

As we forgive those who trespass against us. (Matthew 6:12b)

Introduction:

Besides the Lord's Prayer, one of the most well-known Bible verses is John 3:16: **"For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life."** Having everlasting life or having forgiveness from the Father is something that Father wishes to give us. When we sincerely pray: *Forgive us our trespasses*, the Father, who loves us will give us the desire of our hearts. However, God then expects us to be compassionate to others, just as he was compassionate to us. The following parable makes this clear.

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, "Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all." Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, "Pay me what you owe!" So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you all." And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So my heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses (Matthew 18:23-35).

Just before this parable, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother. Is seven times enough? **Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22).** If we keep track, how many times we have forgiven, is that genuine forgiveness? Probably not! Jesus is teaching us to have an attitude of forgiveness. He and the Father have an attitude of forgiveness. Love keeps no record of wrong.

The words: **"forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us"** are rendered in the New King James version as **"forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."**

So, forgiving others is a prerequisite to being forgiven. In fact, we are actually asking God not to forgive us if we do not forgive. Because by saying "forgive us as we forgive", we are in essence saying: "Dear God if I don't forgive, I want you to treat me the same way." Are we not then asking that our sin remain?

This is only the only part of the Lord's prayer that Jesus explains and restates immediately after the prayer ends. Right after the "Amen," of the Lord's prayer, Jesus says:

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 6:14-15).

Why did Jesus feel the need to reiterate this, and emphasize again that God would not forgive us if we do not forgive? It is probably because for most people forgiving is hard thing to do.

When is it not hard to forgive?

It is not hard to forgive someone if we love that person, have empathy for the person, or if we feel sorry for that person. By praying for someone that has wronged us, God can change the feeling of resentment to a feeling of empathy or pity for the person who has hurt us. I remember feeling resentment against someone whom I strongly disagreed with, until I started praying for that person. Why should we not feel sorry for a person who has such a negative attitude? We should pity them. This is in keeping with the teaching of Jesus who says:

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you (Matthew 5:44).

The measure of perfection.

Jesus sometimes sets the standard of conduct so high, that no person is able to achieve it with its own strength. Indeed that is why Jesus says: **“Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5)** and **“with men this is impossible but with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26).**

This certainly applies to Matthew 5:43-48. Here Jesus says,

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

In the book of Romans, Paul also reminds us that

If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:20-21)

Jesus did not only ask us to forgive our enemies, but he also modeled this with his life and death.

And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:33-34).

When our Lord and master showed such forgiveness, how can we still bear grudges against one another? How did Jesus treat his betrayer?

And while He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, with a great multitude with swords and clubs, came from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now His betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “Whomever I kiss, He is the One; seize Him.” Immediately he went up to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed Him. But Jesus said to him, “Friend, why have you come?” (Matthew 26:47-50)

I believe it is fitting to take John 13:15 out of context and to apply it here.

For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you (John 13:15).

We see that Jesus did not just teach forgiveness and expect it of us. He modeled it. He went beyond just forgiving. He gave his life for us. **“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13).**

We have a promise that we can come to God with everything in prayer, and that he will answer us. Note however, what comes right after this promise in Mark 11:24.

Mark 11:24 Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.

Mark 11:25 ¶ And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.

Mark 11:26 But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.

Again, if you have anything against anyone forgive them. Actually, Jesus goes one step farther than this; in Matthew 5: 23-24. He says:

Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Here he says that if your brother has something against you, you should go and be reconciled to him. He does not say just forgive him in your heart, or wait until he comes to you.

How about you? Do you have someone who has something against you? It doesn’t say that it has to be justified. Does someone bear a grudge against you? Have you done your part to have this reconciled? You see, Jesus preached a gospel of reconciliation, not just between you and God, but also between you and your neighbour.

It is easy for most of us to listen to sermons telling us that we need to be born again and that we need to come to Jesus and put spiritual things first in our lives. The reason such sermons are not hard to listen to is because most of us have been born again, and have put spiritual things first. Most of us comply. That is one reason you are taking time for this lesson. However, if someone has wronged us, and bears a grudge against us, and we need to do our part to be reconciled with that person, that is quite a different matter. But you can't ignore it. It is part of the gospel. Yet you cannot do this on your own. You will need God's grace and his power. He has promised to help you in this difficult step.

The Golden Rule

The teaching of forgiving others if we want God to forgive us is an extension of the Golden Rule.

Matt. 7:12 Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Other scriptures along the same lines are Matthew 7:1-2, Matthew 26:51-52 and Revelation 13:10. Going a second mile, if someone compels us to go one also falls into this category (see Matthew 5:41).

What do we need to do this?

This is not something that comes easily to most people, so we should not rely on our human strength. This is something divine, so we need God's help. We need God's love. We need what we read about in Romans 5:5, namely that **the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.**

Ask the Holy Spirit to pour his love into your heart. How else can you find the strength to do this? You can ask God for this gift.

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you (Matthew 7:7).

And above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you (Matthew 5:44)

What if we do not feel love?

Sometimes we need to decide to love. Make a decision to act it out, even if you do not feel it. A man who had converted to Christianity did not love his neighbour. They had been enemies and they had actually hated each other. He knew he should love him because the Bible said so. So, because he felt emotions that were quite contrary, he made a conscious decision to do as the Bible said, despite how he felt. He would practice love even if he felt the opposite. Okay, having made this decision, "if I loved him what would I do? If I loved him, I would say hello," so he did. If he loved him, he might buy him a present for his birthday. If I loved him, I would smile and be

friendly. So he started acting as if he loved him. God honoured that decision and after a while the two enemies actually became friends.

When is it hardest to forgive?

We expect people who are strangers to treat us indifferently. But if a loved one betrays us and hurts us, that is hard. Psalm 41:9 says **“Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.”** This in part is a prophecy concerning Judas, who betrayed Christ. But David experienced this too. When friends turn against you, that is hard to take.

In Matthew 24:12 we read: **“And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.”** The NIV reads: **“Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold.”** The German Bible says, **“because unrighteousness will gain the upper hand the love of many will grow cold.”**

As long as most things are fair, we can accept disappointments, but when unrighteousness rules and gains the upper hand, if the love of God has not been poured out into our hearts, how can we possibly keep from becoming bitter?

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God (2 Timothy 3:1-4).

Perhaps I should stop now. But let me mention some extreme cases, things we will probably never have to deal with. Maybe God will not let us ever come into these circumstances because he knows we would not be able to handle them. God will not give us a test that we cannot handle. And there are things we cannot bear. If someone hurts me, I can forgive, but when they attack my loved ones, that is harder. One of my relatives was in court and saw the man who abused and killed his 21 year old daughter. His little grandson was left without a mother. How heart-wrenching is that? Or I think of the German poem “Füße im Feuer” by Conrad Ferdinand Meyer. A messenger of the King of France is riding through a forest and finds shelter for the night in the castle of a Huguenot family. Huguenots were persecuted by the Catholic King of France. After being given shelter for the night, the messenger realizes that this is the home in which he had tortured his host’s wife to death, in carrying out the state’s persecution. He bars himself into his room, hoping the host will not recognize him. In the morning he turns white, when his Host appears in front of him, entering by a hidden door. After breakfast, his host accompanies him and shows him the way out of the forest. It is then that the messenger realizes that the host had recognized him all along, and he compliments him in honouring the great King of France and not killing him, being his messenger. Yet the Huguenot did not practice revenge because he honoured a much greater king. The Huguenot replies:

Du sagst’s! Dem größten König eigen! Heute ward Sein Dienst mir schwer . . . Gemordet hast du teuflisch mir Mein Weib! Und lebst . . . Mein ist die Rache, redet Gott.”

He did not spare his life because he honoured the King of France, but because he himself was a servant of the King of all Kings, Jesus Christ, who said: Bless those who curse you. Here he gave shelter and did good to the murderer of his wife. That is why he said: Today, I found the service of my King difficult.

I hope God will never test my love to Him in extreme circumstances. I know my own mother struggled not to hate the guard who hit my grandmother in the prison camp at the end of the last World War. However, the pain you suffer when your child is abused is the hardest of all that I can imagine. Who can forgive something like that? Yet that is exactly what God did. He forgave a world that not only rejected his Son, but abused him in the worst possible way, nailing him to the cross.

Let us love him because he first loved us. We can love others because we are loved. Some things we may only be able to forgive because we are forgiven.

Questions

1. What is a prerequisite to being forgiven?
2. In which way do some people condemn themselves in praying the Lord's Prayer?
3. How can we possibly love our enemies?
4. How can God change resentment to empathy?
5. When is it easy to forgive?
6. When is it hard to forgive?
7. How should Matthew 5:24-25 be applied today?
8. What is the hardest thing to forgive?
9. How did God manifest his love to us?
10. Why can we forgive?