

Forgive us our sins

Series: Teach us to Pray

Date: 24 May 2020, 6th Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's Online

Texts: Matthew 18:21-35

When I was a teenager I remember seeing my mum upset one day. I asked her, "What's wrong?" She said, "I've just heard that our friend Graham and his two boys were killed." It was a horrible story. Graham Staines was a missionary in India who had given his life to care for people with leprosy. One night he was visiting a village and had gone to sleep in their jeep with his sons, who were 6 and 10. A mob, stirred up by Hindu extremists, surrounded the jeep and set it alight. Graham and his sons perished. The baseless reason for this horrific action was that Staines was supposedly forcing people to convert to Christianity. What was incredible was that when Graham's wife Gladys was interviewed the next day she said, she forgave those who were responsible for the death of her husband and sons.

Earlier this year Australia was sickened at the deaths of the three Abdullah children and their cousin, mown down by a drunk driver. We were perhaps more shocked by the words of their mother Leila. She told reporters, "I think in my heart to forgive him ... I'm not going to hate him, because this is not who we are, [as Christians]."

Today we're looking at the prayer, *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*. Of all the petitions in the Lord's Prayer, this is perhaps the most emotionally charged. In our culture today where we rightly focus on victims, the idea of forgiveness seems outrageous. We don't want forgiveness. We want justice. Forgiveness seems immoral. Doesn't forgiveness excuse people for doing wicked things? I'm not going to answer every question, but I hope I can offer some wisdom from God's word as we grapple with forgiveness.

The Staines and Abdullah stories make us feel the weight of forgiveness. And they raise the question for us, how could they do it? As a pastor I've found again and again when forgiveness is touched on in a sermon someone wants to talk to me. What spills out is a story of a grievous wound. "I know I'm meant to forgive. But I don't think I can." Anyone who thinks forgiveness is a simple matter has not experienced something serious to forgive. Or not sat with those who have. And yet Gladys and Leila's forgiveness breathes life and hope in the wreckage of pain and death.

One of the sessions I most enjoy when I do marriage preparation with couples is the session on giving and receiving forgiveness. I tell them that this is the most powerful tool in their belt. In the session we break down what forgiveness involves. It is not saying everything is fine. On the contrary forgiveness names what was done as wrong. It names how this has wounded me and how I feel as a result. In doing so it

lays down an expectation that the guilty party will not do the same thing again. In this sense forgiveness is a form of judgment because it exposes and condemns the wrong. But forgiveness does not stop there. Forgiveness says I will let go of my right to get even. I will let go of my feelings of anger and bitterness and resentment towards you. I will not demand that you work to get back into my good books. I will extend my hand for relationship.

Of course for a relationship to work, forgiveness must be met with change from the guilty party. The old fashioned Christian terms of confession and repentance still capture this the best. When I confess, I take responsibility for what I've done. I acknowledge that it was wrong. I acknowledge the hurt that I've caused. I say I'm sorry. In repentance I commit to change, to not do what I've done again. Only when I've confessed and repented can I ask for forgiveness. And I can only ask. I cannot demand. Forgiveness is always a gift. I receive it by faith. It doesn't work with the accountant's ledger weighing our good and bad deeds. It's a gift when we forgive others. It's a gift when God forgives us.

Where the hand of forgiveness is met with the hand of repentance then you have the embrace of reconciliation. Without either hand the circle isn't joined. The hand of forgiveness can be refused. The hand of repentance can be met with a cold heart.

I always ask couples, "Where does the pain of the wound go in forgiveness?" Our desire for justice can all too easily spill over into revenge, where we revisit the pain done to us back onto the one who did wrong - and with interest. But when you forgive, you refuse to let evil win this second victory. Instead you bear the pain. And you do so for the sake of the other person, to open the possibility for the relationship to heal. This is of course the great challenge of forgiveness. The one who forgives bears the cost of that forgiveness. Where do we find the resources to bear that cost?

At this point I tell couples that this is the secret power of the Christian faith. Because at the centre of the Christian faith stands the cross of Christ. In Christ's suffering and death we see God himself absorbing the pain of our wrongs against him. In the cross we see the cost of our forgiveness.

Like all forgiveness, the cross exposes the wrong that we have done and names us as guilty. Oh yes in your honest moments you know the things you've done that you're ashamed of. But Jesus' diagnosis is that our actions are the symptoms of a diseased heart. It's out of hearts that evil thoughts come - sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.¹ The essence of the cross is the exchange. Christ dies for us, in our place, that we might be

¹ Mark 7.21-22

forgiven. And that is because the essence of our problem is an exchange - we seek to take the place of God. It's the "i" in the centre of sin. It's like the servant in Jesus' parable who didn't see the depth of the king's generosity, and instead sought to play the tyrant over his fellow servant.

We may not feel the seriousness of our sin. But the agony of the cross shows just how much pain that sin causes God. Jesus willingly bore that cost of our forgiveness because he loves us, he loves you, and would not be separated from you. Every time we pray *forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us* it's an opportunity for us to receive God's forgiveness.

When you've been deeply wounded it can feel like it's impossible to forgive. Does God only forgive us if we forgive others? No. We do not earn his forgiveness by own. In Romans St Paul writes, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." God's forgiveness comes before and is deeper and wider than all our halting attempts at forgiveness. His forgiveness is an infinite well we can draw from when struggle to forgive others. We're called to forgive, because God has forgiven us. We pray this prayer because we need God's help to forgive. Of ourselves we don't have the spiritual resources to forgive others who wound us deeply. Forgiveness is always a gift. It's something we learn. Sometimes it can take time, even years. And that's ok. We need Christ to cradle us to his breast and tend our wounded soul. Sometimes we need to ask God for grace to forgive others as he forgives us. Theologian Miroslav Volf writes,

All our forgiving is inescapably incomplete. That's why it's so crucial to see our forgiving not simply as our own act, but as participation in God's forgiving. Our forgiving is faulty; God's is faultless. Our forgiving is provisional; God's is final. We forgive tenuously and tentatively; God forgives unhesitatingly and definitively. ... our forgiveness is only possible as an echo of God's.²

In the Lord's prayer we pray for God to meet our needs. Forgiveness is my greatest need and your greatest need. Jesus's hands are outstretched to forgive you. The question is how will you respond to his forgiveness? We've seen the way to respond to forgiveness - confession and repentance. Saying sorry for trying to be your own master. Committing to follow Christ as your king. Asking for him to forgive you. As you grasp his hand of forgiveness in faith he will enfold you in his reconciling embrace.

² Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, Zondervan 2006: 220