

Sermon Series: Pray Like Jesus

Forgive

Matthew 6:9-15

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Two brothers went to their rabbi to settle a longstanding feud. The rabbi got the two to reconcile their differences and shake hands. As they were about to leave, he asked each one to make a wish for the other in honor of the Jewish New Year. The first brother turned to the other and said, "I wish you what you wish me." At that, the second brother threw up his hands and said, "See, Rabbi, he's starting up again!"¹

Today we continue our series on The Lord's Prayer as we talk about forgiveness. As usual, Jesus provides our roadmap. Not surprisingly, it's not an easy one to follow. But there's always hope for reconciliation through Christ. Hear these words from the prayer that Jesus taught us.

***Matt 6:9** "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. **10** Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. **11** Give us this day our daily bread. **12** And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. **13** And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. **14** For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; **15** but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Asking for forgiveness doesn't come naturally, even though scripture couldn't be more clear about our need for it. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8). We've heard those verses and maybe even memorized them, but it's still hard for us to admit when we're wrong. Instead we try to justify our actions. Pride gets in the way. We feel entitled to have this or do that. And when we behave badly toward others, we justify it by saying they deserved to be treated that way. He or she had it coming because of what he did to me or what she did to someone else. That's pride talking.

Pride is one the most dangerous of all sins. Prideful people never apologize or seek forgiveness. Our culture sometimes admires and rewards that kind of false bravado. But for Christians there is serious danger in that attitude. Not only does Jesus command us to forgive those who sin against us but he also warns that if we don't forgive others, God won't forgive us!

¹ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/e/enemies.htm>

There's a story about James Oglethorpe, founder of the colony of Georgia, talking to John Wesley once about someone who had wronged him. Oglethorpe indignantly said, "I never forgive." Wesley responded, "Then, Sir, I hope that you never sin."

All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. We all need forgiveness. The good news is that God grants forgiveness freely to all who ask: if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn 1:9). But Jesus makes clear that that forgiveness is only available to the extent that we're willing to forgive those who sin against us. It's one thing to acknowledge our sin before an almighty God who is without sin. But to ask for forgiveness from another sinful human being? Or to grant forgiveness to someone who has wronged us? That's way tougher! As CS Lewis observes in *Mere Christianity*, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive."²

We see very early in the bible the path humans typically prefer instead of forgiveness. In Genesis 4, right after the story of Cain and Abel, we read about a man named Lamech. Lamech brags about killing a man who had injured him. He says, "If Cain is avenged seven times then Lamech seventy-seven times" (Gen 4:24). Lamech takes justice into his own hands, and he retaliates for the violence done to him by escalating it exponentially. We all naturally long for retribution. It's in our sinful nature. You sin against me? I'll get you back - and then some! This instinct is born out of a reaction against injustice, which is a good thing. But vengeance and justice are ultimately God's to enact, not ours. Besides, if we always meet violence with greater violence, where does that cycle ever end?

Jesus offers a better way. David preached a couple weeks ago about what it means to pray "thy kingdom come." God's kingdom come on earth is a place where the cycle of retribution is broken. Where people don't repay evil for evil. Where the Lamech in us doesn't get revenge but chooses a different path. *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

The Greek word translated "forgive" literally means "release." Release us from our trespasses. Free us from our debt to sin. Help us break the pattern of retribution. Forgiveness is making a conscious decision to work for a better future despite the very real pain of the past. It's not forgetting the past. It's not pretending that the offense never happened. It's not letting people walk all over us like a doormat. Hurting someone has consequences, and not all relationships can be restored to the way they were. Some pain will never fully heal, and some relationships simply cannot survive the trauma inflicted. But striving to be forgiving people frees us to hope and try for a better future.

² CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Chapter 7, p 115

Richard Foster puts it this way, “We must face the fact that things will never be the same. By the grace of God they can be a thousand times better, but they will never again be the same... Forgiveness means that the power of love that holds us together is greater than the power of the offense that separates us. That is forgiveness. In forgiveness we are releasing our offenders so that they are no longer bound to us. In a very real sense we are freeing them to receive God’s grace. We are also inviting our offenders back into the circle of fellowship.”³

It’s not easy to forgive like that. Forgiveness is not a natural response. But Jesus commands us to forgive because we’ve been forgiven. He tells us to love because God first loved us. That’s the kind of love that holds us together as Foster said. It’s God’s love, not ours. It’s only by God’s grace that we have the power to forgive and invite our offenders back into the circle of fellowship.

One of the most amazing examples of this kind of forgiveness was in the aftermath of the Charleston mass shooting. As you know, nine people were gunned down during bible study because they were black. Family members of those who were killed had an opportunity to address the killer in court. Nadine Collier, whose mother Ethel Lance had just been murdered two days before, said this to the shooter:

"You took something very precious away from me," she said, her voice cracking. "I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. But God forgives you, and I forgive you."⁴

What a powerful testimony to God’s amazing grace in the midst of unspeakable tragedy. Nadine tells the truth - you hurt me, I’ll never have my mom back again. But then even in the midst of her pain, she forgives, and releases her mom’s killer into the mercy of God. God forgives you and I forgive you. I’d like to think I could offer that kind of grace to my enemy. I’m not sure if I could.

I think it is interesting timing that God would have us preaching on forgiveness and loving our enemies on such a contentious weekend as this. Throughout the country and even throughout the world we see protests and marches decrying the inauguration of our new president. Regardless of our political affiliation, many of us feel like we have lots of enemies these days. I hesitate to use that word, enemies, because it only adds fuel to the fire of us against them. But a lot of us are feeling that real tension today, and I want to name that and talk about it in light of the scripture we’ve been studying.

³ Foster, *Prayer*, chapter on Petitionary Prayer, p 188

⁴ <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/relatives-charleston-shooting-victims-offer-forgiveness-article-1.2264253>

Whoever your enemies are - politicians, family members, friends, coworkers - God calls us as Christians to love and forgive them. Scripture is explicitly clear on that. However, that doesn't mean we have to like our enemies, approve of them, or condone their behavior. We can always find ways to love people despite not liking what they say and do. We do it all the time with our own selves.

We love ourselves even though we do things we hate. Paul talks about this in Romans 7. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom 7:15). So it is possible to love someone and not like the things that person says and does.

CS Lewis says it this way in his chapter on forgiveness in *Mere Christianity*:

"Just because I loved myself, I was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did those things. Consequently, Christianity does not want us to reduce by one atom the hatred we feel for cruelty and treachery. We ought to hate them...But it does want us to hate them in the same way in which we hate things in ourselves: being sorry that the man should have done such things, and hoping, if it is any way possible, that somehow, sometime, somewhere he can be cured and made human again."⁵

Notice he doesn't say we won't feel hatred toward enemy, or that we should simply lie down or bury it when we do feel it. Again, we were made to react against injustice when we see it, and that's a good and healthy impulse. But when we feel that resentment and animosity welling up toward retribution, we can't choose the way of Lamech. We can't escalate and repay violence with violence. Jesus calls us to a better way.

Lewis goes on to say "...we must try to feel about the enemy as we feel about ourselves - to wish that he were not bad, to hope that he may, in this world or another, be cured: in fact, to wish his good. That is what is meant in the Bible by loving him: wishing his good, not feeling fond of him nor saying he is nice when he is not."⁶

We love our enemies and forgive them not because it's natural or because we want to but because God commands us to do it. It is part of God's will being done on earth. And scripture tells us more than once that if we don't forgive others, God won't forgive us. So as Christians, we eventually need to get to that place of being willing to forgive. Even if our hearts don't feel it. It might well take some time to get there. That's ok. Forgiveness is a process. And we just might also be amazed by what God can do when we surrender our hearts to God's will being done.

⁵ CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p 117

⁶ CS Lewis, p 120

Here are some practical things we can do. Praying for the president and all our leaders - that's biblical, and that's in God's will. Standing up for the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed - that's in God's will. Doing the things that are in line with the values of the kingdom of God - feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner, caring for widows and orphans - all of those things are in God's will. Loving and forgiving our enemies - that's in God's will. None of those things are dependent on who sits in the oval office. And none of them are optional for those of us who follow Christ.

If we choose not to forgive and not to love our enemies, things like anger, resentment, bitterness, and stress can consume our lives if we're not careful. Not to mention all the health challenges which accompany them as well. It's difficult to carry those heavy burdens of hate. They take up space in our wounded hearts that might otherwise be filled by Jesus' healing power. We need to release ourselves from the burdens of hate and embrace the way of God's kingdom instead. Martin Luther King, whose life we celebrated this week, said, "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear."

To choose love over hate, forgiveness over retribution, is to participate in God's kingdom. It's our choice but we can't do it on our own. It's only by God's grace and in the unity of Christ's body that we can choose life. This is why we confess our sins in church - to remind ourselves who we are. We are God's people - sinful but forgiven children of God. Hauerwas and Willimon put it this way, "The courage to forgive begins by realizing we've been forgiven. So every Sunday the church reminds us that we gather as those who have been forgiven, for that is the way we planned to produce heroic souls who are able to forgive."⁷

This is why every Sunday at our 11am service we begin with confessing our sins together. It's why we pray the Lord's Prayer every week in both services - forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Practicing forgiveness is what God's children do. It's what God's kingdom looks like. It's what empowers us by God's grace to choose love over hate, to love our enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us.

So in response to God's word today, I invite you to join me in an ancient church practice; one that moves us toward becoming heroic souls who are able to forgive. Let's confess our sins now before God and one another (UMH #890).

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole

⁷ Willimon and Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us*, p 84

heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen.

Scripture promises that if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. As far as the east is from the west, that's how far God separates our sin from us (Ps 103:12). In the name of Jesus Christ, know in your heart that you are forgiven. You are released from the debt of sin, you don't have to carry it any more. And now you are free to forgive others with the same amazing grace and forgiveness you yourself have received from God our Father in heaven, whose name is called holy, and who has made you holy as well. Amen.

Before we continue to our time of prayer I want to offer another chance to respond to God's message of forgiveness. Research shows there are certain health benefits associated with the regular practice of forgiveness - less stress, lower blood pressure, improved heart health to name a few.⁸ We practice forgiveness because God forgave us, but those are pretty nice side benefits. Research also demonstrates that we best realize the effects of forgiveness by writing down what needs forgiving and physically getting rid of it - burning it, throwing it away, etc.

So in further response to God's word I want to invite you to reflect on a situation in your life that is in need of forgiveness. It could be something you struggle with, something specific you need to ask God to forgive. It could be the name of someone you need to learn to forgive, or some situation you're aware of that needs an infusion of God's grace and forgiveness. Write those down now on the blank paper insert in your bulletin. When you're ready, come forward and place them on the altar, releasing your sin and opening your heart to God's grace.

Prayer: Create in us clean hearts, O God. And renew right spirits with us. Cast us not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from us. Restore unto us the joy of your salvation, and uphold us by the power of your Spirit. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

⁸ Don Mackintosh, "The role of forgiveness in the recovery of physical and mental health" from *Ministry Magazine*, January 2017