

ESSENTIAL PARTS TO A DISCIPLE'S PRAYER
A SERIES ON THE MEANING OF THE LORD'S PRAYER:
(3) RELATIONAL FORGIVENESS

Matthew 6:12

Jeffrey S. Carlson

March 15, 2009

PROLOGUE

C. S. Lewis said, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive."

SCRIPTURE

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. {37} And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. {38} She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. {39} Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him--that she is a sinner." {40} Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." {41} "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. {42} When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" {43} Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." {44} Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. {45} You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. {46} You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. {47} Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." {48} Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." {49} But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" {50} And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:36-50 NRSV).

"Pray then in this way:...Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:9,12 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are reluctant to address the need for forgiveness and it seems to start at a young age. Ranai Carlton writes:

During Sunday school, I was trying to teach the children that we all need God's forgiveness. After the Bible story, I asked one of the girls, "Lisa, when is a time you might need God's forgiveness?" Her blank stare prompted a response from my son. "It's okay. Lisa. You don't have to tell her." Then he turned to me and said, "We don't have to tell you our problems. You're not Oprah!"

But Jesus wants us to talk to God about our problems, especially if it is a problem about forgiveness.

1. HOW IMPORTANT IS FORGIVENESS?

How important is forgiveness?

Some years ago I was involved in a survey in which pastors were asked, "What is it that is clearly taught in Scripture but people in church are least likely to believe and practice?" The results were disconcerting. In third place was stewardship. In second place was evangelism. In first place was forgiveness. Think about that! Forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian Faith yet we are reluctant to offer it and hesitant to receive it.

Jesus seems to have been aware of this problem when he taught his disciples how to pray using what we are referring to as the Disciples' Prayer. The prayer contains six requests. All six are vitally important. But he gives special attention to one and only one of the requests: Forgiveness.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matt. 6:14-15 NRSV).

The word that is translated as "trespass" can refer to an intentional or an unintentional offence against another person. Haven't you noticed that when we feel someone has injured us we don't care if it was by accident or not? We get just as angry and assume the worst. I think this is one of the reasons why, after Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he felt he had to revisit this idea of forgiveness. It is as if he had said, "I don't think you'll have any trouble acknowledging that God is great and I don't think you'll hesitate to ask God for help, especially if you are in trouble. But the one thing you are sure to get hung up on is forgiveness. Make no mistake, if you don't offer it then you won't receive it!"

Not that forgiving others is the condition for God offering forgiveness to us. We cannot earn God's forgiveness no matter how merciful we are to others. But an unforgiving attitude

affects our ability to receive God's forgiveness. It is a question of proportion and that is why the word "debt" is used as a synonym for sin. "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

In order to understand this we need to look at Luke's account of Simon the Pharisee and the unnamed woman (Lk. 7:36-50). Jesus told them a story about two debtors: one who owed the equivalent of two months wages and the other owed the equivalent of two years wages. They could not pay and the creditor cancelled both debts. Jesus then asked, "Now which of them will love him more?" Simon gave the answer that would later indict him, "The one who had the greater debt." Simon soon discovered that Jesus was not talking about two men who owed money. Rather, he was talking about Simon and the woman. Both were in debt to God but only the woman was aware of the greatness of that debt whereas Simon had little or no awareness.

Some translations have Jesus referring to the woman and saying something like, "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven--for she loved much" (Luke 7:47 NIV). This implies that the woman was forgiven because of her love, as if she earned it. But in fact, the original makes it clear that just the opposite is meant. Her love was a response to being forgiven. And because she was so aware of how much she had been forgiven, her love was proportionately great.

2. WHY DO WE NEED FORGIVENESS?

But why do we need forgiveness?

The Disciples' Prayer presupposes the need for forgiveness. Jesus did not teach us, "Forgive us *if* we have sinned." There is no *if* about it. The Bible says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

The need for forgiveness began early in human history. I imagine that Adam and Eve told their story over and over again to their children. How God had made a beautiful world, placed them in it to enjoy but they were not content with that. They wanted to be like gods themselves. So they rejected God's authority. They rebelled against him. God said that if they did that they would die. So they did die. Immediately, in a spiritual sense and some time later in a physical sense. The relationship they had with God died. The relationship of harmony they had with nature died. The beautiful relationship they had with each other died.

In a very real sense, this story is reenacted in every generation. It has become an integral part of our existence. The traditional word for this condition is "Sin." The condition of Sin is the cause for the various manifestations of Sin in the world. War, hatred, bigotry, murder, envy, selfishness, theft, adultery and gossip are just some of the symptoms of this condition. The symptoms are not equal in their seriousness, for example, murder is more heinous than envy. But all "sins" point to the condition of Sin whereby we are estranged from our

Creator. The fact of Sin points to our need for forgiveness.

What confuses people is that the Bible uses the word “forgiveness” in different ways. For our purposes this morning I am going to describe two different kinds of forgiveness: salvation forgiveness and relational forgiveness. They are similar and the first is the basis for the second, but they do refer to two different things. (By the way, the terms “salvation forgiveness” and “relational forgiveness” are not found in the Bible. I am just using this terminology to give us a handle on the two different kinds of forgiveness.)

The basis for our salvation forgiveness is the work of Jesus Christ. If the condition of Sin has broken our relationship with God then something needs to be done to restore the relationship. The Bible refers to this kind of work as “atonement.” Atonement means a price is paid to repair a broken relationship and make it one again. At-One-ment.

Christ’s death on the Cross is sufficient to atone for the sins of everyone but is effective only for those who have faith. As the Scripture says:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8 NRSV).

If I turn from sin and place my trust in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior then the condition of Sin in my life has been dealt with once and for all and God treats me as if all instances of sin in my life have not taken place. I have experienced salvation.

Nevertheless, I still sin. I do not want to sin and with God’s help I will experience a measure of progress in this area but on this side of heaven I will still commit sins. These sins do not affect my standing with God but they do affect the quality of my relationship with God and with others. So what I need on a continuing basis is relational forgiveness. There are times when I need to seek forgiveness from God. There are times when I need to seek forgiveness from others. There are times when I need to offer forgiveness. If I do not work on relational forgiveness then my relationships suffer.

The Disciples’ Prayer is intended for those who have already experienced the gift of salvation. The request within the prayer, “Forgive...as...we...have forgiven” has to do with relational forgiveness. Mercy shown to others is evidence that we have, in fact, experienced the mercy of God.

Without relational forgiveness I will feel estranged from God and others. I will be consumed by bitterness, grieve my Heavenly Father, doubt my salvation and have a sense of unfulfilled purpose in my life. Furthermore, if I am unforgiving toward another that may or may not have an effect on that other person but it will have an effect on me! Booker T. Washington said, “I will not permit any man to narrow and degrade my soul by making me

hate him.” On the other hand, if we want to have peace of mind, the joy of the Lord, assurance of salvation and a sense of purpose then we need to forgive one another as God has forgiven us.

3. HOW DO WE PRACTICE FORGIVENESS?

How do we practice forgiveness? Paul tells us:

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13) .

Because we have received mercy we are to show mercy. On a practical level this means surrendering our “right” to retaliate. Unfortunately, human nature wants revenge.

Two little brothers, Harry and James, had finished supper and were playing until bedtime. Somehow, Harry hit James with a stick, and tears and bitter words followed. Charges and accusations were still being exchanged as mother prepared them for bed. The mother instructed, “Now, James, before you go to bed you’re going to have to forgive your brother.” James was thoughtful for a few moments, and then he replied, “Well OK, I’ll forgive him tonight, but if I don’t die before I wake up, he’d better look out in the morning!”

We feel we have the right to hurt back when someone injures us. There are many different ways we can do this.

- We can hurt back by trying to kill or maim the person. Look around the world today. Such violent revenge is all too common.
- We can hurt back through insult. Do you remember the playground jingle, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me”? Perhaps you said it as a kid, probably after someone called you a name. But the jingle is a lie. Broken bones heal after a couple of months. A stinging criticism can continue to hurt years after it was first said.
- We can hurt back by damaging a person’s reputation through gossip and rumor. This is the preferred method of retaliation in the Church. Generally, we avoid guns and choose character assassination over coffee instead.
- We can also hurt back by trying to hold something over the other person and using that to control or manipulate the person. And if they resist our control we remind them afresh of their past offence, how much they “hurt” us.
- Even trying to force someone to apologize to you is a form of retaliation! (Oh, yes, we human beings are masters at finding ways to hurt back.)

The only way to overcome this is through forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a feeling. It is a choice. Forgiveness means even though you think you have the right to hurt back, you voluntarily surrender your right to do so. You release it. In effect, you say to that other person, "I am not going to hurt you. What God or God's delegated authority may do is another matter but I will not harm you — not with my hands and not with my mouth." But real peace of mind does not come until we also stop imagining how we can hurt back.

When I say surrender, I mean surrender to God. There are times when we need stand up for ourselves. There are times to call attention to injustice. There are times when we need to flee from those who are hurting us. But to surrender to God means relinquishing a desire for personal vengeance. Vengeance is God's business and not ours.

Forgiveness is not contrary to justice. If you cooperate with authorities in a robbery case where you were the victim then you are supporting the administration of justice. This is different from how you regard the person who robbed you. You can forgive that person, that is, you can give up all notion of taking personal revenge. You leave it up to God or to the impartial human authorities to whom God has given the responsibility for justice. It is not our job to retaliate! Our job is to forgive as we have been forgiven.

CONCLUSION

There is a Native American tale about two wolves. A Grandfather said to his grandson, who came to him with anger at a friend who had done him an injustice.... "Let me tell you a story. I too, at times, have felt great hate for those who have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do. But hate wears you down, and does not hurt your enemy. It's like taking poison and wishing your enemy would die. "I have struggled with these feelings many times. "It is as if there are two wolves inside me; one is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all around him and does not take offense when no offense was intended. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way. But...the other wolf... ah! The littlest thing will send him into a fit of temper. He fights everyone, all of the time, for no reason. He cannot think because his anger and hate are so great. It is helpless anger, for his anger will change nothing. "Sometimes it is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them try to dominate my spirit." The boy looked intently into his Grandfather's eyes and asked, "Which one wins, Grandfather?" The Grandfather smiled and quietly said, "The one I feed."