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Speaker: Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor
Scripture: Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Nathan grew up in Oakridge neighbourhood in London, Ontario. In his early teenage years, he fell into a pattern of rebellion against his parents. They didn't react too well when he came home with an earring. Things were worse when he got his first tattoo. They were furious when he stayed out all night without as much as a phone call or text to tell them where he was. His friends weren't exactly his parent's first choice.

One night Nathan and his parents got into a huge fight. "I hate you!" he screamed at his father as he slammed the door to his bedroom. That night he acted on a plan that he had been hatching for some time. Once everyone had gone to sleep, he got dressed, packed a bag and before he left the house, he rifled through his dad's wallet he had left on the kitchen counter. He took his cash, debit and credit cards and his parent's bank book from the kitchen drawer. Nathan hopped on the train headed towards Toronto. When he got to Union Station, he went to the nearest TD bank and withdrew \$ 10 000 from his parent's bank account. He then took Uber to the airport where he used his dad's credit card to buy a plane ticket headed west. He figured the last place his parents will think to look for him is on the streets of Vancouver.

He arrived in Vancouver and pretty soon, he is enjoying his new found freedom. New friends, plenty of booze, late nights, sleep all day. No school. No parents hassling him. He began to experiment with sex and drugs. But, it doesn't take long until \$10 000 is used up and the debit and credit cards were cancelled.

Back home in London, his parents were frantic. Their credit card was maxed out and the \$10 000 set aside for their daughter's fall tuition was now

gone. The police had been notified. The streets of London had been searched. A missing person's alert has gone out. Nathan's parents were at a loss for what has happened. They feared the worst.

Meanwhile, in Vancouver, things were not going so well for Nathan. He was soon addicted to Fentanyl and the money he stole from his parents was gone. He was now homeless and living on the streets. He was forced to start turning tricks, selling himself for sex, to support his habit. One day, he was walking down the street and saw a poster on a telephone pole, it said, "Missing Person". Below the heading he recognized a photo of himself. At least the way he used to look. The poster had his parent's phone number on it. It asked if anyone had any information, to please call them. Nathan ripped the poster down and jammed it into his pocket.

The months pass, then the years. Nathan was careless one time too many. At first, he wrote off his sickness as just another bout of the flu that came from living on the streets but the illness persisted. He went to the free walk in clinic to discover he had contracted Hepatitis C and HIV. Not even the scuzziest of pimps would sell his services, now. As he sat at a drop in centre, lonely, tired and hungry. He looked at the poster he had taken from the telephone pole and saved for the last few years. He thought back to the life he had in London – a typical middle class family. It triggered memories of the family vacations to the lake, the loud and chaotic family dinners. He remembered his mother's comforting words when he failed his driver's exam the first time.

"Why did I leave?" he said to himself. "Even the family dog lives a better life than I do." He's crying now, and knows that more than anything he just wanted to go home.

He convinced someone to lend him their cell phone and he called home. Three straight phone calls, three connections with the answering machine. He hung up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time he said, "Mom, dad, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I will be using up all the money I have left to catch a flight to Toronto tomorrow. I will be arriving at Pearson airport at 6:00pm. If you're not there, well I guess I'll assume that I am no longer welcomed in your lives. I will understand and stay away."

The next day on the plane, Nathan thought about all the flaws in his plan. What if his mom and dad didn't get the message? And what are they going to do if they heard it anyway – after all, it's been 3 years and they haven't heard a word from me in all that time. How are they going to react when they discover I'm a junkie with AIDS? If they do show up what on earth am I going to say?"

The plane arrived in Toronto just before 6:00pm. His heart started pounding as he walked through the arrival gate. "This is it. Here goes nothing." As he stepped through the doors, he looked to his right, no one. But before he could look back he heard someone call his name. His head whipped around and there was his mom and dad, his sister and aunts and uncles and cousins and grandmother. They were holding a banner that read "Welcome home". His mom and dad started running towards him, tears streaming down their face, arms held wide. Nathan couldn't move. His parent's grabbed him with such force it almost knocked him over. "Dad, I'm sorry", he stammered. "Shush", his dad said. "All we care about is that you are home. We just want to hold you. Come on, everyone's waiting and we have a big party for you at home." Nathan found himself covered with a love that he had not known in three years.

This story may sound familiar to some of you, perhaps bits of it are your story but maybe you caught on that it is a modern retelling of a well-known parable in the bible. Does anyone know what it is?

The Prodigal Son. It is found in the gospel of Luke 15:11-32, Jesus tells the story of a father who has two sons, a younger and an older. The younger son asks the father for his inheritance, which while the father was still alive, was like a slap in his face. It

was so disrespectful. But, the father grants his son's request. This younger son then turned his back on his family, his upbringing and goes off to a foreign land and squanders his entire fortune. Recklessly extravagant, he spends everything, eventually becoming destitute.

As a result, this son is forced to return home empty-handed and intends to beg his father to accept him back as a servant. To the son's surprise, he is not scorned by his father at all but instead is welcomed back with loving, open arms and a celebration. One of the most vivid images in this whole story and perhaps most shocking comes at Luke 15:20. After the younger son had made the decision to return home and beg his father to simply allow him to work as a servant and pay off his debt (he expected nothing more after the way he had betrayed his father), it says in the text;

Luke 15:20

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Picture it if you can, this father running. Have that image in your mind. You may be thinking, *what's the big deal, Paul? These days, all sorts of people run. Go to Gibbons Park this weekend, you are likely to find a whole mass of people running up and down the trail.* Even our Prime Minister has been known to lace up the sneakers and go for a jog. It is good for the health and it makes for a great photo op.

But this is what we need to understand. In Jesus' day, in that culture, the more senior you were in the community, the less likely you were to even walk fast, let alone run in public. It showed a lack of dignity and decorum. So when Jesus told this story of this father running, it was meant to get a reaction from the audience he was addressing. It would be like if the mayor of our city showed up at his swearing in ceremony in a bathing suit. It would be a total embarrassment and loss of dignity.

When we discover why the father is running it is even more shocking. He is running to greet a son who has brought such disgrace to the whole family. It is when we understand why this the father is running that we will truly understand what Jesus

meant when he taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer.

Matthew 6:12

*And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

Let me stop there for a moment. You may remember that we had a message series on the Lord's Prayer in January and February. Each week, we went through the prayer line by line and kind of broke it down to determine its meaning but we omitted one line at the time. We didn't get to it. The line of the prayer we didn't discuss?

*And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors*

See we knew that we would be launching a new message series after Easter, today, where this line would fit perfectly and so we held off until now.

This new series is entitled, ***A Generous Faith***. The premise for this series is that God held back nothing from humanity in order to save us from our sinful condition. He gave the very best he had to offer, his son, Jesus. That is what we just celebrated at Easter.

Jesus is the epitome of humility, servanthood and generosity. He gave his life on the cross to provide a pathway of redemption for us. All we need to do is accept him as Lord of our life and, empowered by the Holy Spirit, follow the way he has called us to live.

The way of a life of a follower of Jesus is to be defined by among other things, generosity. To be a Christian is to live generously.

Is that the way you are living? Generous is defined as *showing a readiness to give more of something, than is necessary or expected*. Generosity is a value we hold highly at North Park. Are you a generous person? As we think of today's theme, are you generous with your forgiveness?

Let's go back to the *running man* in our story of the Prodigal son. We need stories like this in our world today because it seems that we have lost the concept of forgiveness in our society. Let me explain.

Remember when Jesus walked the earth and taught people? It was during the time of an overly rigid and rule bound society. It was the time of the

Pharisees, the Jewish religious elite who had laws for everything. What you could and couldn't do and when and where you could or couldn't do it. They had laws about when you worked and when you rested, when you went to church and when you prayed. They had laws about how and when you washed your hands, what you could wear and who you could associate with in public. It was stifling and if you broke a rule, you paid the consequences. Everything was black and white.

You do the crime you pay the time.

Into that societal paradigm, Jesus introduces the story of the lavish forgiveness of the *running man*, the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. It was a shocking contrast and an antidote to the prevailing legalism of the day.

For a son to blatantly disrespect and publicly embarrass a Father like the younger son did in this story was cause for permanent exile from his family. No one would have blamed the father for permanently disowning the son. He should be banished not welcomed back with open arms.

Do you see why Jesus' story of the *running father* was so scandalous? Jesus shows him doing something that was contrary to what the society would have expected, he forgives. It may be a little harder for us to understand though. Something may get lost in translation because we don't live in that kind of society today, do we? Instead of legalism and rigidity, it appears as though we have moved to the opposite end of the spectrum. Our moral standards have become somewhat fuzzy. Instead of having everything defined, black and white, there is a lot of gray in our world. We are encouraged to do our own thing or to define our own truth or reality. Just do what feels good and with that prevailing mindset, we have lost the concept of forgiveness. Have you ever thought about that? We have lost the concept of forgiveness in our world or at least we trivialized it.

We live in a world where celebrity parents can pay up to a half million dollars to a fake charity as a bribe to get their children into university and then plead not guilty when they are caught red handed. See once we replace morality with moral relevancy, that is, we set our own standard for what is truth

based on what feels right at the time, there isn't anything left to forgive or ask forgiveness for.

If you feel hurt about something, do you know what our culture suggests? You should simply retreat into your own private world and pretend it didn't happen. And we see where that mindset has gotten us, don't we? We are the most depressed, medicated and addicted generation in history.

Suppressing our pain and hurt doesn't work, have you noticed? That is why we are having movements such as, #MeToo, or sex abuse scandals by noted religious leaders coming to light more and more. Given time, sin and pain will come out from behind closed doors.

Instead of forgiveness, do you know what our society is championing more these days? This obscure notion of tolerance. At its best, tolerance is a cheap knock off of forgiveness. At its worst it is a way of sweeping the real issues that face humanity under the proverbial carpet.

I still have these vivid images in my mind of road trips with my parents when I was a kid. I just turned 56 this week, so I am going back 45-50 years.

Back to the day, believe it or not, when parents were not obligated by law to strap their children into a car seat or seat belt. No, it was every person for themselves in the back seat of my dad's 1972 Dodge Charger. My two sisters and myself. We had our territory marked out and no one better cross each line of demarcation. If you did, all heck would break loose. There would be pinching and biting and my little sister screaming, arms and legs flying everywhere. Was it just my family?

Then almost on cue, my dad's big arm would reach into the back seat like a crane, swinging frantically as we weaved back and forth to avoid contact. Then my mom would turn and look at us. It was a look only a mother can give. A look that would make you want to confess to any misdeed whether you did it or not. *You kids better learn to tolerate each other, it's a long drive.*

That planted the seed in my mind that to tolerate someone means, you better plug your nose and put up with each other. Endure each other. Do you know that in scripture, Jesus never taught his followers to tolerate? Did you know that? No, he

taught us to love, even our enemies. That goes way beyond tolerance and Godly love forgives.

Remember the Apostle Paul's well known words, you hear it at all the weddings in,

1 Corinthians 13:4-5

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Godly love forgives. Tolerance puts up with, almost begrudgingly. Just as a bit of a caveat, when Paul says *keeps no record of wrongs* here that does not mean forgive and forget. It means you don't keep bringing back someone's failings to shame them. To forgive doesn't mean to forget. The dangers of forgetting can be significant.

Without a clear memory, we have little ability to break destructive cycles in marriages, families and churches. Accountability depends on memory but love does not dredge up the past so that it can continually punish someone. Do you understand that?

If the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son would have merely intended to tolerate his younger son when he made his way home, he would not have run down the road to embrace him. He wouldn't have lavished gifts upon him. He wouldn't have thrown him a party. No.

He would have put up with him, endured him. He would have tolerated him. He would have waited for him on the porch while his son made his walk of shame up the driveway. He would have given him a disgusted head shake and then thrown him a sleeping bag to bunk in the garage until he got his act together. To prove himself worthy of the father's love again. To tolerate is such a weak facsimile of forgiveness.

What was Jesus getting at with this idea of forgiveness and why was it so important that he included in this prayer he taught his followers to pray?

*And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors*

If you read through the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John carefully, you will see that it is a written account of Jesus travelling throughout the scenic countryside of Galilee teaching, preaching and healing people in the name of God. Do you want to know what he most often preached about? The Kingdom of God.

In *Mark 1:14-15* it says,

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Jesus told parables about the Kingdom of God and used illustrations such as the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It is like yeast. He announced the Kingdom of God has come near and he also declared that there was a very unique quality about this kingdom different from all the other ruling kingdoms of the day. It was forgiveness. Forgiveness of sins and transgressions would be offered through Jesus.

Remember, this was good news to the people, especially the lower class because in this rigid, rule bound society, they were oppressed by a works mentality. If they messed up, the only way they could make amends was not by getting on their hands and knees and saying, *I am sorry*. No, it was to try harder, work harder. Forgiveness didn't cut it. But that only left them more exhausted and defeated.

Jesus comes along announcing a new kingdom and a new way of life offered through him, that includes generous forgiveness for their sins, transgressions and debts. This was freeing.

Luke 24:47

Jesus says to his disciples "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

So, Jesus is preaching about the Kingdom of God coming, that forgiveness of sins was happening through him and that God was transforming his people to be light to the world.

Whenever people responded to Jesus and his call, he gave them instructions as to how they should live. The Apostle Paul captures the way of life of a Christian well in *Ephesians 4:29-32*. He says this is the way to live as followers of Jesus;

Ephesians 4:29-32

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Noteworthy here, having received God's forgiveness themselves, the early Christians were to practice forgiveness with each other. To not forgive would mean that they hadn't fully grasped what Jesus was all about. To not forgive would mean that they hadn't fully grasped what life was like in the Kingdom of God.

When Peter approached Jesus about how often he should forgive those who sin against him, he thought he was being generous when he said,

Matthew 18:21-22

"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Not just seven times, Peter. Seventy-seven times. In other words, Jesus seems to say, *be generous with your forgiveness because I was generous with mine to you*. Having received the forgiveness of God ourselves, we are to practice it generously with others. If we don't, then we don't truly grasp what Jesus has done for us. We don't truly grasp what life is like in the Kingdom of God.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, Jesus depicts the *running father* pouncing on his son in love not only before he has had a chance to clean up his life and demonstrate that he has changed but also before he has had a chance to recite his apology. That repentance speech that he no doubt had been going over and over for the length of his journey home.

This greeting would have dumbfounded the son and taken him completely by surprise. It was overwhelming. But the Father is lost in his joy. He throws off all matter of decorum and stuffiness and he runs to greet his long lost son. What a home coming!

Jesus' story here is about a Father that he knew well. It was his Father, our heavenly Father who offers us his generous love and forgiveness. Have you received it? Have you received the Father's love and forgiveness?

That is the thing, isn't it? You may be thinking, *Oh Paul, you are always talking about God's generous love and forgiveness but I just can't believe it, how can God love me for what I have done? How can God forgive the despicable things in my life? I am not worthy.* That is another purpose of this story.

Our Father, God's love and forgiveness can pardon and restore any kind of sin and wrongdoing. The younger son discovered that among his Father's riches was love and grace to spare. Forgiveness is bestowed on even those who take the path of the younger son or Nathan from my story earlier, but eventually find their way back home.

This phrase about forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer does contain an interesting clause, however. Look at it again.

Matthew 6:12

*And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

As we appeal to God for forgiveness it almost appears as if there is a precondition. *Forgive us our debts, AS we also have forgiven our debtors.*

The passage just after this prayer seems even more convicting.

Matthew 6:14-15

For if you forgive other people 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.

Here is the truth about me. I can forgive some people and circumstances quite easily. I got a few sarcastic texts and emails referring to the result of a

certain hockey game this week. After a short time of grieving and self-pity, I was able to forgive you people fairly easily. But there are some things or some people, I struggle with forgiveness. And just when I think I have moved on, *bam*. Something triggers a response from me that shows I have not forgiven as fully as I thought.

My capacity to forgive is not always as complete or as consistent as I would like. And the thought has crossed my mind. What if God's forgiveness of me is likewise? Inconsistent and incomplete. I mean that is what this phrase in the Lord's Prayer and the verses that follow it seems to state doesn't it?

*And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

God will forgive us to the same degree that we can forgive those around us. Yikes! Just hold on a minute. Remember God is not about performance, *if you behave, I'll do something for you.* No.

This is hyperbole, a literary device used for emphasis. Jesus is taking the opportunity here in this prayer to remind us, his followers, that life in the Kingdom of God truly flourishes when forgiveness abounds in our lives.

When we can both offer and receive forgiveness generously. Just as our heavenly Father did. Do you understand that? But we can only forgive generously with the help of God's spirit in us.

So, I am wondering, where has this message met you today? Perhaps this is an area of your life where you really struggle. Forgiveness. Maybe as you sit here, you are hanging onto something that you have done that you feel is beyond forgiveness. You can't forgive yourself and you know the person you have wronged is still holding it over you.

Here's my advice to you. You need to come home. Come to the Father, God today. He is *a running Father*. One who loves and forgives generously. Will you receive that from him today? Will you forgive yourself because God has already forgiven you?

There are some of you in here, who have been wronged. Something has been done to you that is unfair or unjust or just plain evil. Perhaps the perpetrator has never admitted guilt or even ask you

for forgiveness. That is tough for sure. I feel your pain.

But I cannot overstate the power of forgiveness. Resentment and bitterness can turn us inside out. It can destroy lives but forgiveness, frees us. Forgiveness that is only possible through the one who forgave us. That is what restores us and allows us to move forward in hope. The power of forgiveness lies not only in our being forgiven but also in the act of us forgiving others.

When we harbor grudges and resentment, they become like leg irons that restrict us and cut into our flesh and serve as a constant irritant. You know because some of you sitting here, that is where you are at.

I first heard Debbie Morris' story over 20 years ago at a youth conference. I have shared a bit of it with you in the past in a different context.

At 16 years of age, Debbie was abducted at gunpoint by two career criminals and repeatedly raped over the course of several hours. She survived the attack, which is all the more miraculous considering that the woman these two men attacked just a week before hadn't. They killed her.

It was Debbie's testimony that lead the State of Louisiana to sentence her primary attacker, Robert Willie to death for his crimes. Anyone know the name, Robert Willie? His story is told in the 1995 award winning movie, *Dead Man Walking* starring Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon.

In her book, *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking*, Debbie Morris admits that through her ordeal she felt abandoned by God.

She writes, *People told me it was a miracle I survived and I thought, If God really saved me, why did he let me go through the whole horrible experience in the first place? I felt angry at God; I felt abandoned. I thought God punished me.*

It's difficult to explain to someone who's never been raped what rape takes away from you.

Not only did it rob me of something sacred that should have been mine to give away, it robbed me of my self-worth, confidence, and security—the very things you depend on to live a normal life.

In a television interview, Morris stated that she felt imprisoned and when Robert Willie was eventually executed she thought she would finally be free from her torment, but she wasn't. She suffered from depression. She lashed out at family members and started drinking to dull the pain.

Finally, at age 24, she checked herself into an intensive treatment program and made a conscious decision to rededicate her life to God. She realized that God had *not* abandoned her.

It was that stanza in the Lord's Prayer, *And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors* and the verse about forgiveness that follows the prayer that finally allowed her to see how much God had forgiven her. That she had made a mess of her life and turned her back on God in the years that followed her attack.

When she finally experienced just how much God had forgiven her, how much he loves her, He gave her the strength to forgive Robert Willie. Even after he was dead! Even if he didn't ask for forgiveness. It didn't happen all at once. It came in stages but it is what finally set her free and allowed her to look towards a hope filled future.

To this day, God is using Debbie Morris to help in the lives of others who have experienced similar ordeals – to find hope and freedom that comes with forgiveness.

Forgiveness. That defines our relationship with Jesus and it is to define our lives as Christians. So let me ask you, *does it define your life?*

May we be people who extend and receive forgiveness generously as we seek to follow Jesus and live life in the Kingdom of God.

Amen. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

For yours is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

A translation based on Matthew 6:9-13 and the original Greek text.

Points to Ponder

A Generous Faith

Luke 15:11-32 ~ Matthew 6:12

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Have you ever had an experience like the Prodigal Son? Describe a time of rebellion in your life when you turned your back on the people closest to you and went out on your own. What were the consequences? Where did you see God meet you in the midst of it?
2. What does generosity mean to you? In what areas of your life are you generous? In what areas of your life do you hold back a bit? Why?
3. Discuss with your group this idea of tolerance in our culture today. How does our society today stifle the true meaning of forgiveness? Where have you seen forgiveness difficult to give and/or receive in your life?

4. *For a Christian not to forgive means that they have not fully grasped what Jesus did, preached and taught.* Discuss this statement. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
5. What does forgiveness look like for you? Do you feel you are generous with giving or receiving forgiveness? What stymies you from being able to give or receive forgiveness?
6. What do you think Jesus was intending when he said, *For if you forgive other people 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.* Matthew 6:14-15.

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray for a deeper understanding of what it means to forgive and that God would give each one of you the capacity to be generous with extending and receiving forgiveness.