

Lord, Teach Us to Pray
“The Forgiveness Which Oils the Human Machine”

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A Gallop poll asked Americans what they try to do when wronged. Forty-eight percent said they try to forgive. Eight percent said they try to get even. In our minds, at least, forgiveness wins over revenge six to one. Forgiveness, what a great idea.

Forgiveness is the oil that lubricates the human machine. Without it, all of life becomes hot and squeaky. Lewis Smedes says, “God invented forgiveness as a remedy to the past that even He could not change.” Jesus said when you pray learn to say, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Here, at the heart of the Lord’s Prayer, we come face to face with the importance of forgiveness. Let us take a closer look.

FORGIVENESS IS A FREEDOM EXPERIENCED.

It is a happy day in any person’s life when we come to recognize the insufficient credit of our self-sufficient funds. Matthew says, “Forgive our debts.” Luke says, “Forgive our sins.” Methodists say, “Forgive our trespasses.” By any translation, we wind up in need of someone beyond us to do something for us that we cannot do for ourselves.

Once upon a time a man found himself billions of dollars in debt. How he got that way nobody knows. As Jesus tells the story, it would have taken the annual income of five countries just to pay the interest on what he owed. Yet, when called on the carpet of accountability, this self-sufficient, positive thinking, entrepreneur pleads for more time to save himself. He is yet to grasp the insufficiency of his self-sufficient funds. Just as listeners wait for the hammer of justice to crush, the king steps in, cancels the debt and gives him a full pardon. Jesus says God is like that. He forgives our debts.

Max Lucado, in a chapter entitled “Credit Where Credit is Not Due,” tells about his dad handing him a credit card on the day he left for college. “It didn’t have my name on the plastic,” said Max. “It had his. His only instructions were, ‘Be careful how you use it.’ Months went by and I never used it,” continues Max. “Then, one day I skipped class, slipped off to another city to see a girl I liked, and managed to rear-end a car on my return trip. I can still feel the embarrassment when I made that collect call home. After listening to my feeble confession my dad said, ‘Well, these things happen. That’s why I gave you that card. I hope you have learned a lesson.’”

We err and stray from God’s ways like lost sheep. We follow too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We do those things which we ought not to

do and leave undone the things we should be doing. But, it is the nature of God to give us credit where credit is not due.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST WE ARE FORGIVEN.

Forgiveness is not cheap. God does not excuse us, pamper us, indulge us, tolerate us. God forgives us. The cost is more than we can pay. The gift is more than we can imagine.

When our son, Wes, was 24 years old, he underwent surgery to replace the aortic heart valve. On the morning of his surgery, I stood by his bed. Wes was afraid. I was concerned. I leaned over to give him a fatherly hug of assurance and said, “O, Wes, I wish I could take your place in surgery today.” And Wes replied, “I wish you would.”

That is exactly what God does for us through Jesus Christ. Even though the debt is deep, Jesus paid it all. Even though the trespasses are serious, the pardon is full. Even though our sins are many, grace is amazing.

*Upon the cross of Jesus, my eye at times can see
The very dying form of one who suffered there for me.
And from my stricken heart with tears
Two wonders I confess,
The wonders of redeeming love and my unworthiness.*

Forgiveness is free. Richard Foster tells about a lady who approached him following a lecture on prayer and began in rapid fire sequence to tell him all the troubles of her life. “As I listened,” said Richard. “God said to me, ‘Tell her that her sins are forgiven.’ So I did. She never stopped. For the second time I said, ‘Ma’am, your sins are forgiven.’ She kept going. The third time I took her shoulders, looked directly in her eyes and said, ‘Look at me. I’m trying to tell you that your sins are forgiven.’ She stopped mid-sentence. ‘What did you say?’ ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ In shock she said, ‘They are?’”

Just as Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery—*neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.* Just as Jesus said to Zaccheus, who was up in a tree—*Salvation has come to your house today.* Just as Jesus said to the paralytic lying at his feet—*Your sins are forgiven. Rise and walk.* Just as Jesus said on the Cross—*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.* So, I say to you today, **in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.**

FORGIVENESS IS A GIFT EMPOWERED.

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors or as the little child said who had misunderstood the prayer, Forgive us our trash cans, as we forgive those who put trash in our cans. Doris Donnelly says, “Forgiveness is an empowered form of giving.”

A gift is a present, a favor, an offering. We do not earn gifts, we are given gifts. People do not earn gifts, they are offered gifts. A gift is just that—a gift. Nobody can demand forgiveness. We only give forgiveness. If there is any ought, it is the ought of opportunity, not the ought of obligation.

In the powerful musical, *Les Miserables*, Jean Val Jean is paroled after nineteen years of imprisonment for stealing a loaf of bread. The years have turned Jean into a hardened criminal. After wandering around the community, the Bishop of Digne finally takes him in and serves him supper, makes his bed and treats him with utmost hospitality. Jean rewards the bishop's kindness by making off with all the silver in the middle of the night. The next morning, before breakfast, there is a knock at the door. The authorities have arrested Jean and brought him to the bishop for the crime to be confirmed.

But to everyone's surprise, the bishop hands over the candlesticks and says, "Jean, have you forgotten that I gave you these, as well?" To a freed man the bishop says, "My brother, you no longer belong to what is evil, but to what is good. I have bought your soul to save it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition. I give you to God."

If we wait until those who harm us are worthy of forgiveness our hearts will become hard and time will run out. Walter Everett is pastor of the United Methodist Church of Hartford, Connecticut. In 1987, his son, Scott, was murdered at the age of 24 by a neighbor who was 27. "I was filled with anger and grief," says Rev. Everett, "but I did not want to get stuck there forever, so one day I sat down and wrote, Mike, my son's murderer a letter. In it I said, 'I forgive you.'" Eventually Rev. Everett went to visit Mike in prison. Three years later he conducted Mike's wedding. Walter Everett now works with Victim's Families for Reconciliation, a group of about 2,000 people nationally who have had family members killed and who oppose the death penalty.

Forgiveness is an empowered gift. Alexander Pope said, "To err is human, to forgive is divine." If forgiveness is divine, then it is not an act of willpower, but an operation of grace. Some say to me, "I just can't forgive." I don't say, "Try harder." I tend to say, "Are you able to pray for the grace to forgive? If not, are you willing to pray for the grace to say that prayer?"

In God's time we find the power we need to do His will. Corrie Ten Boom touched the world with stories of faith from a Nazi concentration camp. As she tells the story, a man approached her following a lecture and said, "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein, to think that, as you say, God washed my sins away."

Corrie Ten Boom recognized him as a guard at Ravensbrook where she and her sister were held and where her sister died. "Suddenly, all the hurt and humiliation came flooding back to me. He thrust out his hand to shake mine, but I was frozen. 'Lord Jesus, forgive me and help me forgive him.' My hand touched

his and something empowered me. I discovered that it is not our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives us, along with the command, the power.”

The Spirit ever plays the flute within inviting us to dance its tune. The Spirit keeps nudging the image of God hidden deep in the soul, reshaping it to look more like the One who fashioned it. The Spirit breathes possibility into impossibility and authorizes us to forgive as God forgives. The world may be at war, but you can be at peace.

In closing, I would ask you two questions: Where do you need to be forgiven? Whom do you need to forgive?

In the name of Jesus, we are forgiven. By the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to forgive. Isn't it about time we put our prayers into practice?

