

“A Frightening Thing to Ask”

The Lord's Prayer

Matthew 18:21-35

Matthew 6:12

August 10, 2008

Forgiveness is one key to a great life. It involves both giving and receiving forgiveness.

I like clever lines. Or a well-turned phrase. That occurred to me all over again yesterday.

Ogden Nash was good at them. I like his stuff.

Shake oh shake the ketchup bottle, none'll come and then a lot'll.

How odd of God to choose the Jews.

I don't know where these originated at:

Whether you think you can, or whether you think you can't – either way you're right.

Life is like an onion. You peel one layer at a time and sometimes you weep.

People who say they don't understand **the Bible** never read the **Proverbs**. It's full of clever lines and the more you think about them the more you understand them.

-better to control yourself than to control a whole city

-sometimes it takes a painful experience to make us change our ways

-discipline your children while they are young enough to learn. If you don't, you are helping them destroy themselves.

-your will to live can sustain you when you are sick.

Oh there are so many good ones.

There are some lines I just don't agree with:

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. That's not true.

Forgive and forget. That's not possible.

Some things can't be forgiven. That's not true.

If you forgive you just let them get away with it. Oh really?

Jesus was good at clever lines. I like his. That's why I really like what we call the Sermon on the Mount.

-don't worry about tomorrow, today has enough worries of its own.

-be concerned above everything else with the kingdom of God and he will provide you with what you need.

-forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us
 forgive us our sins in the same way we forgive those who sin against us
-if you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your father in heaven will also forgive you. If you do not forgive others, then your father will not forgive the wrongs you have done.
WHAT!?!?!

Jesus teaches us to pray: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” Now that’s a frightening thing to ask!!

Have you ever noticed that line when we join together in the Lord’s Prayer? Has it ever made you think of anyone? Ever made you a little uncomfortable? Who do you really need to forgive? And what do you need forgiveness for?

Why didn’t Jesus teach us to pray for joy, or peace, or fulfillment, or financial ease, or physical health? Why forgiveness?

Because, there may be nothing so vitally needed to the human spirit than what is asked for in this petition. To be forgiven – AND – to be able to forgive. **To be a forgiven and forgiving person is the only way to know joy and peace and fulfillment.**

We all know it is phrased in different ways, by different translations. Forgive us our debts, forgive us our trespasses, forgive us our sins, forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. Pretty much comes out the same way doesn’t it?

Before we can honestly pray this prayer, we must realize that we NEED to pray this prayer. That is, to have a sense of being a sinner. William Barclay wrote in 1958 that “sin is not nowadays a popular word. Men and women rather resent being called sinners.” But then, that was 1958.

Gerald Kennedy in his book *Who Speaks for God* writes about “a college under the control of a small, fundamentalist sect which advertised that its campus was 7 miles from any known form of sin. That would be a good trick if you could do it. If I believed that there was such a college, I would apply immediately for a job on the faculty; and if that were not forthcoming, I would settle for a job on the custodial staff. There are few things I would be unwilling to do in order to get 7 miles from sin.”

Remember how Jesus said to pray for your enemies. One of the most challenging thoughts of this new teaching is to pray for the very person that hurt you so much. If you dare try that you will be very surprised at the results.

Give up the right to make it even. It is impossible.

Give up the hope it could have been different. It can’t be.

Don’t keep doing this to yourself. You know you are only hurting you, because it does nothing to the other person.

This is not letting the other person off. Actually it is letting you off.

Yes, there is a price to be paid. But you are not the enforcer.

Keep it up, and you will just be a bitter, joyless, miserable person.

If we are to have forgiveness in our lives, several things are necessary:

1) To have forgiveness in our lives we must understand the principle of forgiveness initiated by God.

That means that the event is over and done with, put behind, forgotten (“as far as the east is from the west, so far will I remove their sins from them”). Any penalty is set aside. The record is removed. It is finished and done.

2) It is to know that we have sinned.

A guy in jail came to terms with his own sinful nature and wrote about seeing “the harm I dun’ just in bein’ me.”

3) It is to know that others sin.

It is part of the human condition. Others are just like us. It is easier to see the hurt others do than it is to see the hurt we do.

4. If we are to have forgiveness, we must learn to understand.

There is always a reason why a person does something. It is said that what we don’t like in others is usually the thing we don’t like in ourselves. Also that we are more like those who have hurt us than we are different.

5) If we are to have forgiveness, we must learn to drive on.

I’ve heard people say, “I may forgive, but not forget.” I suspicion that as long as we remember (particularly in that tone of voice) we have not really forgiven. And as long as we remember, there is little intention to forgive, or little hope that we will forgive.

Most likely the issue is not so much forgetting, for we always remember – but the issue is in letting it go. Putting it behind. Giving up the emotional investment. Surrendering the right to paybacks.

This is critical, because the meaning of the prayer is that we will be forgiven in the same measure in which we forgive.

The hard core issue is that as long as we are unwilling to be a forgiving person, we will never truly experience the freeing, transforming power of forgiveness for ourselves. We will remain trapped in the desert of our own past, by our own hardened attitudes.

“But you don’t know what he did to me,” we protest. God does. And God forgives.

6) If we are to have forgiveness in our lives, we must learn to forgive.

Christian love is that unconquerable benevolence, that undefeatable good will, which will never seek anything but the highest good for others, no matter what they do to us, and no matter how they treat us.

Nothing good comes from holding grudges and clinging to old memories of the past. That is to try to play God, thinking that we can retain the right to hand out punishment. The one who refuses to forgive destroys the bridge over which he himself must pass. The one who refuses to forgive hurts himself most of all. When we refuse to forgive, we only hurt ourselves.

Abraham Lincoln once overruled the death sentence given to a very young soldier who had fled from his first encounter with the enemy. In his official pardon of the boy Lincoln wrote, “I have observed that it does not do a boy much good to shoot him.”

I might ask, “Do you believe this?” This prayer asks us – “Do you want this?” Do you want to be forgiven in the same way you forgive? It is a frightening thing to ask!

How do you respond to the one who hurts you?

We typically laugh and say, “Hey, I don’t get mad, I get even.” How DO you respond? Hold a grudge, or seek revenge? Talk it out? Get angry and blow up? How are you doing?

Is there some old wound from the past that continues to come up and haunt you? That causes your life to be less than it could be? Do you see the connection between withholding forgiveness and your own mental, spiritual, and even physical health?

There is great good news here. We all need to be forgiven so bad. And to truly be happy we need to learn how to forgive. And the two are intertwined. Learning to forgive, and experiencing forgiveness, are identical.

Do you have someone in your life that you refuse to forgive? And in light of this prayer, what do you feel you need to do? What do you think this says about your own forgiveness?

Terry Anderson was a member of the press who was held hostage in Lebanon for almost 7 years. He had this to say about forgiveness in his book:

“Forgiveness isn’t something that you just do and get it over with. It’s a process. What does it mean to forgive? Does it mean that I accept what they did to me? No. Does it mean I have to love them? That’s what Christ says, but I’m not ready for that.

It does mean not hanging on to the anger. I’m not going to spoil the joy of being free by being angry. I can’t hurt them by my anger. I can only hurt myself.”

You just can't experience forgiveness when you are holding on to something you have against someone else. It just won't work. If you are holding a closed fist in the face of God you are cutting yourself off from the very thing you need most. So if you can't get past your own past, look to what you are holding onto against someone else. If you can't figure out how on earth to forgive someone else, look to your past. It's in there somewhere.

It's ok to take your time. I'm not asking you to deny your feelings. Point the ship that direction and make the turn. I specifically remember a couple at a church I served a long time ago. They accused me of something which was very painful and hurtful. Their accusation basically ended my ministry at that church. Public accusations can do that to people you know. It took me a long time to forgive that. Oh, sure, I remember it. When I prayed I just admitted to God that I was not ready to forgive them – yet. There finally came a day when I was ready to let it go. It just took some time.

Forgiveness is the key to a great life. We all need it. Without it we are chained to the failures of our past. We need to give it. By forgiving, we open our hearts to allow the love of God to flow through us to the other. Our own lives are transformed forever.

To pray like this is a frightening thing to ask. To NOT seek that life is even more frightening.
May God grant to all of us His power to move forward in this area.