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Lord, Teach Us to Pray: Forgive Us As We Forgive
Matthew 6

We just got back from vacation a little over a week ago. Thank for giving that time to us! It was very restorative, very restful.

One of the things we got to do was take an overnight trip up to Victoria with Megan's parents. We hadn't been yet since we've been in the Northwest, so it was great to do that. One of the pleasant surprises of that trip was actually the hotel. It was one of the newer ones in downtown Victoria and it hadn't quite built up a reputation, so we were able to get some good deals on rooms. My in-laws were able to get a room on the top floor, 17 floors up, nice balcony with a gorgeous view of the city, jacuzzi bathtub, the whole works. Megan and I were on floor 5, but it was still nice.

So we stayed overnight at this place, got up the next morning, go down to join up with the in-laws, but only Megan's dad was there. He'd gotten up a little earlier to get a coffee. We wait a little bit, wondering where mom was, until Megan and her dad decide to go up to their room to drop off some luggage. So now I'm waiting for them. Eventually they all come back down, but Megan's mom was not a happy camper. Well, I learned that she had been accidentally locked on the balcony by her husband! She spent a good 30 minutes stuck on the 17th floor in the cold, stewing on the balcony and feeling very forgotten. If you have a sliding door, you might understand how muscle memory makes it second nature to lock a door without thinking about it, and of course that's exactly what happened. Well, my father-in-law was pretty embarrassed about this, and my mother-in-law chewed on it for a bit. But later that day Megan and I were walking behind the two of them and saw them holding hands, and we knew that all was well after all that.

We've all been there, haven't we! Someone we love makes a mistake, and we get mad at them. But eventually we get over it, and we forgive them. At least, if you're in a healthy relationship you do. Because if you want to be in healthy relationships, forgiveness has to be part of it, doesn't it? Forgiveness is fundamental to relationship.

We've been learning, from Jesus, to pray these past few months from his beautiful prayer in Matthew 6, and this Sunday we have arrived at the petition in the prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." I find it so insightful of Jesus to use the word "debts" here to talk about forgiveness. It's a financial word, about transaction. A "debt" is about one person owing somebody something for something

taken, and that's exactly how forgiveness works in relationships. When we've been wronged, we have an innate sense of justice that demands repayment at some level. This is the economy of relationship, especially as we're talking about our flawed human race. Every day, we live in a kind of give-and-take with people, making and repaying debts. And indeed, "forgive" in the original language of the Bible has a connotation of releasing. To forgive is to release what someone owes you.

The economy of relationship isn't just about how we deal with each other, but also how we relate to God too. Notice Jesus' only commentary on the prayer he has just taught, later in Matthew 6: 14. "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." This can be really troubling for people because it sounds like a salvation issue, doesn't it? But it's much more fundamental than that, because this is really about our relationship with our Father, about our ongoing relationship with him more specifically. In other words, how are we to be in ongoing relationship with our Father—by forgiving others as he forgives us.

It is no small thing that this is the only part of the prayer that Jesus comments on, because I believe this petition is the "beating heart" of the prayer, the axle around which the rest of the prayer revolves. Why is he our Father? Because of his grace. Why do we pray for his will to be done? Because he is gracious. Why do we ask him for bread? Grace. And so on. The Lord's Prayer, after all, is about living in the light of the abundant grace of a Father who loves us so much, and his forgiveness is key to that.

How are we to understand this forgiveness—how about through a story? Jesus is really good at using stories to illustrate spiritual truths, and there's one in Matthew 18 that really helps expand this part of the Lord's Prayer. Before the story we are going to read in Matthew 18, Jesus had been explaining to the disciples how we are to live in community when someone sins. He tells them to confront their brother, not for the purpose of accusation but for the purpose of reconciliation. And if they don't respond to a one-on-one, take someone else with you. If they don't respond to that, take the whole community to them. It's excellent advice, and if you've ever wanted to know what to do when you're in conflict with someone over something, please take some time to learn from this earlier passage in Matthew 18:15-20.

But after Jesus talks about what to do if a brother sins against you, Peter comes back to him and says, "Yeah, Jesus, about that brother sinning against you thing..." Let's listen in to this conversation here in verse 21.

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

First of all, you should know a little something about Jewish culture. At the time, it was readily accepted that one should forgive, but the tradition at the time was that you should forgive someone at least three times, but after that it was game over. So when Peter asks this and suggests to forgive seven times, he’s probably thinking he’s being pretty generous here. But Jesus’ response is shockingly over the top. Seventy-seven times! And the point here is not to draw a more generous line in the sand, but really to say, forgive as many times as you need to. Over and over again. There is no limit to the kind of forgiveness in the face of repentance Jesus is talking about.

So Jesus tells us this story about what it looks like to forgive. He starts with a king who is settling his accounts. He’s getting what’s owed to him, collecting his debts, and maybe he begins with this guy. Now, as it turns out, one talent is the equivalent of 20 years of labor, so 10,000 talents is actually 200,000 years of labor! The closest modern equivalent would be something like \$1 Trillion. How do you even make that kind of debt? Was he buying aircraft carriers for his friends? This has to be a significant loss to the king. How much could be done with 200,000 years of labor? \$1 Trillion? It’s simply impossible that this poor sap could pay this off, so it’s no surprise that he begs for mercy. Astonishingly, the king forgives him. But in pity the king gives him forgiveness freely.

The story continues. This man who has just been freed of this astronomical debt then goes and finds some poor guy to strangle for the 100 days’ wages that he owes him. The contrast between the two debts here is meant to elicit a laugh out of us. How absurd is that? 100 days isn’t nothing, but it’s not 200,000 years. And the guy he’s strangling says almost exactly the same words that the servant had said to

the king. So the man strangling this servant and throwing him in jail is clearly made to look petty in the light of what his master has done for him, and he is petty. Not only that, but he is wicked. When the master summons him back, he says to him, "You wicked servant!" It was wicked of the servant to withhold the mercy he had been given. Even at the end, you see the mercy of the king, because he does not sell the man and his family.

What if the twist of this parable isn't that the wicked servant was such a knucklehead? What if the twist is that we are the wicked servant? Think about it. How often in a day do you think about how great a debt you have been forgiven by our heavenly Father? How often in a week? In your life, ever? Already, you and I have something in common with this wicked servant, who walked out of the presence of the king and immediately forgot the great grace of his master.

Every one of us begins life with a \$1 trillion debt, by the very virtue of existing. God didn't have to bring you into existence, he didn't need to, but he made you anyway. You are precious to him! But because long ago humanity was broken, we immediately begin living life as though God didn't exist. And if you don't think you have any truck with God, think about how we treat each other! All these other people whom God loves, we lie to, we steal from, we call them names, hurt them, lock them on balconies. Every time we hurt someone who God made, who is precious to him, we hurt God.

We begin life with this debt, and we keep accruing it as we live our lives. And here's the dark secret of human nature, the origination of so much pain and suffering in this world, that we are all deep down murderers. We don't just lock God out on the balcony, but if given the chance, we would toss God off the roof. We'd rather be God, and we'd rather he wasn't. When Jesus was murdered on the cross, the hands that hammered those nails to that cross were yours and mine. None of us escape this sickness. Paul says in Romans, "None is righteous, no not one." How great a debt we owe! And yet... Jesus knows this, and he looks to his Father and says, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

That is why we call the gospel, "Good news." Your debt is great, but the Father's forgiveness is so much greater! He is the one who forgives us over and over, as long as we are willing to repent. As long as we, like the prodigal son, will turn from our pig slop, he will come running to us with a ready embrace. Do you know your debt? Do you know the incredible, abundant grace of the Father that forgives that debt?

If we really grasped God's grace, I wonder how this would change how we live. If you've seen some variation of the Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens, it's hard to forget that memorable scene where Scrooge wakes up from his nightmare, realizes he has a second chance at life, and goes about in a daze. He's giddy, he's grateful, and he lavishes the people in his life with the grace he has been given. I think this

is probably as good a picture as we can get of what it might look like when we realize the Father forgives our debts.

But Jesus knows we are forgetful, often petty, and grasping people; we are more like Scrooge than anything. Why do you think we have to be told the Golden Rule? "Do unto others as you would have done unto yourself." Those are Jesus' words. But more often, we do to others what we want to do to them, but not to ourselves. We want to get what is ours; we want to be repaid for what we are owed. We want to get mercy, but we don't to give mercy. Why? Because giving mercy costs us.

Take a moment to think about that. As humans, we are used to scarcity. There's only so much to go around—so much love, so much time, so much energy, so much money, so on—but with God, there is no limit to his resources. What can death do in the face of infinite life? What can hate do in the face of infinite love? It is no wonder that he is able to give so much, and we are not able. It is no wonder that we are petty and grasping when we are so used to scarcity, fighting over the scraps.

What if we could grasp that our Father has what we lack? Where we lack love, he supplies. Where we lack grace, he supplies. If only the wicked servant had realized that the merciful King who had released his debt would also, in his grace, supply all his needs. He was a servant, serving his master. And if the master would have such mercy, would he not only have such grace? If only we would realize that.

The end of the parable seems quite harsh. Jesus tells us that what happens to the wicked servant will happen to us too, if we do not forgive in the same way. But it is precisely because he is a God of such mercy and compassion that he cannot live with those who are devoid of compassion and mercy.

So it's no wonder he tells us to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." It is not only a prayer, it is a format for life, it is a guide for relationship with our Father. Every time we pray this, we remind ourselves of the debt that Jesus paid, and the radical grace, mercy, and forgiveness we were given. And we ask to live in the light of that radical grace. "Father, give me your grace, just as I give grace to others."

I suspect that any of you deal with unforgiveness, you do so with people who are close to you. The people who we are closest to are often the ones who hurt us the most. That was the case with me. One of the defining features of my early adulthood was realizing that I had missed out on some important, healthy parenting structures, from both my mom and my dad. My dad had passed away when I was 11, but my mom is still with me. I realized, just before I got married to Megan, that this was a source of great tension to me. Megan noticed that whenever I talked to my mom on the phone I would physically tense up, my countenance would change, my voice would change and my words got mean.

What was going on inside me was the feeling that my mom owed me the childhood I didn't get, and every time I talked to her was a reminder to me of her debt to me and her failure to make up for that. To put it bluntly, I hated my mom, and what was in my heart showed up in my body.

Did you know they've done medical research on that? You can become physically ill because of hatred and bitterness. Conversely, you can physically heal when you forgive, when you release your anger. Well, I recognized that I couldn't hold onto this hatred anymore, especially on the eve of my marriage. I knew it would eat me and impact our marriage. So at a retreat I asked for some prayer about this, prayer for the love that I didn't have, for the forgiveness that I didn't have. The people who prayed for me told me that what I needed to do, was not just forgive my mother, but actually to ask her to forgive me for the hatred I'd harbored for her.

Honestly, this seemed incredibly hard to do. I didn't know if I could do it. I was owed something! I knew I'd see my mom when she came to our wedding, so I waited until then... and in the meantime, I prayed. The week of our wedding came, and I remember sitting down alone with my mom in the kitchen of the house that Megan and I were going to move into. With my heart pounding, I told my mom that I had been angry with her for years. That I didn't need her to understand why, I simply needed to say that I was sorry. There was no great emotion about it. No tears. And to be honest, she was more confused than anything, but of course she forgave me. But by God's grace, the apology was sincere, and so was the forgiveness, and since then I have been released from that anger.

I wonder how many of you need prayer like I did before you can sincerely pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?" I could not offer that radical forgiveness without being empowered by the Spirit, and neither can you. You won't find that love in you, but you can find it from the Father.

In a moment, you'll have an opportunity to come up front and ask for prayer. But before that, I want to lead us all in a prayer together, because we all need God's Holy Spirit to have this kind of radical forgiveness. Would you pray this with me?

Father, thank you for your lavish grace. Thank you for forgiving us of all our debts. Thank you that you would call us your sons and daughters. Thank you that you give us whatever we need. Help us to become like you. Give us love that overflows. Help us to die to ourselves so that others may find your life. Help us to forgive. Give us your Spirit so that your life and love would live inside us. In the name of Jesus, we pray.