

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who takes away the sins of the world, Our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

This is our last week in this series on the Lord's Prayer. I hope you've enjoyed hearing more about this great prayer as I have had reading, learning, and preaching about it. As short and sweet as it is, Jesus sure did pack an awful lot into these few words. Today's topic is the forgiveness petition, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." That's the line we say week after week. Matthew's Jesus also goes on to emphasize the importance of forgiveness by adding, "<sup>14</sup>For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; <sup>15</sup>but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." One of my seminary professors used to say Matthew was the most Catholic of the Gospels because of those two verses. Matthew wants us to know we must forgive in order to receive God's forgiveness. This tidbit is added only in Matthew, so most Lutherans tend to shy away from talking about it. We prefer our forgiveness free of any effort or work on our part, thank you very much... Most of the commentaries just gloss over those two verses without saying much.

This isn't the only place in the Bible where Jesus addresses forgiveness. When Jesus returned to appear before his disciples who were locked inside the upper room on that first Easter, He breathed on them and gave them the Holy

Spirit. He told them if they forgave the sins of any, they were forgiven. If they retained the sins of any, they were retained. In Catechism class we call this the Office of the Keys, because the power to forgive or not seems to have influence over what happens when the great judgment day finally arrives.

So, if forgiveness is that important, we should all know exactly what forgiveness is. My guess is many Christians around the world today would be hard pressed to explain forgiveness to someone who had never heard of the word. I could be wrong, but my guess is most people think forgiveness works like this... Someone is offended or hurt in some way by another person. In order for forgiveness to happen the one who perpetrated the offence must apologize to the victim. They have to say they're sorry. At which time the victim says something like, "It's ok." That's the common view of forgiveness. The person who is in the wrong must repent and seek forgiveness from the person who was wronged. We place so much emphasis on apologizing I'm afraid we've strayed from the mark. Seeking forgiveness and apologizing aren't all that Biblical.

So, then what can we say about forgiveness? I would say first a couple of things it is not. Forgiveness isn't a feeling. It's not an emotion. God requires us to forgive our sisters and brothers whether we feel like it or not. I've never found anything in the Bible that talks about feeling of forgiveness. I do recall Saint Paul, in his letter to the Ephesian Church saying, "forgive one another just as God, for

Christ's sake, has forgiven us." (Eph 4:33) From that verse we know our forgiveness should be modeled after God's forgiveness. There are plenty of examples in the Bible of God's forgiveness. It starts with a declaration of forgiveness. In the Old Testament book of Isaiah God says, "I will not remember your sins." Isn't that great! God doesn't remember our sins...

Wait, isn't that just like my earlier scenario? Isn't that the Godly equivalent of saying it's ok, just forget about it? Well, not exactly... Not remembering is not the same thing as forgetting about it. God is omniscient, which means all knowing. God can't forget... God can however choose to not bring it up. When we choose to not remember we relinquish our right to hold the offence against the other person. When God says he will not remember our sins, he has made a promise that our offence will not be brought up again, ever. Period!

To get a better idea of what this thing called forgiveness is all about I looked at other places where Jesus talked about forgiveness. I give you fair warning right here, these teachings of Jesus are hard to take and most of us don't follow what Jesus proscribes. Here's one of the principal teaching of Jesus on forgiveness. "Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. <sup>4</sup> And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive." (Luke 17:3-4) First off, notice Jesus says if someone sins against you

rebuke him. He doesn't say go off and sulk in your corner and have a pity party. He also doesn't say we should go around telling all our friends what so and so did. If someone comes along and stomps on your toe you go directly to them and say, "Hey, look what you did to my toe." There's no going behind anyone's back or unfriending them on FaceBook. You simply go to that person and let them know they hurt you. I say that's a hard teaching because we normally think the person who was in the wrong is the one who is obligated to return to the offended person to seek forgiveness. That's simply not what Jesus says here. The innocent victim is obligated to chase down the offender and talk to them. Show them your trampled toes. There are other places in the Bible that speak about the sinner repenting. I believe God wants us to understand forgiveness from both sides. We often forget about this part of the equation where the one with sore toes is obligated to go to the one who stepped on them and talk it out. In so many cases the offender doesn't even know they offended you. You stay angry and hold a grudge thinking you're hurting them in some way. The truth is the only one you hurt by withholding forgiveness is you. Several of us read the book called Keep It Shut a couple of years ago. In that book Karen Ehman says withholding forgiveness is like drinking a tiny amount of poison every day and expecting the other person to get sick.

So, as if that isn't hard enough, when we go to the one who stomped on our toes and he or she says they are sorry, then we must forgive. Then, to make matters worse, if they come back 5 minutes later and stomp on them again, and repent again, you must forgive. Jesus used a number which in ancient times meant "a lot" when he said you must forgive as many as 7 times in one day for the same thing. With some people you'd spend all day just rebuking, listening to apologies, and forgiving... When the disciples heard Jesus say this they responded, "Lord increase our faith!" I can forgive you stepping on my toes the first time fairly easily. Maybe even the second time, but hey, everyone knows three strikes and you're out! After that I just don't feel like I'm in a very forgiving mood... Imagine how God must feel about us and our constant natural state of sin. Yet God promises He will not remember any of them. Forgiveness isn't about feelings, it's a decision and a promise. You can make a decision and a promise to do something, even if you don't feel like it. Here's what I mean. Let's say I promise PJ I'll take her out to Red Lobster for our Anniversary dinner. I don't like Red Lobster, but I know that's one of her favorite places to eat. See, I made a promise to take her to the restaurant she likes even though I don't care for it. Then suppose on the week of our anniversary I have a really bad week. I really don't feel like going out to eat, much less to a place I don't like. Guess what, I still take her out to Red Lobster and I pretend to like it. Have you ever pretended to like something

because you didn't want to hurt the other person's feelings and then they think you really like it? The next thing you know you're always eating at Red Lobster and they think it's your favorite place... Anyway, my point is you can make promises and decisions and even keep them despite the fact that you don't feel like it.

Forgiveness is a broad and deep subject. There are scads of book and commentaries attempting to explain it. I've only scratched the surface. Forgiveness is hard. I actually believe forgiveness is a supernatural act. That's why the first thing the disciples said after Jesus teaching was Lord increase our faith. I think forgiveness is about faith. When Jesus began his earthly ministry, he went around Galilee telling everyone the "Good News". He said Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near!" How can the call to repent be "good news?" It's good news because we already have God's promise that he will remember our sins no more.

May we all learn to forgive the way God forgives us. If we could only do that one thing, how much better our world could be. Along with Jesus' disciples we pray, God increase our faith so we can forgive the way you forgive! Amen.