

“Forgive Us Our Debts, As We Forgive Our Debtors”

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, March 4th, 2018

Continuing with our occasional series on the Lord’s Prayer, our topic today is forgiveness. It’s been about 8 years since we covered this topic in some detail here, and the teachings on it haven’t changed! But there are always new questions, and an endless variety of challenges to overcome as we try to apply those teachings, particularly in the context of our prayers.

To begin, you will of course remember the story of Peter asking the Lord about forgiveness, saying, “How *often* shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” And Jesus said, “not...up to seven times, but up to *seventy times seven*.” And you will remember the parable He told Peter in response. Now of course the strange thing about this parable – especially in this context – is that having just forgiven his servant, when the king heard about that man’s cruelty toward another servant he not only revoked his forgiveness, but he “**delivered him to the torturers**” until he paid up. It seems like a rather massive contradiction, doesn’t it?

What can we make of this? How can we understand it?

Well, first of all, forgiveness does not mean disregarding evil. If you look up the word in the original Hebrew, Greek or Latin, you’ll see that it means “to send away,” or “to send back.” In fact, many translations of the Writings use the word, “remission,” instead of forgiveness, meaning the sending away of sins, debts, trespasses, or offenses. Today we apply the word most commonly to sickness, still meaning the same thing, as when we say a cancer patient is “in remission.” So when we think about it we can see that the whole concept relates to our letting go of bad habits and bad memories that keep us from receiving the goodness of the Lord’s love.

Now remember, among other things in the third lesson we read, “A person’s sins are continually being forgiven by the Lord, for He is absolute mercy. But the sins cling to the person, however much he thinks they are forgiven, and the only way to have them removed is to live in accordance with the commandments of a true faith” (NJHD 165).

Here we begin to get at the true meaning of forgiveness as a real, active, present state of determination of the person who is seeking to improve, change, reform, and do what is good. Sure, people who are trying to get away with something will want forgiveness in the sense that they won’t want to take the consequences for the wrong they may continue to do. They won’t want to take responsibility. But because forgiveness means remission, *or the removal or sending away of what is wrong*, it is a simple fact that people can’t be forgiven until they themselves let go of that wrong, whether it’s an attitude or behaviour. As long as we cling to the thoughts, feelings or activities that are out of line with the Lord’s love, or even dwell on the memory of those bad things that we have done in the past, we will not be able to “get” forgiveness, no matter how much the Lord offers it to us. And He does offer it to us constantly, every moment!

That said, how is it that the Lord, like the king in the parable, might possibly “deliver us to the torturers” or as it is sometimes written, “the tormentors”?

In the parable it says that the king was angry, but we know that the Lord is never really angry. It just seems that way to the person who is self-centered ... and unforgiving. But He does have the power to do whatever He wants – which is why we pray that He will not “deliver us to the tortur-

ers” but rather “deliver us *from* evil.” In fact it is never His will that we should suffer. The general teaching is that everything of the Lord’s WILL involves the goodness of His love, but to the extent that we reject or *turn away* from that goodness we place ourselves under the rule of the laws of Divine *truth separate from good*, which by their very nature criticize and condemn (AC 2447). And since the Lord will not compel us to remain in His love He must PERMIT or ALLOW us to go the other way. So He “delivers us to the torturers;” in fact He doesn’t lead us (that’s an entirely different word in Greek) but He *releases* us to the influence of those (men and spirits) who delight in nothing more than punishment – which they naturally carry out with the help of all the harsh truths they can bring to bear about Divine order, and about how weak and foolish we really are.

Again, the Lord is constantly delivering (and here the word does mean *leading*) us FROM this evil. The truth is, He only ever “delivers us” TO evil in the sense that He allows us to pursue it – unfortunately, along with its torments. But He can “deliver us,” that is, *lead us away from* it only if we let Him, and that requires certain actions on our part.

This is where the story of the Prodigal Son is so instructive (though, ironically, the word, forgiveness, itself never appears there). Everybody knows the story, and everybody recognizes that the literal father in it represents our heavenly Father – who of course is all-forgiving! But what many people miss in the story is that the Father never condemned or tried to punish his son during his prodigal life, though he certainly didn’t favour or support the son when he was in that life. It was, for all intents, as if the son was lost or had died, which is what the father actually said – twice. But when the son came to his senses, and in utter humility *repented of his sins* and *turned back to his father* immediately the father “had compassion on him” and fell on his neck and kissed him, and prepared a great feast to welcome him back. So his forgiveness was based on the son’s actions, and on the son’s change of heart – just as it is with us and the Lord.

Now with regard to the Lord’s prayer specifically, you are no doubt aware that there are two versions of it in the Christian world. In ours we say the words “forgive us our debts,” but in many churches the words are “forgive us our *trespasses*.” Why is that?

Well, as you may know, the Lord’s Prayer occurs in two places in the Gospels. In Matthew’s version (chapter 6), the Greek word definitely means debts, that is, things we owe as obligations, things we need to pay for. But it doesn’t necessarily imply that we have done anything *wrong*. For example, we owe a debt of gratitude to the Lord for life itself and whatever loves we think of as our own, not to mention all the many blessings we receive from Him on a daily basis. We ask the Lord to “forgive us our debts” in that we acknowledge the fact that we can never really repay Him for all those incredible blessings – most of which we don’t deserve!

In the same vein we need to remember that very often other people are not able to repay us for the benefits *we* offer *them*, and in the prayer we are reminded that we cannot receive forgiveness of *our* indebtedness unless we also are willing to forgive others of theirs. What we receive from the Lord is precisely in keeping with our attitude toward others and the efforts we are making – good or bad, a point neatly summarized in the *Arcana Caelestia* where we read, “Love to the Lord cannot possibly be separated from love towards the neighbour, for the Lord’s love is directed towards the whole human race whom He wishes to save eternally and to join so completely to Himself that not a single one of them perishes. Anyone therefore who has love to the Lord possesses the Lord’s love and so cannot help loving the neighbor” (AC 2023).

Now in contrast to the teaching about debts, we have the statement immediately following the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew, speaking of trespasses, which *are* actual offenses: “For,” we read, “if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” This is a peculiar word in the original Greek that literally means to fall beside, or perhaps to fall *aside* – in this case to fall away from what is right. Again, this may be done consciously or unconsciously, so although it’s an offense, and evil, it may or may not be a *sin*. And because it follows after the Lord’s Prayer we also use it as a separate petition right after we say the Prayer, thereby *adding* our recognition that we also have to let go of the *hurt* that others have inflicted on us. But many churches incorporate it into the Prayer, using it instead of the word, debts.

Still, to complete the picture, we have the version of the Prayer in Luke (in chapter 11), which actually uses the Greek word for *sins* – along *with* the word for debts – so that what we have literally is “forgive us our *sins*, as we forgive our *debtors*.” To be clear, to sin, literally, is to miss the mark or to fail at something, and in Scripture it generally refers to the failure to live according to the Lord’s Commandments *despite knowing that we should*. The point is, WE sin, and we know it when we do it, but we can never judge of others whether they are sinners or simply mistaken – or ungrateful. But in order to receive His forgiveness of our sins all He asks is that we let go of the indebtedness others have to us, which is another way of saying we must let go of our need for *reward* for any good that we have done. We do not always need to be repaid.

Anyway, as the Pharisees pointed out in several stories, no one can forgive sins but God. He is the *ONLY* one who really knows who we are and what we are about; He is the only one who knows us all inside and out. So we can’t presume to forgive in the same way that He does. But what we *can* do is learn to “let go” of any selfishness or prejudice that we may harbour in our minds, either about ourselves or about others. In that way we can gain some relief – and freedom – from the stress, worry, embarrassment, guilt – or arrogance! – arising from our actions; and *to the extent we do this we can both forgive and be forgiven*.

In this context a curious new twist on forgiveness has emerged in our popular culture, and that is the concept that if we want to be forgiven we need first of all to forgive *ourselves*. People say the same thing about love: if we want to be loved we first of all have to learn to love ourselves! And as usual with stuff like this *there is some truth in it*. We obviously need a reasonable, or what we call a healthy sense of self-esteem. We need to learn how to let go of our own past mistakes based on our humble commitment *with the Lord’s help* to do better. But of course we can’t really forgive ourselves! *That would be the ultimate conflict of interest* and a real threat to our spiritual lives! Instead, what we can do is recognize the influence of the hells that are trying to condemn us, shun that influence like the plague, and ask *the Lord* either to remove as much as possible the memories of our past mistakes or at the very least to *use* those memories to inform our resolve to share His love in a better life with others.

As noted earlier, the Lord is all-forgiving. There is, however, one sin that can’t be forgiven. As we read in Matthew, “Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; *but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him*, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matt. 12:31-32). This sin has been described as that of deceitfulness, or profanation, but in simple terms it is the betrayal, denial or rejection of the very *spirit of truth*, for *that is* the Holy Spirit (John 16:13).

The basic problem here is that when we despise the truth of what the Lord teaches we can't possibly receive His forgiveness, since our minds are closed to it. Still, it doesn't have to be this way, and the moment we change our attitude, forgiveness is again possible – as it was presumably even for Judas, not to mention the others who also betrayed the Lord at His crucifixion.

There are many more stories in the Gospels that speak of forgiveness, especially of the Lord's forgiveness as He healed people of their various illnesses or sins. But it's important that in every one of them the Lord either says or clearly implies that true forgiveness requires a *new life*. For example, in the story of the woman caught in adultery, though He did not condemn her He plainly said, “Go and sin no more.”

To summarize, then, there are at least 3 things to keep in mind about forgiveness:

1. The very word means to let go or send away. With respect to our own need for forgiveness from the Lord, it is precisely when we let go of the destructive habits, resentments, selfishness and misunderstandings that plague us that we can be forgiven. And the forgiveness is ALL the Lord's doing as we turn to Him in faith and charity, for it is He who actually sends all these problems into “remission.”
2. With respect to our forgiveness of others, it is much the same, only in this case we are looking at what bothers us about others, and so what is required is that we let go of the self-centred ill feelings we have toward them so that they are free to be themselves, and not only what we want them to be.
3. Finally, when it comes to how often we should forgive, and *what* we can forgive, the thing to remember is that we can only get as much as we give. 70 x 7 basically *does* mean always, forever and, yes, EVERY time. But the teaching doesn't mean we should have no regard for the quality of a person's life. The word, brother, in Scripture actually means someone who has a charitable attitude (but who may nevertheless mess up). Sometimes it is necessary to put some distance between ourselves and those who cause us trouble. Even so, it is important for us to live in the present, not in remorse or depression or resentment about the past, or in anxiety, dread or suspicion about the future. Furthermore, while we may and should condemn certain acts, we can never condemn another person. So if a “brother” repents of any evil and sincerely tries to live a new life (as judged by his actions), our forgiveness – like the Lord's – should be automatic. After all, as we noted earlier, we don't really know what's going on inside other people, but we do know that the Lord is leading everyone, always, toward heaven. So He gives every one of us the opportunity to be inwardly happy, spiritually free, and perfectly generous, if we will only give up and let go of the actions and attitudes that stand in the way.

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 15:11-32
Children's Talk: The Prodigal Son (turning his life around)

Matthew 18:21-35
NJHD #159-161, 165-166