



Roanoke, Virginia

March 29, 2020

## *“Forgive us Our Sins”*

*Part V of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Pray Then in This Way.”*

*Matthew 6:14-15*

**George C. Anderson**

Throughout Lent, our sermons have been based on the Lord’s Prayer. We did not anticipate a worldwide pandemic, but we have stuck with this sermon series because we believe we need to be guided by the prayer more than ever.

- The prayer offers perspective in drawing us out of ourselves in calling on God first, and then being guided to pray for others and the whole earth.
- The prayer focuses our attention on what to pray for—
  - for God’s will be done,
  - for God to provide what will sustain us in these unusual days,
  - for God to work reconciliation among us, and
  - for God’s goodness to be made known on earth.
- And Jesus saying, “**Pray then like this,**” reminds us that even as we gather information and take precautions, we are to return again and again to prayer so we remain grounded in hope as we remain in communion with God and others.

Listen for some of the guidance of the prayer in the reading of our brief passage:

**14** For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; **15** but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.



Pray then like this: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.

Many Bible passages could speak to the theme of forgiveness, but I’ve chosen one that actually is tied to the Lord’s Prayer itself. The passage I just read is what Jesus says right after teaching his prayer. In fact, F. Dale Bruner points out that “the only petition in the Lord’s Prayer to which Matthew’s Jesus adds commentary is the fifth petition on forgiveness.”<sup>1</sup>

Think about that. “Forgive us our sins” is the only petition that Jesus thinks he needs to explain... or, more to the point, *drive home*?

- He doesn’t need to say more about God’s name or God’s kingdom coming to earth?
- He doesn’t need to say more about our asking for daily bread or our being spared temptation?

Forgiveness, evidently, is something he thinks we really need to think about.

- Is it because forgiveness is the world’s greatest need, and thus what most needs prayer?
- Is it because forgiveness is the most important thing we are to be about as Christians?

I do think both are true: that reconciliation is the world’s greatest need and reconciliation is the most important thing we are to be about as God’s people. We are, after all, spiritual descendants of Abraham. Abraham’s world is one where different tribes and races are often in violent opposition, and sometimes they are trying to exterminate each other. God calls Abraham’s descendants to be his people *not* to take sides, but to work through them to bring blessing to the entire world.

Or let’s think about this as Christians in the season of Lent, the 40 days before Easter. Lent is when we prepare for Holy Week; the week that begins with Jesus coming into Jerusalem being welcomed by a crowd waving palms, and then leads through

- his being betrayed by one disciple,
- arrested at night,
- falsely accused,
- wrongly convicted,
- physically brutalized,
- executed on a cross,
- buried in a tomb,
- and then raised from the dead.

When Jesus is raised, the great cosmic question to be answered is this: Will God seek revenge or forgive those who were complicit in his death? Will God seek revenge because of the

---

<sup>1</sup> F. Dale Bruner, Matthew Commentary, *The Christbook*, p. 257.



terrible ways some people treat each other and God's good earth, or is mercy going to be God's final word?

Of course, I know in some sense there is no drama in my asking this question. We know Easter is coming. I imagine there might be folks worshipping with us online who are not all that familiar with the stories of Jesus' last week—at least, I hope there are. Anyway, you should know that while Jesus is dying on the cross, having been treated with cruelty, he prays this prayer: “**Father, forgive them, for they are clueless. They do not know what they are doing.**”

And you need to know that when Jesus returns from the dead, he makes breakfast for the disciples who abandoned him, including the one who, to save his own skin, denied knowing him. Jesus lets those disciples who let him down in his hour of need know that nothing has changed. God still has a purpose for them in the world.

So, there seems to be no drama here. Easter's news is that we're good with God—we're forgiven. We only need to worry about forgiving each other, right?

I don't want to surrender that faith assumption. The foundation of my faith is that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God that we know in Christ Jesus our Lord. That God's love and grace are sure means *so much* right now when we wonder how long we will be separated from each other in this chapter of social distancing. We need to know God is with us and won't abandon us.

Still, there is a struggle here. I want you to join my struggle in understanding what Jesus means in our passage. For

- though I believe reconciliation is the world's greatest need,
- and though I believe reconciliation is the most important thing we are to be about as Christians,

I don't think we yet grasp why it is so important for Jesus to say what he says.

Let me remind you what it is that Jesus says when he drives home the point that we should ask to be forgiven while we forgive others.

**<sup>14</sup> For if you forgive others their wrongs, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others, *neither will your Father forgive your wrongs.***

That's unsettling. Have we just discovered a crack in the foundation of faith that is the unconditional love and grace of God?

After we first announced this sermon series on the Lord's Prayer, a church member said to me: “**I'm so glad we are going to have this sermon series. I just hope that whoever preaches on forgiveness will say something about God not forgiving us our sins if we don't forgive others their sins. For me, that has been the most disturbing verse in the Bible because, to be honest, I have a hard time forgiving some people of some things.**”

When he said that, I knew I would preach on this passage. For it *is* challenging. Listening to what Jesus says, it's as if the “*unforgiveable sin*” is to be *unforgiving*.



Matthew's Jesus later tells a parable that seems to say the same thing. He tells the story of some guy who owes a king an unpayable debt. He owes millions and he has thousands. The king basically resurrects him from his financial grave. He forgives him of his entire debt. The very next day, this man with a new life then encounters someone who owes him a day's wages. Not much, but more than the guy can pay. The one who was forgiven much will not now forgive the little that another owes him and has him thrown into jail. The king finds out, and has the cruel ingrate thrown into jail as well... left there to rot until he pays what he can't repay. "[Forgive us our unpayable debts, Lord, but only as we forgive the unpayable debts others owe us.](#)" It seems that if we expect God not to let our sins stand between him and us, then we cannot let past wrongs stand between us and others.

I've thought about this a great deal... not just for this sermon, but over my entire ministry... indeed over my entire life. I find it hard to forgive sometimes.

And I have to say, in my life I have been as caught up in those fairy tales of the world being righted by revenge as anyone else. Think of all the blockbuster movies that deliver the emotional satisfaction of evil ones getting what comes to them. From comedies like *The Sting* and *Trading Places* to almost every action-adventure movie I have ever seen, the emotional payoff is seeing the scoundrels getting what's coming to them.

Those movies portray the revenge fantasies on a large scale, but they reflect the private, personal fantasies we can have that don't necessarily involve mayhem. What is beneath it all is this conviction that justice really is about making things square. Making things fair. We don't think two wrongs make a right, that the punishment should be worse than the crime. Still, we are attracted to the symmetry expressed in "an eye for an eye," "measure for measure," "do unto others what it is that they did unto you." If things can be squared, then the world can be righted.

But rarely in life does it work out that way... at least not for people with a conscience; not for people who have some awareness that if we hope to live by grace, we have to show it. For as emotionally satisfying as fantasies of revenge can be, the reality of it can be devastating.

- The perfect, sarcastic retort can haunt a relationship for a long time.
- The silent treatment given another to punish some perceived offense can chill a relationship that is supposed to be warm.
- Relationships built by grace where each delights in the other despite each other's faults can take a turn and unravel as anger toward each other notices and catalogues every affront.

Earlier, I spoke of comedies and action adventure films that tell the emotionally satisfying stories of revenge. Consider now those movies and stories that we would call "tragedies." *Tragedies explore the dark side of our fantasies.* I hope that out there sitting in front of a computer Margo McCord, Alice Loftin, Laurie Saunders and the other members of our faith community who have shared their appreciation of tragedies with me are now nodding in agreement. Tragedies explore the dark side of the fantasies that come from our delusions of strength.



And the fantasy that is most often exposed in tragedies is that of *revenge*. I have a hard time thinking of even one tragic play, book or movie where revenge is not at least part of the reason why things end so badly?

I offer one example. It is not a Shakespearean tragedy but another blockbuster movie. The director and star of the movie is well known for his fantasies of revenge. “Go ahead, make my day,” said Clint Eastwood in the movie *Dirty Harry*, giving a twist to the stories of the Spaghetti Westerns that made him famous. Eastwood directed and starred in the movie, *Unforgiven*.

My father loves telling the story of my recommending that movie to him. Here is how he described his experience of watching it: “It was one dreadful sequence of ever more senseless violence. It was awful!”

He called me and asked why I had recommended it. He loves telling others how I replied. “Dad, you needed to watch the movie theologically.” He burst out laughing when I said that. “I’ve got to admit,” he said, “it never occurred to me while watching that bloodbath of a movie to think theologically.”

He may have laughed at me when I said that, but I want you to know that he thought about it and later preached a sermon that some of you with Herculean memories might remember, for he preached it when he was the Interim Minister here 22 years ago. He talked about how the movie portrayed violence in a realistic and not romantic light. Then he reflected on how the story is about retaliations that lead to greater and greater acts of revenge, beginning with an ill-timed giggle and leading to escalating violence and killings until an entire saloon is littered with dead bodies. The whole point of the movie can be summed up with an exchange between Mr. Mundy, the Eastwood character, and a hired hand. The young man, miserable after killing someone for the first time, says something to try to make himself feel better. “He had it coming.” To which Mr. Mundy says, “We all do.”

That’s a truth many of us know from experience. Retaliation won’t heal you. And neither does holding and nurturing grievances and anger against another. They are “relational viruses” that often won’t go away even when we create social distance by trying to cut the other out of one’s life, because as long as the anger and desire for revenge remain, so remains in your head and heart the one who offended you. You can’t think of the other without that sudden rush of spoiled adrenaline. Your moment, even with others you enjoy, can be robbed of its delight simply in bringing the thought of *that other* into mind.

Let’s go back to what Jesus says after teaching the prayer. I think the best way to get past this idea of an unforgivable sin being not forgiving others is to draw on the Lord’s Prayer itself. We want *on earth what is in heaven*. On Easter, we proclaim heaven’s cosmic truth that nothing, not even an inability to forgive, can stand between us and God. But on earth, we know that what Jesus is saying has truth. The grace and peace of God feels somehow denied to us when we nurse grudges and act in revenge. It may not be true all the time, but within the realm of a particular relationship—

- within that divorce that cannot get past retaliation—
- within the broken friendship that can’t get past the betrayal—



- within the country that can't get past its seeming delight in its political attacks—
- within the places in the world where races, or tribes, or factions go beyond insult to injury—beyond violent fantasies to violent actions—there is a lingering hellishness. It can be relational, spiritual, legal, political... Jesus wants us to be spared that hellishness, whether world-large or personal-small.

We do find it had to forgive sometimes, so pray for what we can't always manage on our own. IF I could soften what Jesus says just a bit but without losing its meaning, I suggest that Jesus is saying, “**Forgive others as a way to live into God's forgiveness. For unless you learn to do that, you have no idea what God's forgiveness really means.**”

The simple irony of our faith shows itself again. We think we are giving up so much by letting go of hatred and resentment and fantasies of revenge. And yet, what we are letting go of is hellish and destructive and what we gain is something on earth as it is in heaven.

Indeed, that is something to pray for.

