

FORGIVENESS AND FORGIVING

Scriptures: Matthew 18:21-35; 18:15-17

In a book called *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes,

Not long ago I heard a mother defend her grown daughter's ignorance of Christianity. She herself had been schooled in a French Canadian convent, where nuns bullied her for years in the name of God. When she escaped them, she vowed to protect her own children. "My daughter doesn't know Moses from Goliath," she says with some pride, "but at least she grew up without guilt" (p. 7).

In our culture guilt is not a very popular word. You are not supposed to "guilt" people, or as we said back in the 70s, lay on a "guilt trip." Guilt is something you are supposed to get rid of by going to a therapist. And sometimes guilt is unwarranted. Sometimes people feel guilty that they could not make everyone happy or solve everyone's problems or prevent their children from getting into trouble. That is inappropriate guilt. That is making yourself responsible for things you cannot control.

But that does not mean all guilt is bad. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." He is talking of course about sins. He is talking about admitting our guilt. According to Jesus guilt is not always a destructive emotion. Sometimes it is a kind of emotional warning, like a fever, that should drive us to God.

It occurred to me this week that I have never been to a memorial service or done a memorial service where the deceased was described as a sinner in need of forgiveness. One of my seminary professors told us that at many funerals we should shrug and say, "I don't know; I hope he makes it." But I have never been able to do that. Even if the person was a drunk who lived a completely dissolute life, I try to find something positive to say. I might talk about how the person struggled with addictions or relationships, but I never come right out and say, "This guy was a sinner in need of forgiveness." But we are sinners in need of forgiveness, all of us.

I am particularly struck by the way Jesus uses the word *debts*. Many Christian churches when they pray the Lord's Prayer say "Forgive us our trespasses." But Presbyterians say, "Forgive us our debts." Why? Because in this case we are right. In the gospel of Matthew when Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer he uses a Greek word that means debts. It does not mean trespasses. The word trespasses comes after the Lord's Prayer in verse 14 when Jesus says, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." This is a comment Jesus' makes after the Lord's Prayer. But in the Lord's Prayer itself, the word trespasses is never used. He uses the Greek word for debts, meaning something that we owe to God.

This also is a foreign concept to many people. On occasion I meet with couples who ask me to do their wedding but who do not attend any church. They believe in God and so they want a minister to do their wedding, but that is the extent of their religious practice. So I engage them in a gentle conversation. I ask, "What do you think you owe to God?" When I ask that, they

often stare at me with a totally blank look. “What do you mean?” they ask. I say, “Well, if you believe that God created you, what do you think God’s wants from you? What do you owe to God?” And they look at me like I am speaking a foreign language.

Which I guess I am. I am speaking in New Testament Greek. I am speaking the language Jesus uses in the Lord’s Prayer. According to Jesus we all owe something to God, and we have not done a very good job paying it.

Which brings me to the second problem in this part of the Lord’s Prayer. There are two problems with this part of the Lord’s Prayer. The first problem is coming to terms with our own guilt. The first problem is accepting the whole idea that we owe something to God, and that we have done a terrible job paying it. The second problem is the whole idea of forgiving others.

Several years ago a psychologist in Spokane named Craig Lammers, who is a member at First Presbyterian Church, wrote a journal article about the issue of forgiveness. He began by describing a woman he calls Joyce (not her real name). He writes,

The walls of my office had heard her all-too familiar pain and grief many times before: past sexual abuse at the hands of her father. She had been young, but the memories were as clear as though the abuse had happened only a few days before. It took little for her to recall the fear, dread, and betrayal that she had known while in the presence of her father. ... While telling me her story she occasionally cried. At other times she stated that all she wanted was revenge. Mostly, she seemed confused about what to do with over twenty-five years of pain, hurt, rage, guilt, and discouragement. Near the end of that first session, I suggested that maybe she needed to forgive her father, for this might be the only means of healing what was still boiling in her. Joyce looked at me as though I were crazy. (“The Forgiveness Component,” *The New Bethesda Bulletin*, April 1998, p. 4).

I can understand her feeling. Jesus teaches us to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” But how does Joyce do that? Should she ignore the sins that had been committed against her by her father, pretending they never happened?

Absolutely not. Jesus never said that sin should be ignored. In fact in our first scripture lesson he says, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. ... But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

Forgiving people is not the same as excusing them. Those who commit sexual abuse or physical abuse or any kind of exploitation or injustice need to be confronted.

But confrontation is not the end of the story. In the same chapter Jesus goes on to tell a parable about a servant who owes his master ten thousand talents. A footnote in the pew Bibles says that a talent is worth more than 15 years pay for an average laborer. So a debt of ten thousand talents would take this servant more than 150,000 years to pay.

But in a shocking display of mercy, the master forgives the entire debt. He does not renegotiate it. He does not extend the terms of payment. How do you extend a repayment schedule that already runs 150,000 years? The master does not try to work out a payment plan; he forgives the entire debt, thereby saving the man and his family. That is what we call grace.

But then this man goes out and confronts a fellow servant who owes him one hundred denarii. A denarius is equal to one days pay for an average laborer. So a debt of one hundred denarii is about three and a half months pay. But the first servant, who was just forgiven a 150,000 year debt, will not forgive or even renegotiate the four months pay owed by a fellow servant. As a result, the first servant loses his own forgiveness.

Here is where the two parts of the parable and the two parts of the Lord's Prayer come together. There is a connection between forgiveness and forgiving. You cannot forgive others until you realize the magnitude of your own forgiveness, and you will not believe or experience your own forgiveness until you are able to share that undeserved grace with others.

In his journal article Craig Lammers continues the story of Joyce, the woman who was abused by her father. Eventually she confronts her father, which is a necessary first step in her healing. Forgiving people is not the same as excusing them. But confrontation is not the end of the story. Craig writes,

Over time, Joyce came to understand that her father was a product of his own upbringing, paying for the dysfunction in his own family of origin. At one point, she actually told her father that she forgave him for what he had done to her. His response was less than encouraging but for Joyce it was a crucial step toward healing. Whether he wanted her forgiveness or not, Joyce was offering it to him. Whether he accepted it or not, Joyce was able to release the burden she had carried for too many years of her life.

The story concludes with these words:

Joyce's memories of abuse will always be with her—but they no longer cause the same level of upset and turmoil. ... The energy that had been drained by years of anger and frustration was now available for the good things in life. Forgiveness has freed her to become the woman God wanted her to be (pp. 6-7).

Let me close with one last story about forgiveness shared with me by a member of our church, who gave me permission to share the story with you. I won't disclose the family's name, but in 2001 their son Dan was beaten unconscious by a young man named Jeremy. Dan suffered permanent brain damage as a result of the beating and has been disabled ever since. Jeremy was convicted of deadly assault and sentenced to 8 years in prison.

In 2009 after serving his sentence, Jeremy was scheduled for release, and all the feelings Dan's mother had about what Jeremy had done to her son came rushing back. And she knew she had to do something about it. At that point she wrote a letter to Jeremy shortly before his release from prison, and this is what she wrote:

Dear Jeremy:

This is a letter of forgiveness. You haven't asked for forgiveness regarding the assault of our son, Dan, nearly nine years ago, but in order to set my heart and mind right, I must forgive you. After a lot of thinking, reading, and praying, I want to forgive you. I cannot carry hatred and a grudge in my life and be a whole person.

Of course, I wish it had never happened, and if the four of you, including Dan, had not been drinking and doing drugs that night, it probably would not have happened.

I hope you learned something about yourself while you were in prison, so that your life will be different than it was in 2001. I can never forget what happened that night, but hopefully, I will no longer get a sick feeling whenever the subject is discussed.

Dan is glad to be alive and enjoys life as much as he can. I hope you are glad to be alive and will enjoy your life again. I will pray that you do. And if you ask, God will forgive you, too.

Take care.

I cannot imagine what it took to write that letter. But I know it was the right thing to do. Because it is what Jesus taught us to pray.

- Ken Onstot
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