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Forgiveness – Matthew 6:9-15

Forgiveness really scares me.

I have come to believe that a core crisis of faith in this time pivots on this point: what is “forgiveness”, and how do we practice it? God’s forgiveness of humanity’s stubborn sinfulness is the purpose of Christ’s work on our behalf, reconciling us to God. And forgiveness is a way that we can emulate God. To be Christians, to do as Christ did, forgiveness is not just what we need, it’s what we need to give. But it’s always easier to look out the window at someone else and critique than it is to look in the mirror and ask if what we are doing is true and of God.

Right here, in this basic teaching of Jesus, are answers, but, at least in my experience, are even more troubling questions. Still, it’s a good place to start. After all, if we call ourselves Christians, and say that we follow Jesus Christ, then we probably ought to pay attention to what he had to say. So, we start with this important piece of his manual for talking with God – the prayer he taught his followers.

There are two places this prayer appears: here in Matthew, Jesus works it into the great Sermon on the Mount, a whole list of lessons. In Luke, he gives it in direct response to one of the disciple's request: "Lord, teach us to pray."

I'm not sure that unnamed disciple entirely got what he asked for, nor am I certain that we've been doing what Jesus taught very well, either. There's a clear form to Jesus' prayer; there's a structure and a careful process laid out for us. But even though we know these words, do we hear what they mean? Do we know what we're saying?

They're so engraved in our very souls that I think probably not. Until you encounter a different wording from what you grew up with, that is. You may not even have recognized it as the Lord's Prayer in this translation!

Now, we'll be studying prayer later. Right now, the hard point is "What does Jesus say about forgiveness when he tells us to ask God for it?"

Forgiving is hard. Absolutely. The president of my seminary while I was there, Samuel Calian, a great scholar and builder of bridges between faith and business, once said that "Forgive and forget' has it all wrong. If you forget, then you haven't really forgiven."

If you've ever been in trouble, you've probably just wished that whoever you've wronged would simply forget the whole thing and move

on. Right? But here's the problem that Sam Calian was getting at: if you forget what happened, then you've lost the reconciliation process that took place first. It takes real work to remember, and still forgive. To really forgive, just like really grieve, you have to face what happened. That's what Jesus is talking about.

So, what is the process of forgiveness? First, there has to be a wrong. God told people from the beginning that they weren't doing things the way he intended. Even when he spelled things out in the Law, even when he sent prophets to take them by the hand and lead them in the paths that God laid out for them, they didn't do it. Things haven't changed, have they?

So, we don't follow God's intention regarding our relationship with him. We do even worse among ourselves – the people you treat worst often are those you love most. And when someone has hurt us or we've hurt someone else, something has gone wrong, and our relationships are tangled up or broken. So, 1. Something's wrong; and 2. Something's broken.

Now, when Jesus addresses this, he uses the concept of indebtedness. He really does say, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Let's try to unpack that.

If I give something to you – money or time or just my good will - without expectation of a response on your part, then there is no

imbalance: it is a gift. My gift to you is balanced by your gratitude, or by the satisfaction I have that a need has been met.

But if I take advantage of you, show you disrespect, or hurt you, or take something from you – something physical, or your dignity or simply refused to show you love, then I have created a debt: I have taken something from you, and made the relationship between us unbalanced. Sinning against God or someone else is taking away something, putting us in debt – to use another old translation, trespassing, invading their soul.

Forgiveness, then, is rebalancing that relationship. It can be achieved in lots of ways: repentance (being sorry for what you've done); punishment (repaying the debt through a loss of your own); or if it is cancelled.

So, what's going on in this prayer that Jesus gives us?

Jesus says, “forgive us our debts *as we forgive our debtors.*”

Forgive us the way we forgive others.

People owe us. Not just money, or not even money at all: people owe us because they have taken advantage of us, they've hurt us. They have cut us off in traffic, they've lied to us; they've treated us like we weren't human or manipulated us as if we weren't children of the creator of the universe. And that's not the half of it.

I'm indebted to the kid I bullied in summer camp, to dozens of people I hurt in college, just for a start – those are things I can call to mind. But there are also myriads of ways in which I have been less than what I could have been to others, with or without extenuating circumstances. That puts me in their debt.

It also puts me in debt to God, because God created each of us to live together in love and mutual support and care. Those aren't just words, either – because God came to us in Jesus Christ who said, "Love one another as I have loved you" and then let himself be killed, at least partly so we could see what that kind of love looks like.

I don't love like that. I love cautiously. I tend to love the people I like or that like me, although I try hard to do better. Yet, no matter how hard I try, I will always fail to love like Jesus, and I will always manage to be a day late and a dollar short in keeping up my balance sheet with God, let alone with you.

I can't speak for you, personally, but I will speak for all of humankind and say that we're all in this same boat. Which gets problematic when Jesus says, "forgive us as we forgive others."

Doesn't say who those others are; doesn't say they have to be friends or members of our family (which, of course, are some of the hardest to forgive). It just means trying harder to forgive those whom there is absolutely no way we can forgive: those who have hurt us, those

who have hurt those we care about, those who have hurt others - committed atrocities, unspeakable acts of horror.

That level of forgiveness, friends, is scary. Because it doesn't just mean that *we* have to forgive them; it implies very strongly that *God could forgive them*. And we wonder whether that's fair, right, just, or even possible.

One of the most striking incidents recorded in the Gospels is in John, chapter 6. After Jesus spells out in graphic language what following him means, we are told that "after this, many of his disciples no longer followed him." It might just be that faced with this level of forgiveness, we will find ourselves in a similar situation, if we take Jesus seriously. If this is what Jesus means by forgiveness, something so huge, can you follow him?

Taking Jesus seriously has to do with forgiveness, clearly. Jesus tells us in his prayer to forgive – but it's in living life following him that we learn, however imperfectly, how to do it.

I can do all things through Christ – but I have to make the effort. And that's what's so hard – because, quite honestly, I don't always want to forgive. Sometimes, I'm not even certain that I want God to forgive.

Which is why God is God. God can do these things; we have a hard time seeing how justice can possibly be served. But all this is from a human point of view.

We watched the Westminster Dog Show earlier this week. When the Scottish Terrier was introduced, I realized for the first time that the announcer says the same thing every year: “The owner of a Scotty must be firm enough to earn the Scotty’s respect, be reasonable enough to satisfy its strong sense of fair play, and confident enough to love a dog that openly feels superior to its owner.”

Now, think about that for a minute. That sounds familiar. Might we seem a lot like Scotties to our God? Our sense of “fair play,” not to mention how we openly feel superior to God, at least at times? Wondering who God can forgive, and trying to make the decision for ourselves – shrinking God’s mercy to our human standards?

Try this: “The God of a human must be firm enough to earn the human’s respect, be reasonable enough to satisfy its strong sense of fair play, and confident enough to love a creature that openly feels superior to its owner.”

I’m not going to resolve the tension here; it’s too important to keep it up, to keep our spiritual muscles toned. Nor am I telling you HOW to forgive as much as inviting you to consider how *you* forgive and accept forgiveness, recognizing that those two things are essential to our Christian behavior.

I pray that God gives you – and me – the grace to explore what forgiveness means in the Kingdom of God. In Christ, in worship, in

forgiveness, we are given the chance to try. We can start by laying our sin at the feet of Christ in worship, remembering that we will always be in debt.