not mean overlooking the wrong, and it doesn't mean forgetting the wrong. The nation of Israel is forgiven by God for their lack of faith and willingness to follow Him into the Promise Land. They're forgiven by God (Numbers 14:20-23), but they still don't get to enter the Promise Land. The consequences of their decisions remain.

Finally, what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not reconciliation with the wrongdoer. When you forgive somebody, it does not mean you're holding hands, singing "Kumbaya" around the fire. You may be forever, permanently estranged from whoever you need forgiveness from, and whoever you need to forgive. Forgiveness takes one person—you. Reconciliation takes two people—you and whoever has wronged you.

In order for there to be reconciliation, somebody needs to say (genuinely, and on the basis of God's Word): "I was wrong." And this demands repentance and a turning back. And even then, it may take years and years and great boundaries in order to come to a place of reconciliation. Please don't come out of here saying well, Pastor says that in order to forgive we need to reconcile and then you call up somebody who's been horribly abusive to you over the years and think you need to make amends with them. You can make amends with them in your heart and not make that phone call. Reconciliation does not equal forgiveness.

So what is forgiveness all about? Luther translated this petition: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. There are many different words for sin in the Scripture. Sin is "missing the mark," in the sense that it dehumanizes us. Sin is transgression, in the sense that we cross over and violate the boundaries and limits set by God. Sin is also a debt, an obligation of obedience that we owe God but cannot pay. The debt we have rung up is huge. We cannot pay it.

The word "debt" connects us to a parable that Jesus told concerning forgiveness. It comes on the heels of Peter's attempt to pare down forgiveness to a more manageable size. Peter wanted to limit his forgiveness to a mere seven times. Jesus takes Peter's puny pardon and multiplies to a heavenly seventy times seven. That's how often we are to forgive others when they sin against us. And even that nowhere near approximates the size of the debt we have been forgiven by God.

Forgiveness means that we release people from the debt they owe and we absorb the wrong. Forgiveness is a ceasing of the cycle of retribution, and it is entrusting true justice to God. Forgiveness is refusing to give the Devil a foothold in our life. Forgiveness is a choice. There's an old proverb that says: "Refusing

to forgive is like drinking poison and expecting someone else to die.” Forgiveness is a choice. But forgiveness is also a gift.

We must be very careful here. We do not pray, “Forgive us our debts because we have forgiven our debtors,” but “as we forgive our debtors.” Forgiving others is not the precondition for forgiveness or a credential for our prayer. “See how forgiving I am, O Lord.” Our forgiving others is then the outcome and fruit of God’s forgiveness – not the cause. God takes the initiative. He makes the first move. He forgives us, unconditionally. True forgiveness is a gift from God, for only God can grant true forgiveness.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the Lord makes us to know ourselves. In Ecclesiastes 7:20), “Surely there is no one righteous on earth who does what is good and never sins.” In 1 John 1:8, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” In Romans 3, “None is righteous, no, not one... All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” And a little later, “all have sinned and lack the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

Thus, even if we don’t feel our sins, we at least believe what God’s Word tells us and we pray the Fifth Petition anyway, acknowledging that we are so wretched that we don’t even know all our sins. David does this very thing in Psalm 19:12) when he prays, “Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults.” And by praying the Fifth Petition daily, even when we don’t see the need for it, we come to see the need for it, because Jesus saw the need for it and taught us to pray it.

Last week Jesus taught us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Jesus has put the words “this day” in the Lord’s Prayer, meaning that Jesus intends for us to pray this prayer daily. And that means we daily find ourselves praying the Fifth Petition, “And forgive us our trespasses.” Jesus teaches us by this petition that we daily sin, which is something we would not come to know by ourselves.

What are we doing when we interact with God? What are we doing when we talk to God? Does prayer really change things? There’s a story of a woman who grew up in Latvia under the communist regime. A Bible great scholar went over and was doing some teaching in Latvia after communism fell. There was this group of young people that this woman was a part of. He went up to her and asked her how she became a follower of Jesus. “Was it someone in your family that was a follower of Christ?” She said, “No, I never met another follower of Jesus. Nobody in my family followed Christ.” “Was it a church that remained open under the communist regime? Underground churches?” “No, I’d never heard of any church.” “Was it a missionary that came?” She said, “No missionary ever came.” The Bible Teacher continued, “Well then, how did you become a follower of Christ?” She said, “When we would go to funerals, they would still allow us to say the Lord’s Prayer. As we recited the Lord’s Prayer, God stirred something so deeply in me and drew me to Himself. As we said this prayer, I needed to know THIS God.” That’s part of the power of prayer, isn’t it? It changes our perspective.

Like every petition, this one is for our benefit, not God's. God forgives even before we ask for forgiveness or even think of it. If God hadn't already granted us the gift of faith and forgiveness, we would never be so bold as to ask to be forgiven. Without our prayer, out of His own goodness and mercy, God has sent His Son to die for all. He has given us the Gospel and the sacraments, which are nothing but pure forgiveness. He has given us the church and pastors to speak forgiveness of sins in His stead. All of this He does without our asking or invitation.

Would you close your eyes and let's go to the Lord in prayer. That's a lot to take in. So who popped into your mind, what situation, when you found out that this is what we were talking about today? Maybe an ex-husband, ex-wife. Maybe a person who abused you, wronged you. Maybe somebody who you did that to. I just want you to imagine, in your mind's eye, Jesus with the books and all the things that you've ever done. Maybe the shame that you carry, the guilt that you have, the regrets that if you could go back and take them back, you would. I just want you to imagine Him going to the cross carrying those things. He's cancelled the debt. He's obliterated it by His cross, because of His love. And He's made a new way for you. A new way for you to move forward and to live.

We pray 'Forgive us our sins...' because we know our burdens are great. And our sin separates us from God. In this prayer we come into the presence of God as humble, penitent sinners. Like the tax collector of whom Jesus spoke in the parable, we pray, "God, be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13). We pray for forgiveness because we do not deserve the many things with which God blesses us. With Jacob, we confess, "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant" (Genesis 32:10).

The forgiveness that God gives us Jesus is a gift that keeps on giving. It's not only a prayer to God; it is a prayerful way of life with Him. And it is a journey, a life to be lived. Jesus paid the price for sin once and for all, but the pain of broken relationships and deep hurt in our lives simply do not disappear. We face them, we deal with them as we cast our cares upon Jesus, trusting that He cares for us and as we love and forgive others as He has forgiven us. God has forgiven us and continues to forgive us, and so we have forgiveness in our hearts towards those who have actually sinned against us.

When Jesus tells us to "Forgive as we have been forgiven," such words can sound frightening, even overwhelming until you realize that it is not by your might or power, but by the Holy Spirit, by the grace of God, in the reality of forgiveness received as a gift. God's forgiveness has wiped out all of our sins. We live by His grace, now and always. Amen.