

<sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

■ Matthew 6:12

If you believe that all of us have fallen short of the glory of God, it's not hard to pray for personal forgiveness. In fact, every time I pray the Lord's Prayer, the part I dwell on the most is "and forgive us our sins" because if there's one thing I'm sure of when I pray, it's that I've sinned, and I need forgiveness. But this fourth clause in the Lord's Prayer can't be prayed without also praying "as we have forgiven the sins of others". And, as if to toss a little more cold water in our faces, when we skip a verse we come to verses 14 and 15, which say "For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

If you've been listening, this sounds like divine extortion: forgive or I won't forgive. Be gracious or I won't be gracious. Love, or I won't love. If you're anything like me, you really don't like the image of God this produces because shatters our ideas of freely-given grace. So how are we to pray for forgiveness? How do we pray the Lord's Prayer in full and live it out with all our hearts? If praying "your will be done" is difficult because it puts Jesus at the center of our lives, praying "forgive us as we have forgiven others" is to invite God to then form Christ in us.

It's worth looking at the context surrounding Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer. While in Luke's gospel, the disciples approach Jesus and ask him for instruction on prayer<sup>1</sup>, Matthew frames this teaching in a sermon Jesus delivers from the top of a hill. It's important here to take

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 11:1

notice of what Jesus is doing when he's preaching from a mountaintop, because to a Jew, teaching from a mountain recalls thunder and glory on Mount Sinai, and therefore signifies a giving of a new law. To us, children of a time when we sing "I fought the law and the law won" and can swap our favourite lawyer jokes with ease, the giving of a law sounds like more red tape, more bureaucracy, more oppression. However, for a teeming horde of runaway slaves who had no idea how to be a nation on their own, Yahweh's law was nothing less than an introduction to their national identity. The law, the Torah, was Yahweh's signature on his people that detailed how to love him and how to love each other. It was by exercising this love that Israel would tell the surrounding tribes who their God is; it was by the quality of their life together that the nations would have a glimpse of heaven on earth.

The same thing happens when Jesus speaks to the crowds surrounding him on the mountain. He's giving this new people coming together in his name a new law, a new way of living together that bears witness to the character of the Father. And so when Jesus teaches us to pray, he's teaching us the language of the new Kingdom that in Jesus, comes near. It isn't a secret language with cryptic alphabets. It's a language that transcends all cultures and creeds; the language of love and reconciliation.

Saying "sorry" is one of the first things we learn, and if you're Canadian, saying "sorry" is something of a national pastime. Asking for forgiveness is such a part of all our lives that it's hard to imagine that in the new Heaven and Earth we'll never say "sorry" again. However, saying "sorry" is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to asking God for forgiveness, because what follows a gentle word of absolution is the agony of reconciliation.

Forgiveness, like love, is a word we have beat down to become almost meaningless. In both cases, the great danger in not using these words carefully is that they start sounding easy. Yet

you know as well as I do that nothing could be further from the truth. Love, and its outworking in forgiveness, is the primary calling of God's new people—and nothing God calls us to is ever easy. Rewarding, maybe—easy, no. Forgiveness and reconciliation are two sides of the same coin that goes in the treasure trove of love. If we truly live according to the law of love, then we have no choice—we must work at forgiveness and reconciliation. It's presumptuous to long for a restored relationship with God, but then resist having a restored relationship with those whom God loves.

In forgiving others, we need to steel ourselves and fight the good fight to be courageous and daring in our reconciliation. It often means talking about things most of us would rather remain private and being sensitive to the other party's willingness to discuss it—more an art than a following an instruction manual. It means taking the time to see people clearly and hear *their* stories so that we're kept from condemning them and ourselves. And, what can be most frightening for many of us is that reconciliation also means taking long, unflinching looks at our own fault in the matter and being strong enough to confess our flaws and wrongdoing. It's then that in light of these repaired relationships we work at turning away from the things that destroy right-relatedness and we turn towards becoming the God's loving community.

It sounds great, but the grind of forgiveness and reconciliation is probably the hardest thing we will do as a church. I liken the early days of our church to the opening salvos of World War I—you know, young English men singing "God Save the Queen" as they marched off to fight the Hun. But things changed in a hurry once the brutal reality of war in the trenches became clear. As visions of honour and valor wore off, so did the soldier's resolve to keep fighting. Many were tempted to lay down and accept a complacent death. Many longed for relief and so deserted their brothers at the front for comfort and security. The same thing happens in every church. Once the honeymoon phase is over, we get sick of staring each other in the eye and perhaps retreat into

shells of bland niceness. Yet community is a dangerous place, and the sooner we are disillusioned about our idea and idol of what community should be, the better, because it's when we cannot stand to be around God's people that we become open to *really* loving them. These are the trenches of love, the time when we either lose faith and flee or else gather ourselves and persevere.

If we're to be this loving community of God, we need to be serious about humbling ourselves and working it out. And if we fail, the consequences are dire: "*if you do not forgive others their sin, your father will not forgive your sin.*" I imagine that the plain sense of this verse strikes terror in all of us because we all have people in our lives that we have a hard time forgiving. To this, three things: first, God's mercy in Christ reaches further than our sin ever will, and the strength to reconcile comes from our identity as profoundly beloved people. Second, God often lets us have exactly what we want, even if what we want isn't good for us. And third, if what we want is to live in resentment and anger, then this is what God allows us to shrink down into. It may be that once we sink into bitterness we are still children of God, but we may not feel it because of the way grace ceases to flow in and through us. If we choose to hold onto the sins of others, we become a backed up toilet, full of all the nastiness that we won't let pass us by.

The word for forgiveness that Jesus uses here<sup>2</sup> doesn't just mean the act of apologizing, but also letting go—and even more, to leave, to depart, to abandon, and very importantly, to keep from hindering. Unless we learn to let go, we walk with each other as though we have stones in our shoes: tolerable at first, but mile after mile, the things we hold against each other form bruises and blisters that make real community virtually impossible. Sin, we like to think, is something purely spiritual, something like rotten fairy glitter that we get God to dust off our shoulders like

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<sup>2</sup> αφιημι

invisible dandruff. But the spiritual and physical can never be separated—what affects us spiritually affects us physically, and if there is a spiritual issue within the community it is only a matter of time before it becomes manifest in some physical way as well. Perhaps we stop working through conflict and take a passive-aggressive route that leads us to stop trusting our fellow congregants. From there, it's only a half-step to stop trusting our elders, then another inch more to stop trusting our pastors and maybe a small trip into doubting the existence and mission of Christ's Body as a whole. Though this doesn't sound like a big deal to some of you, it almost goes without saying that it is surpassingly hard to be a loving community that witnesses to a loving Father if we don't trust each other and commit to it.

Telling you that forgiveness is essential to the act of loving each other well is one thing, but finding the strength to do so is always the most difficult part. Some of us here have been through such terrible things that the very thought of forgiving those who have sinned against us makes us sick to our stomachs. Where, then, does the strength come from to forgive the ugly things we do to each other? I can't speak for unbelievers, but as a Christian, the strength to let go of those who don't deserve our forgiveness comes from keeping ourselves squarely in view as creatures journeying under the mercy of God.

The key to finding the power to forgive and persevere in love is that God's mercy is the prior reality in which we live. Though we are all victims of sin in one way or another, we are also perpetrators, even if most of the time we feel as though we're good people. It is our primary identity as reconciled sons and daughters that we can forgive as we have been forgiven: freely and without reserve.

Of course, knowing ourselves as forgiven people doesn't change the fact that most churches avoid engaging in forgiveness and reconciliation because it's so embarrassing and difficult. We'd

much rather write a pretty sermon or play a perky song. However, just because it's difficult doesn't mean we should stop trying. Grace of any kind is never really free. Freely-given, perhaps, but it's always costly. Perhaps part of the problem is that we're so fixated on the idea of God's grace that we often forget how much it cost for him to work it. For even though the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is almighty and nothing is ever *too* hard for him<sup>3</sup>, this does not mean that God accomplishes things without effort, without pain, without toil. The cross of Christ is evidence of this, and if we really seek to be disciples of Jesus, we too will know how expensive grace is to give.

You may have noticed that this sermon hasn't had a snappy illustration to get your attention. This isn't because there's a lack of good examples that might help this message stick. In fact, it's the opposite—there are thousands of stories of forgiveness and reconciliation that I could share with you that would make you smile and warm your heart. Or, I could the other way, and make you weep with personal accounts of how I still struggle to forgive those who have wounded me. But every story I bring you will never have the same impact or importance as the one you tell, the one you work out, the one about which you wake up in the mornings thinking “I can't forgive—I can't, I can't”. All of us have people in our lives that we'd rather not forgive, and all of us have had as much sin done to us as we have done to others. Yet God's prior act of forgiveness changes everything because in light of how much we have been forgiven, living with integrity and humility now means forgiving just as much. How else will the world that God loves know who God is? Not by mere words, but by our willingness to let go of the wrongs done to us and to enter into the demanding toil of mending what was broken. This is what God does for us, and this, as God's people, is what we do for each other.

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<sup>3</sup> Jer 32:17

Maybe you think it's depressing to brood upon our personal unworthiness before God—and so it can be, *if* we fail to temper this unworthiness with the singular fact that we are deeply loved. It is the love of God that compels us to receive forgiveness, and thus strengthens us to be all right with being sinners who have been forgiven, are being forgiven, and still need to be forgiven much until we draw our last breath. The more we dwell there, as people who do not deserve mercy, the more we develop our identity as a people of committed love and real grace. It's a strange thing, but the more we practice reconciliation, the more natural it becomes for us, as though praying that we have forgiven others is a prayer that forms Christ in us in an unexpected way. Perhaps some of us have yet to see the truth of this, but I know that the more I work at humbling myself and deal honestly with pain, the more I see how this changes my heart from selfishness and anger to one who reaches out and dares to love. So may it be for you as well.