

The Preaching of the Word at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church

215 Richmond Road, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185-3534

“Forgive Us Our Sins As We Forgive Those Who Sin Against Us”
The Sixth in a sermon series on The Lord’s Prayer
The Gospel according to St. Matthew 6:9-15 & 18:21-35

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 1/2, 2010

Jesus teaches his followers to pray, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us,” and this must be a challenging part of The Lord’s Prayer for us to pray. Jesus himself recognizes the difficulty because no sooner has he spoken The Lord’s Prayer than he goes on to say, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” No where else does Jesus recognize a need to explain his prayer or elaborate upon it, but at the conclusion of the prayer he feels he must explain what he means, he must elaborate upon the consequences of praying in this way: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

This is one of the most difficult parts of The Lord’s Prayer to pray. Jesus recognizes it and we recognize it as well. Whenever I preach upon one of the many passages of the gospels in which we are enjoined to forgive others, to forgive graciously, to forgive without counting the cost, to forgive as we have been forgiven, someone will inevitably come out of worship snarling at me that there are some things that cannot be forgiven.

Perhaps it was an ex-spouse’s behavior or perhaps it was a child’s ingratitude, a parent’s anger, perhaps a friend’s betrayal; it might have been treatment received by an employer or the way a will was settled in a family; all manner of things create wounds which fester years later and forgiveness will not be allowed to heal. Relationships once warm and close break apart and in the chasm created by hurt and anger forgiveness is foreign currency.

We are not unkind or unforgiving people; we simply reason there are some people who do not deserve our forgiveness. They have done nothing to earn it. They will not apologize and admit the way they wronged us, or their apology may be sincere but no apology can make up for the pain and hurt they caused. Some things you can’t make up for. You can’t put broken cookies back together. There is nothing they could do—even if they were of a mind to—which would be of sufficient merit to earn forgiveness.

Forgiveness, we reason, is a matter of bookkeeping. We speak of “earning forgiveness” and “deserving forgiveness.” The jokes we tell reflect our bookkeeping mentality. You know how they go. Regis Philbin, Julia Roberts and Bill Clinton arrive at the Pearly Gates at the same moment. The angel guarding the gates sizes them up,

then opens up the great ledger book of the Kingdom to examine their vices and virtues, count their acts of kindness and their misdeeds, and total it all up on the heavenly computer. This sort of imagery makes for some pretty good jokes—and some pretty crude ones—but notice the unspoken theology hidden here: God is nothing more than a heavenly bookkeeper. All God does is total up the results. This theology may produce some funny gags but this theology is only more bad news where God sits aloof from human life, high in a comfortable box overlooking the playing field, refusing to get into the complexity of the game. God acts like a referee calling fouls and awarding penalties or a commentator who only announces the score after the game has been played. That may provide good jokes but is bad news.

Jesus comes preaching good news—the gospel, an old English word meaning simply good news. Jesus recognizes how difficult it is for us to pray, “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,” and Jesus recognizes also our bookkeeping mentality, so Jesus has his own story about the Kingdom and about how the books are kept. Later in the gospel according to Matthew Jesus tells a parable, like most of his parables, this parable was about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus said, “The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves” (Mt 18:23)—the king hauls out the ledgers and checks the books—and behold, one of the king’s slaves who owes ten thousand talents.

Now ten thousand talents sounds like Monopoly money to us, one of those monetary units people use in faraway Bibleland, so let me explain: this is a ton of money. When the fabulously wealthy Herod the Great collected taxes each from all of Roman Palestine he got a total of only about six hundred talents. This slave is in hock for ten thousand. Get the picture?

British biblical scholars come up with some of the daffiest details in their studies. One of them calculated, that if the ten thousand talent debt were paid off in sixpence coins it would take to carry it an army of eighty six hundred carriers, each carrying a sack of sixpences 60 lbs in weight, and they would form, at a distance of a yard apart, a line five miles long.¹ When you have ten thousand talents, you don’t buy ocean front property on the Outer Banks; you buy North Carolina—and maybe South Carolina too. Get the picture?

This slave who is in astronomical debt tells the king, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’

That’s what Greece is saying to Europe these days, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything’ but everyone is thinking, “There is no way they can pay their debts!”

That’s what the people listening to Jesus’ parable thought: “There is no way this man can pay his debts!”

Now picture this if you can: when the slave cannot pay, the king forgives the debt. Ten thousand talents flies right off the books. This is an extraordinary king in an extraordinary kingdom, and the Kingdom of God is like this, says Jesus. Of course not everyone wants to live in that kind of Kingdom.

The slave exits palace, and as he leaves he runs into another slave who owes him a hundred denarii, the sort of cash many of you carry around in your purse or wallet. This second slave begs for time, and what do you know, he employs the same plea, the same

¹ A. R. S. Kennedy, quoted from William Barclay, **The Gospel of Matthew**, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), p. 194

exact words, that the first slave did: 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' That's hardly impossible; it's like paying off the credit card at the end of the month.

But the first slave will not forgive and has him thrown into prison.

Yet other slaves witnessed it all, and they report this behavior to the king.

What is with these tattletales, however? What is their point? As far as bookkeeping goes, these were two separate and unrelated transactions. The King forgives a debt; the slave does not forgive a debt. Two separate ledgers, one not connected to the other. We know how bookkeeping works.

When the folks from the school raffle call to tell us we've won the free dinner at The Blue Talon we do not phone the bank to say, hey, don't worry about paying interest this month.

What is owed the king is not related to what is owed the slave—but that is not by any means the way the king sees it! What does the king do? First, the king blasts the slave for his behavior: "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" Then the king hands the unforgiving slave "over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt." Then, lest we miss the point, Jesus, sweet Jesus, meek and mild, tells his disciples, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

We don't expect Jesus to say things like that—torturers, for heaven's sake—but what do we think the alternatives are?

It's a story about the Kingdom, that same Kingdom we pray for, saying "your kingdom come." The Kingdom of God comes with healing and what is broken is mended. In the Kingdom of God death is no more and resurrection life triumphs over everything that distorts and diminishes human life. In the Kingdom even relationships are healed the only way relationships can ever be healed: by forgiveness and by mercy. Jesus invites us to live in this Kingdom, to pray "your Kingdom come" so that we can be refreshed by the gentle spring rain of forgiveness.

But not everyone wants that Kingdom. Some people would rather have what they want, what they deserve. Those who will not live in the Kingdom are left with the only other choice: the torture of carrying heavy grudges, the pain of living with open wounds that refuse the salve of forgiveness, the agony of pulling and pulling on the rod because we refuse to let others off the hook.

Some people enjoy the anguish of carrying a grudge. They are grateful for opportunities to show off their grudge:

"Would you like to see my grudge?"

"Ooooh, that's a big one!"

Some people find carrying a grudge wholly satisfying:

"Have you ever seen a better grudge than mine?"

"I don't know that I have, it's certainly a fine grudge!"

Jesus invites us to something better: "Pray then in this way...your kingdom come... Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

There are only two choices: we can live with Christ in the Kingdom where it rains forgiveness or we can live with the torturers in prisons constructed of our own grudges and bookkeeping. Jesus invites us in to the Kingdom.

To Jesus invitation there are also two choices: we trudge away in resentment at God's generosity or we can do the only other thing possible when we are forgiven an impossible and laughable debt: we can sing to God's glory.

Glory be to God whose desire for the healing of the creation is so great that nothing—not our sins or our grudges—will stand in the way of God's forgiveness.

Glory be to Jesus Christ who preached forgiveness, taught forgiveness, gave forgiveness, scandalized people by the enormity of his forgiveness and taught his disciples to pray for forgiveness.

Glory be to the Holy Spirit, by whose assurance God touches our hearts with forgiveness so that we might open our hands and arms to welcome and reconcile our sisters and brothers. Glory be to God, who heals relationships in forgiveness.

Patrick J. Willson
Williamsburg Presbyterian Church
Williamsburg, Virginia

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