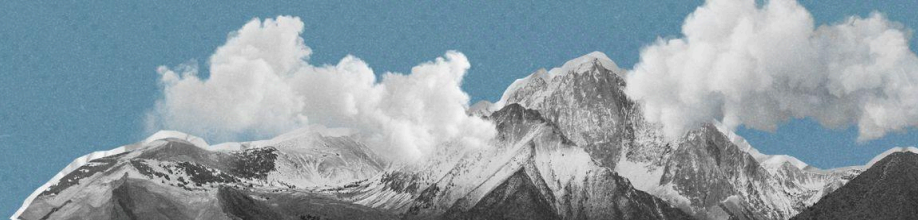


THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW



Matthew 6:14 **Forgiveness** **2/18/2024**

We are going back to Matthew 6 today.

Chapters 5,6, and 7 of Matthew are Jesus's famous sermon on the mount, where He is describing how Christians should live as part of a counter-culture under His rule and reign.

And in this section He has been describing how to pray, and He taught us the famous Lord's prayer.

We walked through most of this prayer last week, but we'll read it and zoom in on one section today:

Matthew 6:9–15

[9] Pray then like this:

**“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 lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

[14] For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, [15] but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

So Jesus is teaching us to pray and in verse 12, he says part of our prayer is:

**Matthew 6:12 and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.**

So one of the many things that praying according to the Lord's pattern should do for us is to cause us to examine ourselves so that we can ask forgiveness for our debts.

In Aramaic language, which Jesus spoke, sin is often pictured as a debt to God. And so we are to pray that God would forgive our debts, forgive us our sins.

And we said last week that this is not a prayer we pray to impress others (confession of sin isn't impressive.) It's not a prayer we pray to inform God of anything He didn't know. But praying according to the Lord's prayer here shapes us into different people.

Confession of sin and asking for forgiveness is a regular and essential part of our lives. If we're going to pray like this regularly, we are going to have to practice some self-examination. If we do that honestly, we'll be becoming more humble, more thankful for God's grace, and we'll live more in the awareness of how good God has been to us.

We'll be different people, and together as a church a different culture, than the culture around us that loves to boast and brag and spin and cover up weakness and act superior to others.

But there's something else this prayer will do because of the major thought Jesus connected to the prayer to forgive us our debts. Matthew 6:12 again:

**Matthew 6:12 “and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.”**

So we are supposed to confess our sins to God and ask forgiveness, and to ask God to forgive AS we have forgiven others. We're supposed to say, “God, forgive me as I forgive. Forgive me just like I forgive others. In the same way, AS I forgive others, forgive me.

We pray for God to forgive us in **the exact same way we forgive others.**

This is not what this verse should say if you ask me.

If I wrote this line of the Lord's prayer (He didn't ask me my opinion, but)..If I wrote it, this would say, “God, help us to forgive others as you have forgiven us.”

We know we've been forgiven by God and we should pray for God to make us forgiving like that. After all, the reason we can forgive is because we have been forgiven so much by God. When we realize how great our debt is that has been forgiven, we forgive great debts. That's the only way we could ever truly forgive - we'll talk more about that a little later in this sermon.

But this line of the prayer doesn't say that. It says, “Forgive me just like I've forgiven others.”

It's like we hold up the way that we forgive to God, we show Him how we have forgiven others, and ask Him to forgive us just like that.

This is a really dangerous prayer to pray. That backs us into a corner beautifully, and if we sincerely pray like this, it will shape us into the most gracious and forgiving people on earth.

You can't sincerely pray this without being radically forgiving yourself, because you are asking God to forgive you to the same degree and in the same way you forgive other people.

And if you're going to ask God to do for you exactly what you are doing for others, and if you're going to hold what you're doing up to God and saying, "Please do this for me," then you necessarily will go to extreme efforts to forgive others. Because you're going to pray, "Forgive me my debts just like I forgave her for this, just like I forgave him for this."

And if we come up short in the way that we forgive and seek to reconcile, we'll feel like total hypocrites praying, "God forgive me AS I forgave."

So, if I forgive someone, but I've ghosted him. I completely avoid him and give him the silent treatment. That's how I've forgiven. I'm now forced to pray, "God, forgive me as I forgave him." Which means I want God to consider me forgiven, but not answer my prayers, withdraw his presence from me, and not be there for me. I don't expect to hear from God anymore. No more meaningful devotions, no more guidance, just avoidance. Ghost me as I have ghosted others.

I forgive someone, but I save what they did to me to use against them at a future date. Now I have to pray, "God, forgive me like that. Forgive me, but make it temporary, and make me live with the awareness that someday you may pull that out and use it against me. Just as they now have to live in fear of my retribution, I want to live, Lord, in fear of Your retribution."

I forgive someone, but I try to take her down. I gossip about her, I try to undermine her among her friends, I work against her, but sure, I've forgiven

her. I now have to pray, “God, forgive me like that. Forgive me, but be against me. Forgive me, but make me live with the constant awareness that you are always ready to undermine me.”

I forgive someone. But I always think of him through the lens of his sin. That will define him from now on. Lord, permanently mark me like that.

Or, I could never forgive this person. And now I am forced to pray, “God, do as I do.”

When we pray for forgiveness, we are supposed to use the way we forgive as the model that we hold up before God and say, “Forgive me like that.”

We are not allowed to ask God for forgiveness that looks any different than the kind of forgiveness we grant others.

We should be able to hold up how we have forgiven: this completely, with these kinds of efforts to restore, with this amount of retaliation, with this much going the extra mile on my part, and say, “God would you forgive me like that?”

By putting this right in our template for prayer, Jesus is forcing the issue that Christians must be gracious and forgiving people.

Now, this isn't saying that we earn God's forgiveness with our forgiveness. It doesn't say, "Forgive me my debts because I've forgiven others." It just says, "Forgive me my debts in the same way we forgive others."

So this doesn't teach that if we forgive, God will forgive us - as if we've earned His forgiveness. We never earn or merit his salvation. Even if we forgive every debt others owe us, our sin debt before an infinitely holy God is infinite. We can't earn it.

It's not saying we deserve His forgiveness if we forgive others.

It's saying we are to pray, "God, I'm cool with you forgiving me only as much as I've forgiven others."

It's a very hard prayer to pray.

And Jesus knew this would be a difficult thing to hear. He knew there would be all kinds of objections, all kinds of people looking for a loophole. They wanted Jesus to qualify the statement.

So Jesus says in verses 14 - 15:

Matthew 6:14-15 “[14] For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, [15] but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Jesus doesn't make it any easier! He doubles down on what He just said. Sure enough, if we don't forgive, and then we pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," God says, "**DONE!**" and we aren't forgiven either.

If we don't forgive, it's conclusive evidence that we are not forgiven by God.

It's a serious error to not be pursuing forgiveness.

When we talk about Christian doctrines, we often distinguish between wrong beliefs and heresies. Wrong beliefs are errors and they do some damage, but ultimately we're all human, we all have to learn more and grow more, so we all have wrong beliefs. Heresies, though, are theological errors that are so serious that they cut us off from God because we so completely misunderstand who God is.

So if a Christian is defined in part as someone who believes that Jesus is God, to believe that Jesus isn't God would be a heresy - because it would make us not a Christian based on what the definition of a Christian even is. By definition you're not a Christian if you don't believe in the Christ.

Heresies are things we believe that would put us outside of the Christian faith by definition. There's no such thing as a Christian who doesn't believe in Jesus.

And Jesus is saying in this passage that we can't be the kind of Christian who doesn't forgive. It doesn't exist. Being an unforgiving Christian is like being a round triangle - by definition you simply can't be.

Again, this isn't just me being harsh, Jesus said in Matthew 6:15

Matthew 6:15 “15] but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Bitterness is not only bad, but heretical.

Grudge holding doesn't just call your kindness into question, it calls your faith into question.

Vengeful people are not, by definition, Christian people.

Forgiveness is some of the evidence of genuine faith. Lack of forgiveness is evidence of false faith.

When I was a home inspector on the side 10 years ago, part of every inspection was going down to the electrical panel and taking the front cover off of it to make sure all the breakers were wired in the right way.

And this was part of the inspection where you had to take it slow, you had to be super careful, because if you drop the cover the wrong way, it could fall right into the main bus where some big power flows and fry you. (Some of you are electricians and this is no big deal to you, but I'm not, so I was super cautious and deliberate.)

And what Jesus says here about the danger of not forgiving should make us extra deliberate to know what forgiveness is and isn't, to know what's expected of us. It's important to be deliberate and careful to know what forgiveness is and what forgiveness is not.

What is forgiveness? We'll unpack a lot of what it is and isn't.

It is deliberately choosing not to hold somebody's sin against them.

And that's not easy, because it's costly. If you forgive the debt of someone, you have to absorb that debt. Somebody has to pay. If a friend breaks your window and you say, "I forgive you and I won't ask you to pay for it," somebody has to pay. You're going to have to absorb the cost.

And we see this modeled for us in the Gospel:

Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

And for God to forgive us, the price had to be paid. So He absorbed the cost by sending His son to pay fully for our sin. Someone had to pay for our sin. Someone had to die. And Jesus forgave by dying the death we owed so that we could be forgiven.

So to forgive is to say and mean, "I am not going to hold this sin against you," and that usually comes at some cost to you. Whether it's an emotional cost, or the cost is that you won't get the vengeance you want to get, or that

you won't get even like you deserve, you pay so they can go free when you forgive. It's almost impossible to forgive anything without suffering some loss yourself.

And because forgiveness is something you grant and something you do, it should be distinguished from feeling like you forgave.

Forgiveness is not a feeling.

You can forgive someone and never hold their sin against them, but that doesn't mean you have warm feelings toward them immediately. You can still be hurt when you forgive, and if you still feel that hurt it doesn't mean you haven't forgiven. People can wrong us so deeply that we have some of those scars for life, but that doesn't mean that we haven't forgiven.

Forgiveness has two forms: internal and external.¹

Internal forgiveness:

Mark 11:25 [25] And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

So Jesus says that if you're praying and you remember that you have something against someone, you remember that someone has wronged you, that you should forgive them. On the spot. Whether they ever repent, whether they ever change, whether they ever apologize - in fact, before you've even brought it up with them, you do the internal work of forgiving. You're not going to hold their sin against them.

¹ This insight is spelled out in much more detail in Tim Keller's excellent book, [Forgive](#). I highly recommend this book for people wrestling with what forgiveness is, how we do it, how it interacts with justice, and how to extend forgiveness.

Acts 7:59–60 [59] And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” [60] And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

So Steven is being stoned to death for preaching a hard sermon. Nobody has said, “I’m sorry.” And he, as he prays, forgives them. On the spot.

So there’s an internal dimension of forgiveness. Someone wrongs us and we decide right away that we aren’t going to be bitter, we aren’t going to retaliate, we aren’t going to stew - and this is before we even bring it up.

Internal forgiveness always needs to happen whether they ever admit the wrong.

And it’s merciful to us that Jesus commands this, because:

Hebrews 12:15 [15] See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;

Bitterness defiles. It poisons us.

I’m approaching about 25 years in pastoral ministry. And early on, I could see the sins that brought quick destruction into peoples lives and would be pretty quick to pounce on those - things like adultery and crimes and drugs and explosive anger - those things all have immediate negative effects.

But now, 25 years in, I get to see the just as damaging, but slower effects of other sins like bitterness and lack of forgiveness. And a sin like bitterness is a slow burn, usually, but brings people and families and marriages and church communities to complete ruin.

A slow steady leak of spiritual vitality in a heart and in a church community can happen when there's bitterness that hasn't been repented of. So we need to do the internal work quickly when we're wronged and commit to only act in love toward people who have made themselves our enemies.

“So that means we just ignore the wrongs done against us? We let the wrongs go unconflicted?”

No, that wouldn't be loving to the people who wronged us. Their sin against us is also against God, and it is harming them, too.

So once we've done the internal work of forgiveness, we are commanded (at least when it's possible) of going ourselves to do the external work of confronting in the hope of restoring them.

External Forgiveness

Jesus said this:

Luke 17:3–4 [3] Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, [4] and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

So Jesus said that when we are sinned against, we must REBUKE - we must confront. And then, if he repents, we forgive.

So this is an external type of forgiveness, the kind that addresses a wrong done against it, that doesn't just let it go without talking about it, and it is all because we want to forgive.

And this external type of forgiveness is a two way street, it involves us doing the internal work, confronting the wrong, and if they repent, we forgive and the relationship is restored. That's external forgiveness. And we can't always make that all happen, because we can't control the actions of another, but we are supposed to try.

We want to see those who sin against us repent.

And this is why the command to forgive is not a command to not pursue justice.

If someone repents of a sin that is also a crime, then if that repentance is real, they are willing to be turned in for the crime.

In the course of doing ministry, there have been a few times over the years when we've learned of situations where people have committed sexual crimes against minors, for example. They haven't happened here, but we learn of those things on occasion when we get into dark counseling situations. And every single time, we turn those things over to the police (if they haven't been turned over already.) And that isn't out of an unwillingness to forgive, it is because of love of victims, and if that perpetrator ever wants any hope for his soul, he needs to deal with the legal consequences of his crimes. He can't just say, "I'm sorry," and then not do the thing sorry people do and go to the police with it. So we help them along, and always go to the police when we learn of things like that, seeking justice.

The command to forgive doesn't mean we don't seek legal justice when there have been crimes, love needs to be extended first to victims, they need to have their voices heard by the law.

So the command to forgive doesn't mean we don't turn in crimes - we must.

And even when there aren't crimes, the command to forgive doesn't mean we just let everything go.

We are commanded to confront wrongs against us.

Now certainly we don't have to confront every sin against us-

1 Peter 4:8 “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.”

There are lots of small wrongs that we observe or that are committed against us, and we can let plenty of things go *if we can really let them go and we wouldn't be failing to love someone by not confronting.*

There have been lots of times when I've gone to someone's house at their worst moment, and they're angry and spewing all kinds of awful things, or they're in intense grief and saying things that are out of character for them. Those things don't all need to be confronted, we can understand and let the one-offs go.

But when there's a significant sin against us and we couldn't possibly “not hold it against them” without it being addressed, we have to address it with them. If we are tempted to bitterness, tempted to ghost that person, tempted to avenge, Jesus commands us to confront.

Those are our two options when sinned against. Let it go, or do the internal work, forgive internally, but then go confront in the hopes of seeing complete external forgiveness and restoration happen.

We can let the small nuisance sins go, or we confront, but there's no third way. All the passive-aggressive stuff we engage in is completely out of line for a christian. Direct, humble confrontation in the hopes of restoration is what Christians do when they're wronged. We confront those who've

wronged us with a desire to release them from the debt and move on - we are always aiming for the fullest possible restoration of a relationship.

Now I say fullest possible, because in extreme cases a sin against you can mean that a relationship shouldn't be restored. You can be free from bitterness and not consumed by how you've been wronged, but in extreme cases relationships that have been broken can't go back together. In some cases, the person who is repenting has to realize that part of their repentance is not further doing damage by trying to re-enter a life. You shouldn't be close friends with someone you've committed adultery with. A predator should not try to re-enter the life of his prey. There are extreme cases when part of repentance is staying away from the one you've done extreme damage to, and a person who tries to get back in to that life hasn't repented and is just trying to manipulate.

There are extreme cases when we can do the internal work, but when we can't confront? For example, a child who was preyed upon shouldn't confront the abusive adult. That child's dad sure should, but we wouldn't expect truly helpless victims to be victimized again by being forced to face the predator.

But the vast majority of our situations are not the extreme cases.

Galatians 6:1 “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

He says that if we see someone in a sin, we should go to restore them. That's the motive in the confrontation - we want to see them restored.

But he says we should consider ourselves because we could be tempted. Not just by the same sin they committed, but by other sins.

The sins of bitterness, vengeance, revenge.

[Time I confronted without doing the internal work].

We are aiming to restore a person and a relationship when we are dealing with their sin.

Are we really expected to live free from bitterness, to forgive, to restore relationships that once seemed dead? Yes.

Remember the incomplete way to read the sermon on the mount is to say, “We could never do that, thank God for our Savior.” We certainly have to run to Jesus for mercy when we hear this high standard. But we are also expected by Jesus to live this way:

Matthew 7:24–27

[24] “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. [25] And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. [26] And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. [27] And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.” (ESV)

So Jesus wants us to hear His words about forgiveness and live that way.

Which is an incredibly high bar. But it’s for our good - so that our house doesn’t collapse.

Jesus calls us to be radically forgiving people, and we may object for a number of reasons, but when we forgive others it is for our good, for their good, and for the good of the community.

And wouldn't this be a huge contributor to us being a city on a hill?

In a cancel culture that is always looking to ruin, to slander, to defame, and provides no way to atone and never forgives, couldn't the church shine?

In a culture that loves gossip and slander in response to sin, wouldn't a church that confronts, and then restores a person who repents stand out?

It would be countercultural as it should be.

How?

First, we need to repent and realize we haven't obeyed this perfectly. We should sense our failure and our powerlessness to really change our hearts to even do the internal work of forgiveness.

But with God, all things are possible. And the more we are reminded of the Gospel, the more our hearts will be softened and empowered to forgive.

The more we believe that I sinned against the Lord severely, and He, at great cost to Himself, absorbed the debt by going to the cross. He forgave me much, and if I believe that, I'll forgive much too.

Prayer of Confession - Adapted from the Prayer Book Prone to Wander, p. 128.

Father,

We have often been quick to judge and slow to forgive our brothers and sisters. We notice and keep score for every sin that others commit against

us. Sometimes we punish them by lashing out in anger, while at other times we treat them with silent coldness, instead of extending mercy and grace. We have dismissed their attempts at repentance as insincere words, and have held grudges against them, instead of forgiving them freely. At times, we have not even given them the chance to make amends by graciously showing them their sin but have simply assumed that they would be unwilling to repent.

Thank you, Father, that this is not how you have treated us. You have mercifully accepted our flawed repentance, in spite of our divided hearts. You have not held our sin against us, though we have grieved and sinned against you countless times, boldly and brashly, not merely out of ignorance or oversight but with deliberate defiance. Instead you have taken every last one of our sins and crucified them in Jesus, your Son. In place of our failure and sin, you have substituted Christ's perfect obedience and righteousness.

Spirit, help us to worship you in light of these truths. Enable us to love and forgive one another in the same way that you have loved and forgiven us. In place of the record that we keep of one another's wrongs, help us to ponder the record of Christ's righteousness, which is sufficient to pay for our brother's sins, just as it has paid for ours.

Help us to become people who, knowing that they have been forgiven much, are themselves deeply forgiving, even toward those who have sinned against us many times.

Assurance of Pardon

Isaiah 38:17 “Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back.”

Sermon Discussion Questions:

- 1) What is forgiveness?
- 2) How is it possible to pursue justice and forgiveness at the same time?
- 3) Have you ever been confronted, forgiven, and restored? Describe that, if possible, and the effect it had on you.
- 4) When should we just ignore a sin committed against us and let it go?
- 5) When must we confront?
- 6) How do we do the “internal work” of forgiveness?
- 7) How do we do the external work?