

Forgive Us

Matthew 18:23-35

*The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant*

'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly

Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Yes, this is still the sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. We have arrived at the part where we say, "and forgive us our (fill in this blank) as we forgive those who (BLANK) against us." There is a blank there because what the actual words here should be is, as we all know, under debate.

As we may know, what we have as the Lord's Prayer comes from two biblical sources, one in Matthew and one in Luke; plus some ancient additions from various sources. What we have in those two sources also vary from translation to translation. But in general, the accepted translations have been that in Matthew, the Greek word has been to mean "debts" and in Luke the word was in general to mean "sins" this may come from the fact that in Aramaic the word for debt is also used to mean sin. This difference between Luke's and Matthew's wording could be explained by the original form of the prayer having been in Aramaic. Let us hear the differences:

From Matthew 6: 9-13:

'Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your Kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

From Luke 11:2-4

He said to them, 'When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

You will notice that actually, although we have a period at the end of the bread section - the first word in the forgiveness section is 'and.' This is the only and first use of this conjunction connecting bread and forgiveness - showing the importance of forgiveness in our lives - as vital as bread is for the body, so is forgiveness for our souls. Body and soul - bread and forgiveness, both are vital to life. It is no wonder that Jesus said we must forgive 70 x 70 times . . . meaning an immeasurable amount of times . . . because it is not only important to the receiver but to the giver. The awareness of the need of forgiveness is the great equalizer of humanity, keeping us in a frame of mind that says, "I am always indebted to God and available to learn something new."

But let's go back to the topic of 'sins' and 'debts' and 'trespasses' for a moment. "Debts" is definitely a part of the early prayers. Debt - financial debt - was a great burden in the early times. The burden of having a debt was crushing. One could end up imprisoned for not repaying a debt until the debt was paid- and you couldn't work to repay the debt while you were in jail, so there was little hope of surviving if you were in debt - unless you had friends or family members who were willing to sacrifice their hard earned money for you. Owing money could be a death sentence. So your relationship with the people around you was very important. Trust and friendship in a community could save your life if you fell on hard times. If you fell into debt, someone would have to pay your debt for you to get you free. Remember this when we gather for communion later on.

So, these petitions in this section of the prayer are very earthy - very real - very human. Give us bread- what we need - only enough to survive - daily - so let us not be greedy - let us learn to trust you, our father provider God with our daily needs - and give us mercy, in the face of our immense potential to fail in this life, for there is nothing in this world that can guarantee that we will never fail, and there is nothing, really, on this earth to catch anyone who may have fallen due to circumstances beyond their control. We could each one of us fail at any time.

In the face of the *official* 7% unemployment rate in Maryland alone, and the bankruptcies we see all around us, this bit of the prayer is all the more vital today. People don't die in debtor's prison as they once did, but the agony and the pain of debt is still as alive today as they were then. According to one online source (THE BANKRUPTCY LAWYER, JOHN FRANCIS MURPHY, ESQ.), "it is estimate that in 2010 there were about 300 million people in the U.S. In 2010, the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts determined that there were 1,412,838 non-business bankruptcy filings in this country in [this year *so far*]. Assuming that each non-business bankruptcy filing means one person filed for bankruptcy, then one out of every 212 individuals in the country, including the number of children, filed for bankruptcy in 2010. A bankruptcy filing can include a husband and wife, and therefore the number of filings of 1,412,838, means that more than that number of individuals filed for bankruptcy that year." And according to a USA Today source, there is only a small portion of those who qualify who actual do file for bankruptcy. So for so many in this country right now, "forgive us our debts" is a dream beyond dreams - a hope that is considered by most to be fanciful (which might explain the popularity of the lottery). And yet, Jesus teaches us to pray it.

In fact, Jesus tells a wonderful parable about debt, the one I read as our scripture for today. I believe Jesus is focusing on the amazing act of mercy and how that affects humanity. Forgiveness is the theme of this part of the prayer - not the debt - but the forgiveness. For one to beg pardon, one must admit their guilt. Forgive us as we would want to be forgiven. It is the attitude when we meet other people who aren't as fortunate as we are; not that we are better than they, but "there but for the grace of God go I." The compassion we need to survive and maintain our blessed humanness is a part of this prayer.

The man in the parable saw only one side of his life - where he was the center of it. He did not see himself as being a part of a relationship with those around him. He begged and got mercy only for himself and showed no mercy for those who owed to him. The King's thinking in our parable is that his actions had a greater meaning than the lack of debt - it was an example of how to live in his kingdom. *Not to learn the lesson of compassion, community and mercy will bring torture and pain in a human life.*

Hatred and grudges do the most harm to those who bear them - for grudges are signs of someone not aware of their own sinfulness. And forgiveness can never be earned - it is a free flowing gift that comes from the King of our earth - the king who wants to be asked for forgiveness - who wants us to live a life forgiving others - for when we are aware of our sinfulness, then we can be truly free in our community and in our lives.

But the word debt so often means owing money or wealth. Often the word trespass has been used at this juncture of the prayer. There are various sources as to when and why it began to be used. I haven't found anything exact as to where, when and why it was used, but its earliest use was around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. It may have been used because the early Christian discovered that they needed forgiveness for debts of the spirit and against their neighbor as well. The communal aspect - the necessity to focus on the relationship with their neighbor became vital so the choice for some became "Forgive us our trespasses."

The dictionary description of Trespass as a verb is listed as: to commit an offense or a sin; transgress or err; to commit an unlawful injury to the person, property, or rights of another, with actual or implied force or violence, especially to enter onto another's land wrongfully; to infringe on the privacy, time, or attention of another. As a noun it is : A transgression of a moral or social law, code, or duty.

So you see trespass encompasses so much more than debt and yet, it also includes debt, for we are indebted to each other all the time for so much. The landownership question is also interesting if you take into account how land became someone's property. The natives of this country did not believe it was their land - land was not to be possessed but to be treasured and cared for the future generations. And our slaves were forced to build this land and our nation's capitol. So you see, we can easily say, forgive us our trespasses.

To take advantage of the generosity of others is to take the attitude that we are not equal in the need of the grace of God. To infringe on someone's good nature, to use and abuse someone's generosity is to be indebted and not to realize it, and that is why Jesus told the parable which was the sermon scripture for today.

The awareness of our debts and our trespasses are the awareness of our sinfulness - our equality of weakness and the fragility in human nature - and it is the awareness of our dependence on each other and on God for our livelihood. So as of today we will be attempting to say trespasses when we recite the Lord's Prayer. Today of all days, we will be quite aware and *awake* as we recite this grand gift from God.

AMEN