

Prayer: Our Spiritual Lifeline, #7

**Praying:
"Forgive Us Our Trespasses"
(Mt. 6:12)**

--CEFC 5/27/18 [cf. Mt. 18:21-35]

We are spending a couple of months as a church focusing on prayer.
Prayer is a practice that is at the heart of the gospel—
for the gospel is about God's gracious work
in restoring a broken relationship.

The Bible says that all of us have been like lost sheep;
we have foolishly gone our own way.
We have rebelled against the rightful rule of God in our lives.
But God in his mercy and grace,
has sent his own Son into a far country
to seek us out and to bring us back.

Though he was blameless,
Jesus died the death we deserve;
the Judge of all the earth bore our judgment,
so that we might be forgiven
and renewed
and share in God's own eternal life.

In Jesus Christ, God has reconciled us to himself.
He has adopted us into his own family as his beloved children,
so that we might know him as our heavenly Father.

He wants us to live with him in a relationship of faithful love and loving obedience,
and in Christ, he has made that relationship possible.

That, my friends, is the good news of the gospel.

And the practice of prayer is one the primary ways that we experience that gospel—
as we engage in a verbal response to God's gracious love
and commune with the Lord of heaven and earth.
In prayer we actually relate to our Creator and our Redeemer.

It is an amazing thought that the God of the universe
actually wants us to speak to him!

Our God invites us to pray—
to open our hearts to him
and to bring to him our cares, our fears, our needs,
as well as our praise and our gratitude for his great goodness.

What a privilege!
What a gift.

Prayer is a means by which we enter into God's own triune life of love,
and there discover a peace that can be found nowhere else.

A personal relationship with God—
that's what we were created for—
to know him, to love him, to trust him, to obey him, and to enjoy him.
And as we engage him in prayer,
we grow in this relationship.

Prayer is one of the primary ways that the life of God flows into our lives,
but sadly, it is too often neglected in our lives.

Prayer is more often praised than practiced.
And as a result, our lives can languish in spiritual lethargy,
God can become a distant proposition,
and our Christianity can become a mere philosophy of life.

When we fail to pray,
we miss out on the riches of a relationship with the loving personal God
who has once and for all revealed his heart to us in Jesus Christ.

We all need to grow in our practice of prayer./

I use the term "practice" not only because prayer is an actual activity,
but also because prayer does take practice.

It is an acquired skill;
it takes time and discipline;
it is something we grow into—
and the more we practice prayer,
the more we can enjoy its benefits.

Deep relationships don't develop without intention and effort.

Now don't get me wrong—

As I have said before, in one sense, prayer is easy—
it's the easiest thing in the world.

It is as simple as saying, "Lord, help me!"

And that may be the very essence of prayer.

It is simply the cry of our hearts to God.

There are no secret codes,
so special formulas,
so magic words that must be said to make it work.

The youngest child can pray—

perhaps better than any of us.

We are to talk to God as if to our closest friend.

But as we talked about,

prayer is also hard.

It is hard because we are so distracted by the world,

that we often forget to pray

and we get too busy to pray;

it is hard because of our sense of guilt.

that we feel unworthy to pray;
and it is hard because of our own pride and self-sufficiency,
that we feel no need to pray.
And prayer is hard because the person we pray to
must be approached not by sight but in faith.

Prayer is hard, but pray we must.

So how do we pray?
Several weeks ago I gave a general picture of how to pray—
We saw that the Bible teaches to pray reverently,
to pray thoughtfully,
to pray humbly,
to pray boldly,
to pray submissively,
and to pray persistently.

And then we began to see how these principles of prayer play out
in that model prayer given to us by our Lord.

In that prayer—what we call “the Lord’s Prayer”—
Jesus teaches us, first, to remember who we are praying to—
He is our **Father**—
he cares for us as his beloved children—
He will provide for us and protect us,
and he wants to guide us into his good will for us.
The God we pray to is our loving Father.

But at the same time, he is over us—he is our Father “**in heaven**”—
he is a **holy Father**,
and as such we are to pray
that he be honored and respected and revered.
And he is our **King**—the rightful ruler in our lives—
and we ought to long to see his good will, his righteous kingdom,
come in our lives
and in his world.

This is the God we pray to.
He is no magician in the sky;
he is not a genie who grants our wishes;
he is not a force to be manipulated by certain incantations.
He is the great and awesome God of heaven and earth
who has redeemed us as his children in Christ.

And on that basis, we are to come to him—
as we seek his provision in our lives—
as we pray “**give us this day our daily bread.**”
and as we seek his purification in our lives—
as we pray “**forgive us our trespasses,**

as we forgive those who trespass against us."
and as we seek his protection in our lives—
"Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."

This is how Jesus wants us to pray.

Last week, Pastor Tim explored all that Jesus meant when he used the term "**bread**"
when Jesus encouraged us to pray for it daily.
"**Bread**" here refers to all aspects of our physical existence in the world—
all that makes us needy, and often anxious,
in a world full of scarcity and competition to survive.
We are to come to God our Father as our ultimate **provider**—
we are to lay before him our desires, our fears, our anxious thoughts,
and trust him to give us what we need.

This morning we turn to the next phrase in that model prayer—
as Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 6--
"**Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."**

So why then, you may ask, when we as a church recite this prayer, do we say,
"**Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us**"?

Well, the answer to that question goes back to the early 16th century
when a man named William Tyndale first translated this prayer into English.
He chose the word "trespasses"
based on Jesus' amplification of this prayer in vv. 14,15,
which uses the word for "**trespasses**" (παραπτώματα).
And, by the way, the Lukan version of this prayer
uses the more general word of "**sins**" (ἁμαρτίας--Lk. 11:4).

Tyndale translated it this way to avoid an overly materialistic interpretation
that might give people the idea that monetary debts no longer need to be repaid.
Augustine, in fact, in his exposition of the Lord's Prayer,
addresses this misunderstanding at some length.
Tyndale's translation was then picked up in Thomas Cranmer's
Church of England Book of Common Prayer of 1549,
and what we now recite is from the modernized 1928 version of Cranmer's prayer book.

So, there you go—a little liturgical history.
I believe that "**Forgive us our trespasses**"
is a valid way of expressing what Jesus meant.

But in Matthew, Jesus does use the language of debt—
and that is language we are all familiar with.

There's the National Debt which is over twenty trillion dollars by last count,
which is a number too big even to imagine.

There's what used to be called "Third-World Debt"--
by which the poorest countries keep getting poorer.

Or closer to home, we may think of student debt--
which can linger for decades.

And, of course, there is consumer debt--
which thanks to the magic of credit cards
allows us to enjoy the good life today
without having to pay for it till tomorrow.

All of these are aspects of monetary debt
that is so much a part of our market economy.

But do ever think about moral debt--
that moral debt that is an integral part
of the marketplace of relationships of which we are all a part?

You see, we live in a web of mutual obligations as we interact with one another--
And instead dollars and cents,
in this market, we deal in a currency of attitudes and actions.

Generally, in our casual relationships
we expect people to treat us with dignity and respect.
They have an obligation to deal with us fairly and decently.

In our friendships the expectations are higher--
we expect loyalty and thoughtfulness.
Our friends should care how we feel.

And in a marriage the expectations are higher still--
Your spouse owes you faithfulness and love.

We live in a world of give and take.
It's not always a matter of strict accounting,
but generally, we try to keep the books balanced.

If someone does you a favor,
then we say, "you owe them one."
If someone sends you a Christmas card or gives you a present,
you try to reciprocate;
otherwise you fall behind.

If you've been neglecting your wife,
you try to "make it up to her" by bringing home some flowers.

It's a kind of barter system,
though the reciprocal exchange is usually not immediate in time.

Some people refuse to participate, of course--

we say they "ask no quarter and give no quarter,"
They make no expectations on you
and expect you to do the same.

But most people aren't like that.
They constantly buy and sell,
trying to give to others what they owe,
and holding others to their social obligations.

It's the moral marketplace of relationships
in which we can gain merit or incur debt,
we come out in the black or in the red,
just as if we were in the business of selling shoes.

And in this prayer, Jesus assumes that in this moral economy,
we are all debtors to God.
We all owe him something that we cannot pay—
our sin, our moral failure, our refusal to live before God in faithful love,
has created a huge moral deficit,
that results in a relational barrier between us.

And in our prayer, Jesus calls us to recognize that debt
and to seek God's mercy to cancel it.

We are guilty, and we know it.
We are to pray that our God may cleanse us from the stain of our sin,
and purify us from the pollution of our moral obscurities,
so that we can come into his holy presence.

And here is the wonderful thing about this prayer as Jesus presents it—
This prayer for forgiveness is not where the prayer begins—
You might expect that—
You might expect that we must begin with our apology to God
before he would even consider talking to us.

But no, this model prayer begins with the wonderful words, "Our Father."
In this prayer,
we have already been encouraged to come to him
to provide for our daily needs.

This tells us that God's grace precedes our repentance.
There is no need to pretend that all is well;
we don't need to try to justify ourselves,
and make excuses for our failure
lest God turn his face from us.

No, he already knows our sin;
he stands ready to forgive.

We can have confidence that we he won't reject us,
but will receive us with open arms.
He simply wants us to acknowledge the truth of what we have done,
to turn to him for mercy,
and to seek his power to resist all that is evil.

You see, this is what the gospel is about—

God in his loving grace initiates a relationship with sinners like us.
We are debtors whose debt has already been paid by another.
When Jesus died on the cross, his last words were "**It is finished.**"
He spoke what was rendered in Greek τετέλεσται --
which in the Roman world
was a word that would be written on a bill
that had been paid in full.

Our God has taken our debt on himself and paid it in full—

That's the confidence we can have when we go to him,
seeking his mercy in forgiving our sin.

We can do nothing to deserve it—

It is a debt we could never pay.
God's forgiveness comes to us only through his grace.

In our prayer,

we are to seek God's purification of our lives
as we seek his forgiveness of our sin.

But just because we are forgiven freely, as a gift,
totally apart from what we deserve,
doesn't mean that that gift doesn't come with its own form of obligation.

Gifts graciously given can also come with implicit demands,
and so it is with the free gift of forgiveness in the gospel.

In Mt. 6:12, Jesus instructs us to pray, "**Our Father, . . . Forgive us our debts,**
as we also have forgiven our debtors."

Then he expands on this in v. 14—

**"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."**

What is this about?

Why does Jesus insist so strongly on this condition of our forgiveness—
that our forgiveness by God
depends on our willingness to forgive others?

I think the best way to understand the force of what Jesus is saying here
is to consider the parable Jesus told about an unmerciful servant,
which Jordan just read for us from Matthew 18.

A servant is called to give an account to his master,
and he's hopelessly in debt,
owing him the equivalent of millions of dollars.

In using such an extraordinary figure,

Jesus may have been exaggerating to make a point,
or the servant may have been in some kind of official position--
like Secretary of HUD,
or chairman of the board of some bank--
and the debt represented the money he was responsible for.
And that money was gone.
He couldn't account for it;
he had lost it.
We don't know why, but he was responsible,
so he deserves to go to jail.
But the servant begs for forgiveness;
he pleads for mercy,
and out of the kindness of his master's heart,
the servant is forgiven.
The huge debt was cancelled. /

Forgiveness, Jesus suggests, can be likened to
the cancellation of a debt--
the cancellation by the one to whom it is owed.
Seen in this light,
you can understand why forgiveness is not easy.

C.S. Lewis puts his finger on the truth when he said that
"Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea,
until they have something to forgive."

There is a cost to forgiveness--
the one who forgives has to cancel the debt and absorb a loss--
and that can be very difficult to do.

Maybe you've been mugged by another person's hurtful words;
You've been robbed by someone's malicious act--
you've been cheated by another's deceit;
you've been relegated to poverty or even maimed
by someone's simple negligence.

There is hurt, there is anger--
there is a justifiable sense of injustice at what has happened.

Someone owes you something--
something very dear to you.

How can you just cancel the debt?
How can you not demand to be repaid?
How can you release someone else from their rightful obligation?

Forgiveness is not easy,
but Jesus says it must happen.

For consider what happens next in the story Jesus told.

After this servant had been forgiven millions of dollars in debt,
one of his fellow servants,
perhaps a teller at the bank, or a clerk in the HUD office,
owed him a couple of bucks--
and he couldn't pay.
But instead of mercy, that first servant gives his fellow servant strict justice--
and he is thrown in jail
and sued, no doubt, for personal damages.

When the word got around what had happened,
the master was incensed.

**"Then the master called the servant in.
'You wicked servant,' he said,
'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.
Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'
In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured,
until he should pay back all he owed."**

**"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you," Jesus said,
"unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Mt. 18:32-35).**

Some pretty strong words, I would say.

Jesus wants to make it very clear
that this gift of forgiveness—which comes to us undeserved
and without any merit on our part—
this gift of forgiveness comes with an obligation to forgive.

And the power of this parable comes in the incredible disproportion,
the huge discrepancy,
between the debt the servant was forgiven
and the debt he was called to forgive.

That's the key to it, you see—

And Jesus is pointing to the overwhelming moral debt we owe to God.

We are guilty of treating the God of the universe

with utter contempt.

We stubbornly insist on our will instead of his;

we put ourselves in his place,

we dethrone him as king—we de-god God.

And we display this contempt toward God

in the way we treat his representatives in the world—

those human beings created in his image.

When we fail to treat other people as we ought—

with kindness and respect and compassion--

we spit in God's face,
we rebel against his rule,
we commit cosmic treason against our rightful King.
There can be no greater moral offense possible.

But by God's grace, we have been forgiven a debt
which only the death of the Son of God could cover.

So what is that compared to the offense that someone has committed against you?
If God has forgiven you,
how can you not forgive someone who has offended you?

Jesus says that it must happen;
and it can happen.

I can remember the reports
of one January morning in 1984 when Pope John Paul II
walked into a dismal prison cell in Rome to meet
Mehmet Ali Agca, the man who had tried to kill him.
The Pope took the hand of the man
who had fired a bullet at his heart and forgave him.

But, you say, the Pope—I mean, he is a professional forgiver.
And as one writer suggests,
it may be easy for such a highly placed professional to forgive
when he knows ahead of time
that the whole world will be watching.¹

We ordinary folks feel more like the sick man from Illinois
that Abraham Lincoln once told about.

The man was told he didn't have many days to live,
and that he ought to make peace
with any enemies he might have.

He said the man he hated worst of all
was a fellow named Brown in the next village
and he guessed he had better begin with him.

So Brown was sent for and together at the bedside
they had a touching encounter,
as the man told Brown that he wanted to die at peace
with all his fellow creatures,
and he hoped he and Brown could now shake hands
and bury all their enmity.

It was a tearful moment, as they embraced,

¹ cf. Smedes, *Forgive*, p. xii.

and after a parting that would have softened the heart of a grindstone,
Brown had about reached the door,
when the sick man rose up on his elbow and said,
"But, see here, Brown, if I should happen to get well,
that old grudge still stands." /

Forgiveness is not easy,
but Jesus says that we must do it.

The Christian is obligated to forgive,
though, to be clear, no one ever has a *right* to be forgiven!
Nor does personal forgiveness mean that a forgiven offender
is relieved of all the consequences of their sin.
The Pope's attempted assassin was not released from jail
just because the Pope forgave him.
Neither did the forgiveness of the Charleston church shooter
by several victims' family members keep him from being convicted
and punished for his crime.

But, Jesus says, you are still obligated to forgive—
or else you cannot expect to be forgiven by God.

This doesn't mean that we somehow earn God's forgiveness
by forgiving others.

No--
There is no question in the parable of the servant
ever earning or deserving
the cancellation of his million-dollar debt.

Something else is at stake--
"He who cannot forgive," writes George Herbert,
"breaks the bridge over which he must pass himself."

Someone once said to John Wesley, "I never forgive,"
to which he aptly replied, "Then, sir, I hope that you never sin."

You see, if you refuse to forgive someone,
then in this prayer you are actually asking God not to forgive you.

It's true--
if you have turned to Jesus Christ in faith—
if you have received his death as the payment for your sin,
and entered into this new realm called the kingdom of God,
then you must realize
that your relationships with other people
can no longer be based on a market economy.
They can no longer be based on the give-and-take or mutual transactions
in which you keep tabs on what other people owe you.

No, your relationships with other people
must be based on the grace of God in the cross of Christ.

The kingdom of God is not a market economy,
The kingdom of God is a welfare state.
It is a welfare state, but one without entitlements—
for we are entitled to nothing.
The debtor never has a right to be forgiven.
Forgiveness is always based on grace, not merit,
mercy and not rights.

But the fact is,
if you cannot show that same grace and mercy in your relationships with others,
then you haven't really understood it
in your relationship with God.

If you haven't yet given up on the moral market
where everyone is given just what they deserve,
then you haven't yet entered into this sphere
called the Kingdom of God,
the new community of grace and truth,
where you have been given what you don't deserve.

If you continue to keep score with others,
God will keep score with you.
and when that happens,
you always lose.

As Jesus says later in that Sermon on the Mount—
**"Do not judge, or you too will be judged.
For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged,
and with the measure you use,
it will be measured to you"** (Matt. 7:1).

Or as James puts it in his letter—
**"judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone
who has not been merciful"** (2:13).

But how can a person live like that--
how can I forgive--
not just one time, or seven times,
but seventy-times-seven times?

Won't my resources run out?
Won't I go bankrupt by the overwhelming cost of forgiveness?

Not at all--
for you can draw on the inexhaustible moral resources of God himself--
In Christ, the riches of his grace are now yours.

Col. 3:13—"Bear with each other
and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.
Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

"Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

There is a power in the saving grace of God in the gospel
that can transform the human heart.

But let me close with one final question that people sometimes ask—
Why does a Christian even need to pray this prayer at all?
Haven't we been forgiven by God once and for all?
Aren't we already justified in God's sight—
pronounced "not guilty" before the Judge?
Haven't all our sins already been taken away by Christ
when he bore them on the cross?
Why do we need to keep on asking for forgiveness?

Yes, all that is true—
we have been forgiven by God once and for all.
We are already justified in God's sight.
But it is also true that we still sin.
And we still need to be washed clean,
purified from that awful stain.
But the forgiveness in this prayer is the cleansing
of those who are already a part of the family.
This is a believer's prayer—
it is given to those who can address God as "Father."

This forgiveness is not the initial forgiveness by which we are first united to Christ,
but the on-going forgiveness by which we live out that relationship.

And this reflects what Jesus said to Peter
on the night of his last meal with his disciples before his death.

You know the story,
Jesus takes a towel to take on the role of a slave
and he begins to wash his disciples' feet.
Peter is shocked by this—
"No, Lord, you shall never wash my feet."
Jesus answered, **"Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."**
**"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet
but my hands and my head as well!"**
Jesus answered, **"A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet;
his whole body is clean"** (Jn. 13:8-10).

If you are a Christian, and are united to Christ by faith,
you have already taken a bath—
your whole body is clean.
So when we pray **"Father, forgive us our trespasses,"**
we are just getting our feet washed by the gracious mercy of God.
And when we pray this prayer,
we claim the promise of the Word of God--
"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just

**and will forgive us our sins
and purify us from all unrighteousness"** (1John 1:9).

So when we pray, let us come honestly before God
and confess to him our failures--
those times when we have been trespassers into forbidden territory,
those times we have transgressed moral boundaries.
Let us not be afraid to seek his forgiveness for all those ways we miss the mark
and fail to live in a way that displays his goodness and grace.

We walk around every day in a dirty world,
and we are too much a part of that world.
So when we pray, let us allow him to wash our feet in his grace.

But this morning we are going to celebrate a bath—
for we have a baptism—in fact, we have three people being baptized.

And in baptism we are given a picture of that initial cleansing—
that once-and-for-all event by which we are joined to Christ
and becomes a part of the family of God.

In baptism a person goes down into the water
as a picture of their death with Christ,
and then he or she comes up out of the water
as a picture of their being raised with Christ to new life.

And in the process, baptism gives us a picture of their sins being washed away
by the precious blood of Christ.

It's a glorious thing—this forgiveness, this cleansing, that comes to us in the gospel.
And we celebrate that this morning in baptism.

Let me invite our three baptismal candidates this morning to come forward—
Nadia Costescu
Peter Costescu
Rawa Ahmed

Let me just remind you that baptism doesn't save anybody—
Christ saves us,
and we are joined to Christ by our faith.
But baptism makes that personal and private faith, public and visible—
as these three profess their faith,
and enact their faith in baptism,
and we as the church affirm their faith in this act,
we celebrate the gospel at work among us all.//

Let me pray—

Jesus, Our Lord and King [CH #466
Baptism

Prayer: Our Spiritual Lifeline, #7
May 27, 2018

**Praying:
"Forgive Us Our Trespasses"**

We continue our reflections on Jesus' model prayer as we consider our need to ask God our Father to forgive us for the ways we offend him. Significantly, this includes our responsibility to do the same with those who offend us.

The Structure of the Lord's Prayer—

**Whom We Pray To—
What We Pray For—
Our Provision
Our Purification
Our Protection**

**"Forgive us our debts/trespasses"
Monetary debt
points to moral debt (Mt. 18)**

**The nature of sin
The universality of sin
The promise of grace**

"As we forgive our debtors/those who trespass against us"

**The forgiveness of our debts
creates a debt to forgive.**

Why a Christian needs to pray this way (John 13)

**The bath for our bodies
The washing of our feet**

Discussion Questions:

**Praying:
"Forgive Us Our Trespasses"**

- How is your progress in the practice of prayer?
- Why is praying for forgiveness significant in our praying? Why is it important for God? What does it do for us?
- Why does Jesus so strongly connect our forgiveness by God with our forgiving others? (see esp. Mt. 6:14,15)
- How can a gift be freely given yet also include an implicit obligation? Have you ever received such a gift? How is forgiveness such a gift?
- Do you find forgiveness hard? Why?
- Must forgiveness also include a removal of the consequences of wrong-doing? How can that work?

- Review the memory verse: Phil. 4:6,7. Consider again this quote from Martin Luther: "Pray and let God worry."
 - Discuss your "prayer goals" for the month. How are you doing?
- *Take some time to pray together in your group—
Use the "Lord's Prayer" pattern, guiding by your group leaders, spending a few minutes in each phrase.

•Old Anglican Prayer—

“Father, what we know not, teach us;
what we have not, give us;
what we are not, make us.”
Through Christ, Our Lord. Amen.