

"Forgive Us Our Debts"
Matthew 6:5-15
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I want to begin by stating straight off my belief that the deepest and most honest prayer any of us shall ever pray is NOT "Lord, hallowed be thy name" or "Thy kingdom come and thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" or even "Lord, where is my portion of daily bread." NO! The truest and most SINCERE prayer our lips shall EVER utter is "Father, forgive me" as the need of forgiveness--for deliverance from our inward guilt--is the deepest hunger and the mightiest thirst anyone can possibly know. To pray, "Father, forgive me," is to say we are sorry, that we knew what we should have done but didn't do. It is to confess our wrongdoing, our insensitivity, our lack of love, our gross selfishness and admit that we have hurt someone and don't want to hurt that person ever again. It is to value our relationships so much, whether with a parent, a spouse, a child, a friend, even with God, that we don't want ANYTHING to ever stand between us and them. ABOVE ALL, forgiveness is about RECONCILIATION for it means laying aside all arrogance and pride and admitting how important that other person is to our life. And yet, even though we are continually reassured in our weekly Assurance of Pardon that we are forgiven in Jesus Christ, that by his grace we now have the opportunity for a new beginning, the chance to start all over again with a fresh, clean slate, how many of us actually BELIEVE it when those words are pronounced, "Friends, believe the Good News- in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven." The theologian Paul Tillich said that the hardest thing in the world for us to do is to accept the fact that God does INDEED accept us and is ready for us to move on with our lives.

When I look back throughout my life, I can now see all-too clearly that my GREATEST need was really to know "forgiveness." Prior to my Damascus Road experience a half-century ago in which I really discovered Christ for the first time, I always felt overwhelmed by tremendous feelings of guilt, though I could never understand WHY or figure out HOW to alleviate myself of it. If I had felt guilty because of a couple stupid acts on my part such as stealing from my parents or maliciously destroying property, I might have been able to rectify the wrong, to make amends and thus clear my conscience- but it wasn't that. On the contrary, I always thought of myself as a pretty GOOD kid. I studied hard, had a respectable circle of friends, and always conducted myself as polite and courteous around others- my MOTHER, who was a tough disciplinarian, made sure of THAT.

The guilt I felt, however, was much DEEPER than that. I was somehow being called to account over the accumulation of a lifetime of small, petty lies; of sneaky acts which I knew I would never get caught; and of frequent violations of trust. My soul felt weighed down under the guilt of all those nameless acts--conscious and unconscious--one commits throughout a lifetime: the need to feel superior; the need to constantly have my own way; the thoughtless, selfish acts that disregards the rights of others. I was feeling guilty for a LIFETIME of such deeds, and no one or two good acts on my part was going to make up for them. The guilt I was feeling was the guilt of sin in my heart, and I needed nothing more than to have that sin erased, to have my conscience cleared, to have the promise of a new beginning- in other words, to know that I was FORGIVEN.

In retrospect, I now see how I needed forgiveness from my twin brother for the way I often hurt him. You see, he was always the weaker, less popular, less athletic and intellectual between the two of us- yet, on many occasions, instead of supporting and protecting him, I ridiculed him- especially in regards to his faith. I thought he was both a FOOL and WEAK for thinking he needed some imaginary friend to help him get through life. And yet, I can only say I stand in this pulpit this morning as a minister of the gospel in large part because I had a brother who loved me enough to pray for me.

I also needed forgiveness from my parents. After all, they did everything they could to make sure I had all the advantages they were denied growing up- nice clothes, a television and stereo, a car, a college education, and I responded in kind by being rebellious, insolent, and unwilling to communicate honestly with them. I know I needed their forgiveness.

Above all, I now see how I needed forgiveness from GOD. I grew up in the local church but by the time I started college, I had jettisoned my faith and considered myself a "respectable atheist," an "enlightened soul." Religion was the "opiate of the masses" as Marx had said. It was for weak people who could not believe in their own strength and abilities, as another famous German philosopher had declared. The world was made for the survival of the fittest and I was going to scratch and climb over anyone or anything that got in my way- knowing that society, which fosters just such an ethic, would reward me for it.

I tell you, if anyone ever deserved to be struck down for all the terrible blasphemies made against God, it was me. Yet one evening in 1973, in a small church in Upstate New York, God graciously spoke to my heart through his Holy Spirit to reveal to me my TRUE state. He showed me how my life was in rebellion to his own and that he wanted to offer me the very thing I craved more than LIFE ITSELF- the opportunity for a new beginning; the chance to start all over again with a fresh, clean slate; a life with new goals, new values, new friends, new motivation. All this was offered when he held out to me the gift of his own "forgiveness."

Thus, fifty years ago, at the end of a service I'd agreed to attend simply to please my aunt who I was visiting at the time, I got down on my knees, buried my head in the pew, and prayed the first REAL prayer in my life. I'm not sure WHO or WHAT I prayed TO for I didn't even believe there WAS a God- that was all fairy tale stuff to me. But I was certainly aware of what it was I DID need- I was desperate to find someone or something which would allow me to FORGIVE MYSELF and thus find release or deliverance from all the guilt and regret and self-recrimination which clung to my heart like a ball and chain. I needed to be rid of the OLD Dave along with all his old baggage if I was ever going to develop into a new person with a whole new future and experience the freedom only a new life can promise- a future filled with peace and hope instead of the constant guilt and self-recrimination which left me depressed and joyless much of the time.

Therefore, tossing aside my pride, I humbled myself before some Great Unknown and simply said, "If there IS someone, something out there, please help me." When I eventually arose from my knees, I instinctively "knew that I knew" that someone had heard my appeal and was now claiming me for himself. Somewhere deep within, I felt the assurance that what was about to commence was INDEED a whole new life, one which would take me on an adventure

unlike any I had ever dreamed! In fact, it began even before that week was over as I soon realized I was no longer returning to the state university I'd been attending back in New Jersey. From then on, I'd be headed in an entirely NEW direction--one involving future ministry--and that this force, this power, this entity (which I assumed WAS God) would be guiding me. How or when that would occur, only HE knew; I only had to remain faithful to him and the vision he had given me, and the doors would open by themselves.

Friends, Christianity is not just ABOUT forgiveness- it IS forgiveness. That's why Martin Luther could say that forgiveness IS the gospel. "Preach nothing else," he said by which he meant preach no other gospel than the good news of God's forgiveness! You see, Jesus was not interested in forgiveness as a doctrine or dogma as though it was just one theme among many in his life and ministry. Rather, forgiveness for him was an ACTION, it was a RADICAL ACTIVITY that was central to everything he said and did. Were you to take this component out of the Gospel message, you would then have NO "good news" to speak of. The reason why Christianity has any kind of appeal in the FIRST PLACE is that it is first and foremost ABOUT forgiveness- about having been FORGIVEN our sins, FORGIVEN our past failures and indiscretions, FORGIVEN for all those slights and hurts that injured others over the years. Literally translated, forgiveness means "to let go" or "to put away"; it is the sense that a debt owed is cancelled out. Forgiveness thus clears the way so that we can start life anew on a whole new foundation. It liberates us FROM a painful past TO a brand-new future so that we can face each day with joy and hope instead of our guilt and despair constantly weighing us down. Forgiveness is the key to moral and spiritual freedom in our lives and what greater gift could we possibly receive than THAT.

Forgiveness is so essential to the life of the Christian that this is the only part of the prayer about which Jesus thinks it necessary to add a word of interpretation. He says, immediately following his prayer: "For if you forgive others the wrongs they have done, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, then the wrongs you have done will not be forgiven by your Father." Jesus wants there to be no mistake about this- if you cannot find it within your heart to offer mercy and forgiveness even when the other party is not deserving of such mercy, then how can you expect to ever find such mercy and forgiveness from God, your heavenly Father, when YOU are not deserving either.

Thus, what the Lord's Prayer teaches us is that the forgiveness we need is MORE than something we feel inside, MORE than the sensation that we have been washed clean and our troubled conscience calmed- it calls for us to actively reconcile ourselves with others whom we have hurt or those who have injured us. Once we have taken the steps to re-establish a broken relationship, we discover that God is taking SIMILAR steps in reconciling us to himself. As our prayer states, "Father, forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" or as other versions have it, "Father, forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

I cannot underscore this morning just how important forgiveness is for our own spiritual health and maintenance as well as the spiritual health and maintenance of the church as a whole. It is very easy to pray the Prayer of Confession in the worship service and then after receiving the Assurance of Pardon, sing the Gloria Patri, praising God for the forgiveness we find in confessing our sins to him. However, if we leave this sanctuary with an unforgiving heart

towards ANY of God's children, all our confessing and glorias are sung in vain.

Isn't our inability to forgive one of the main reasons why the church of Jesus Christ is as fractured as it is, because it is overrun by petty jealousies and hurts that have gone unconfessed and unforgiven? Christians can be among the most spiteful, hurtful, unforgiving and self-righteous individuals anywhere, and all congregations everywhere have unloving, unforgiving members with unloving, unforgiving attitudes. We can forget that the church is called to be a restored or reconciled community. We are the ones always trying to put away such things as selfishness and pride in the name of reconciliation. We are the company of "forgiven forgivers"; we are the ones proclaiming the ethic of love all the time- love your neighbor, love the stranger in your midst, love even your enemy. "Behold how they love one another" was the comment of outsiders to the "new thing" evident in the very early Christian church- but what has happened in the intervening 2000 years that we find it impossible to love and forgive and reconcile with those who were once of one flesh with us?

Now I believe there is more to be learned from the examples people set than from all the dissertations written on that subject. Let me give you a case in point. Several years ago, a former New York City police officer--Steven McDonald--died after having lived more than three decades in a wheelchair. I know the name is unfamiliar to many of you but if you lived and worked in the New York metropolitan area back then, you were well acquainted with it and the extraordinary story associated with it. On July 12, 1986, Officer McDonald was on patrol in Central Park when he stopped three teenagers. While questioning them, the oldest of the group--fifteen-year-old Shavod Jones--reached into his pant leg and took out a gun. Before the officer knew what was happening, there was a deafening explosion and a bullet struck him just above his right eye. As he fell backwards, the boy shot him a second time, hitting him in the throat. Then, as he lay on the ground, the young man stood over him and pulled the trigger a THIRD time. Thanks to the quick action of his fellow police officers, he was rushed to the hospital where for several days he hovered between life and death. Once it became clear that he was going to survive, a surgeon came into his room and told him and his wife Patti Ann that Steven would be paralyzed from the neck down for the rest of his life and that he would need to be institutionalized. He had been married just eight months, and his wife--twenty-three years old--was three months pregnant. Patti Ann was crying uncontrollably at the cards she had been dealt, and he felt so helpless himself, unable to move or reach out to her.

Steven McDonald spent the next eighteen months in hospitals where he had to learn to live all over again, this time completely dependent on other people. There were endless things to get used to such as being fed, bathed, and being helped to the bathroom. Then, about six months after he was shot, Patti Ann gave birth to a baby boy they named Conor. Their son's birth was like a message from God that he should live, and live differently. You see, he wanted to free himself of all the negative, destructive emotions that this senseless act of violence had unleashed in him: anger, bitterness, hatred, and other feelings. He needed to free himself of those emotions so that he could love his wife, his child, and those around him and so he prayed that he would be changed, that the person he was would be replaced by something new.

That prayer was answered with a desire to forgive the young man who shot him. A news conference was held in which Patti Ann stunned EVERYONE by announcing that Steven

had forgiven Shavod Jones. People often ask if he forgave him RIGHT AWAY, or if it TOOK TIME. He says it evolved over a period of years. He thought about him almost every day. He was angry at him, but he was also puzzled because he found he COULDN'T hate him. More often than not he felt SORRY for him. Rather than vengeance, he wanted Shavod to find peace and purpose in his life, to turn his life to helping others instead of hurting them- and THAT'S why he forgave him. But it was also a way for him to move on, a way of putting the terrible incident behind him ONCE AND FOR ALL. He often told people that the only thing worse than a bullet in his spine would have been to nurture revenge in his heart, for such an attitude would have extended his tragic injury into his SOUL- hurting his wife, his son, and others EVEN MORE.

A year or two later, Shavod Jones called his home from prison and apologized to his wife, his son, and to him. McDonald told him that he hoped the two of them could work together sometime in the future. He hoped that they could travel around the country to share their different understandings of that act of violence that had changed both their lives, and the understanding it gave them about what is most important in life. In 1995 Shavod was released from prison but unfortunately three days later, he died in a motorcycle accident. Still, Shavod Jones was with him wherever his story was told: "We have helped many people, the two of us," the former police officer liked to say.

Steven McDonald was reportedly the most seriously injured member of the New York Police Department to ever survive his injuries. He firmly believed that God allowed him to live for a reason and he spent the next thirty plus years making the most of it. NEVER ONCE did he ever regret forgiving Shavod. In the years following the shooting, he met with Pope John Paul II and Nelson Mandela, and sat for an interview with Barbara Walters. He also took his message of forgiveness to Israel, Northern Ireland and Bosnia. He reached out to children in particular, speaking at schools about nonviolence, and from the responses he got, he knew many were choosing the way of forgiveness and love INSTEAD of violence. In a packed St. Patrick's Cathedral for his funeral service, New York Police Commissioner James O'Neill said in his eulogy, "What we can learn from Steven's life is this: The cycle of violence that plagues so many lives today can be overcome only by breaking down the walls that separate people. The best tools for doing this, Steven taught us, are love, respect, and forgiveness."

Friends, through forgiveness, God turned something terribly tragic into something redemptive- BUT THAT'S WHAT FORGIVENESS DOES. It forms the basis of a WHOLE NEW set of relations between us and with our God; it puts the past and all its wrongs behind us so that it no longer serves as any kind of impediment in the relationship. No longer will hatred or fear or anger or revenge dominate for the old has passed away and everything now becomes NEW. Because God has first come to US, accepting US just as we are- dirty, selfish, greedy, proud, full of addictions, we now have a NEW motivation, a NEW impulse to love others in the same way that WE OURSELVES are loved. Let us therefore live in the light and knowledge of that forgiveness, knowing that if God loves us and forgives us, how can we ever NOT "forgive those who trespass against us." Let us pray...

Almighty God, our Everlasting Father, we confess that we can allow small differences to become major walls between us, and in this way we destroy the unity and fellowship that you will for us. We need your forgiveness but we equally need to be reconciled to our brothers and sisters too. May we lay aside our pride and make what is wrong right so that we can enjoy the love and joy and freedom that comes with such repentance and reconciliation. In Christ's name we pray, amen.