

Abide with Us – Part 1

Matthew 6:9-18

1. Hypocrisy.

- Giving to the poor.

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Abide With Us¹

Matthew 6:9-18

The girl was a high school student in my youth group years ago; a leader in the group, always positive and full of faith, a straight A student who had a great relationship with her parents. All this despite the fact that she had lived the last twelve years of her life in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the chest down. When she was five years old, she was playing with her friends in their front yard when a drunk driver, speeding down their street, jumped the curb and ran through her yard, hitting her and dragging her under the car down the block. She'd had over a dozen surgeries, going in numerous times to place rods in her back, replacing them as she outgrew them – or after she broke them by doing more physical activities than her doctors said she should. Other than her physical limitations, though, you'd never know all this. She was always positive. But here she was, sitting in my office in tears, wondering what was happening to her. She said for some unknown reason she was angry all the time. Her grades had dropped. She fought with her mother. She yelled at the kids in the mall who stared at her – far different than what she usually did – usually she would give them rides.

As we talked, I asked questions trying to figure out when and where things had changed, so perhaps we could find out why. Finally, she was able to approximate the time this had begun. I asked her if anything had changed in her life around that time. After some thought and prayer together, she remembered that a friend of hers heard that the drunk driver who had hit her all those years ago, *might* be getting out of prison and *might* move back in the area. It was just a rumor. But as her eyes widened at the realization, she dropped her head and began weeping...and then raised her head as her eyes flashed with anger. She began to yell about that man, cussing and cursing him. None of this had been in her conscious thought before. When the emotional storm started to subside, we explored the pain and anger that had been buried so skillfully by that five-year-old girl – never to surface until now. Over the days and weeks ahead, we talked, prayed, cried, and figured out a way to get her to the place of forgiveness – what it meant, and what it didn't mean. And her life began to veer back toward health.

Forgiveness is a difficult topic to talk about in our world.

We live in a culture that doesn't very often forgive, and when we do, we tend to make non-apology apologies. I used to work for a person that sometimes could be difficult, and when I mustered up the nerve to tell him what he was doing and how I felt because of it, his response was, "I'm sorry you feel that way," as if to say, "It's your fault that you think you have been hurt." When we aren't shifting blame, we'll say things like, "I didn't mean to hurt you," or even, "It was just a joke." But that kind of halfhearted attempt to make amends

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cheapens forgiveness and, if you think about it, places a significant amount of blame on the one who has been wronged without appropriate accountability for the person who did wrong.

And then also, we sometimes try to force someone to forgive in ways that are not helpful or even harmful. This can happen a lot in church contexts when we sometimes—with the best of intentions—tell victims of abuse that they must forgive in order to move forward.

Although we might mean well, and even though it's true that forgiveness liberates us, we don't get to decide for someone else when they should forgive. By trying to force someone to forgive the person who harmed them, it ends up making the person who has been hurt feel like it's their fault for not forgiving – all while the offender is not held accountable.

So we are going to look at a passage today that might shed some light on this issue of forgiveness; what it is, what it isn't, and what it can do. Today we start a series that will take us to Easter Sunday, through this season that we call "Lent." Lent is a season in the Christian year that helps Christians remember, and identify with, Jesus' fasting in the wilderness for forty days, and his journey to the cross for us. To help us be of one heart and mind on this journey, we are going through this daily devotional book, that we actually started last Wednesday with our Lenten service. This is something that many, many Nazarene Churches around the world are going through as well, so we are all sharing in the daily readings and messages. If you haven't picked up a book, you can purchase them for \$10 at the Welcome Center in the foyer.

Each Sunday's sermons will coincide with reading for that Sunday.

So let's start by seeing the passage for today, as a part of Jesus' sermon on the Mount from Matthew 6. Would you be willing to honor God's Word by standing with me as I read it for us? Thank you. Standing also kind of helps focus our minds on what we are hearing. This starts with Jesus' instructions on prayer:

This, then, is how you should pray:

"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.'

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it

will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.
(Matthew 6:9-18, niv)

May God bless the reading of his Word to our hearts! Thank you for standing.

The ideas of forgiveness that we talked about earlier, and then Jesus' teaching on this, really make a message like this difficult and tricky, because the idea of forgiveness carries a lot of baggage. Forgiveness is hard and confusing and misunderstood, especially for those who have been abused and oppressed. Making it harder, we can't just gloss over or ignore verse 15 where Jesus said, "But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." It would be easier, on this first Sunday in the season of Lent, to skip past Jesus's words of forgiveness altogether, and instead focus on prayer or fasting. After all Lent is traditionally the season for prayer and fasting! But Lent is also a season of confession and repentance, which is what we focused on in our service last Wednesday night. And tied up in the midst of all of those things is a focus on forgiveness.

A big part of what Christians practice this season of lent is that we confront the hard things about our lives instead of avoiding them—our sin, our brokenness, our humanity, even our own mortality. So instead of glossing over it or repeating shallow platitudes about the need to forgive, we need to spend some time today confronting and wrestling with this difficult topic.

Now, the first thing Jesus is dealing with is our tendency toward...

1. Hypocrisy.

When you are reading or studying Scripture, context is always very, very important, and the context for Matthew 6 is a call against the hypocrisy of the time specifically surrounding the ways people gave to the poor (vv. 1–4), prayed (vv. 5–13), and fasted (vv. 16–18). Let's quickly look at those.

- giving to the poor

...was a common practice at the time. Jewish people gave at the synagogue, and pagans gave at their own temples. Giving to the poor very often turned into a way to receive public recognition and praise from others, so giving became less about an outpouring of love and compassion and more about attention, power, and social capital. At times, giving was also viewed as *quid pro quo* (means "something for something"). Giving was a way to manipulate the gods into doing something for the giver in return.

- praying

...was also a common practice. Jewish people prayed in the synagogues, and pagans prayed on street corners and in temples. In both cases, many times people were praying to be seen and approved by others. In Luke 18 Jesus tells a story about the difference between praying publicly to show off, and praying privately only to God. In that story the Pharisee prays

loudly with arrogance and thanks God he is not like the sinner. The tax collector, in contrast, prays humbly, alone, and with a contrite heart. Pagans prayed long, flowery prayers, thinking the precise, intellectual qualities of their prayers would get them what they wanted.

- fasting

...was a third common practice. Jewish people fasted according to their law, and pagans fasted in order to gain favor with their gods. It was popular for anyone who fasted in this time period to make themselves look really sad, dirty, and destitute so everyone would know they were being pious and devout by fasting. They had ways of marking their faces and clothes to make people think they were really suffering, all so they could get more public approval.

So Jesus' advice is that we *should* give and pray and fast, but not for attention or accolades. Jesus said instead to do these things privately instead of publicly in order to avoid hypocrisy.

So, Jesus said, when you give, do it so anonymously so your left hand doesn't even know what your right hand is doing. Don't make announcements about your giving or brag about it. It's impossible to get attention if others don't know what you are doing.

Then Jesus says, when you do pray, do it privately and simply. God doesn't need to be flattered. God doesn't need to be placated but wants us to come to him sincerely with our needs and concerns and requests.

Finally, Jesus said, when you fast, go about your normal routines so it's not obvious you are fasting. Fasting is about spiritual growth, not about being in the spotlight. We fast for a time to help us focus more intently on Jesus and to become more like him. If no one but you knows you are fasting, your motivation for fasting will change.

So now let's get to this issue of...

2. Forgiveness

Since Jesus' statement about forgiving others is placed in the middle of this passage, right after his prayer instruction and right before his fasting instruction, that means his teaching on forgiveness fits into the larger theme of hypocrisy. He wants to make sure we are genuine and authentic when it comes to forgiving others, and not being hypocritical about it.

There are two kinds of forgiveness Jesus expresses concern about: forgiving economic debt and forgiving sins.

In Matthew 18:21–35, Jesus tells the ultimate story about hypocrisy in relation to economic debt; it's the parable of the unforgiving servant who has this huge debt (Jesus says it amounts to about 150,000 years' worth of salary!) Too great for the man to ever pay back, but the king graciously forgives the man of the entire debt and releases him from debtor's prison. The forgiven man marches right out and up to a friend who owed him a couple of months of salary, and he grabs him by the neck and throttles him, demanding his money.

He's been forgiven this astronomical debt and then turns around and refuses to forgive a small debt. Got it? This type of forgiveness gets its meaning in monetary debt.

When we recite the Lord's Prayer, sometimes we say, "forgive us our trespasses," but other translations also say what? "Forgive us our debts." Debt is an economic concept.

Wrapped up in this is the practice of the year of Jubilee, which the Jews were commanded to practice. Jubilee happened after 49 years. During the 50th year, Jewish slaves were to be set free, land returned to its original owner, and they were supposed to forgive all financial debt. God clearly commanded them to do this. By the way, there is *no* evidence that the Israelites *ever* obeyed this command. But imagine that! Those of us who sit under the weight of debt can understand the freedom that might come from having those debts canceled before we've paid them in full. Imagine what kind of freedom having a debt canceled opens up for individuals and for families!

So, the Lord's Prayer specifically could easily be referring to economic or financial debt, but Jesus is also concerned with the forgiveness of sins.

God forgives us.

We forgive others.

The concept seems simple, and the parable of the unforgiving servant can apply here too—if we are forgiven of much by God, then we are obligated to forgive much of others. And yes, forgiveness *is* important! Otherwise, we literally block God's ability to forgive us.

But let me just take a moment to say something: sometimes these verses are misused to compel forgiveness from survivors of abuse. I've counseled people over the years who, at some point in their Christian lives, they've had pastors or other Christians shame them into feeling like they must forgive their abuser, especially if they want their abuser to get saved – as if the abuser's salvation depends on them. Now, I'm not saying we shouldn't forgive – I'll talk about that in a minute – but none of us are in a position to demand when someone should forgive – especially someone who has been abused.

When we look at the passage we read earlier and put it alongside the parable of the unforgiving servant, we see that forgiveness is supposed to be *the response of those who have been forgiven*. This is not about insisting or shaming the victim of abuse or a wronged party in this parable to forgive the one who wronged them. The servant in the story wasn't forgiving the King. The point is that the servant is expected to show the same mercy to others that he was shown.

We really do need to consider the power dynamics. When someone owes us money, that puts the person who lent the money in the position of power. The one in power is the one with the ability to cancel the debt. In cases of abuser and abused, the person who is often expected to forgive—the abused—is the one *without* the power, an idea that is in direct contradiction to this story about the unforgiving servant, which focuses on the person *with* the power as having the responsibility to forgive, or discharge, the debt. The focus is not on the one who owes the money to "forgive" their lender for keeping them in debt. Please understand that because it's very important.

Remember that the overarching message of the Matthew 6 text is about hypocrisy, not about giving to the poor, praying, forgiving, or fasting in and of themselves. The context of the passage is super important, and it is extremely harmful to our faith and the faith of others if we don't understand that. Okay?

Now, having said that, let's talk about the importance of forgiveness. There are *numerous* studies that have been done on the psychological benefits of forgiveness. People who choose to forgive the perpetrators of the horrible crimes committed against themselves or loved ones tend to be psychologically healthier on average. Holding onto pain and refusing to forgive can absolutely be damaging, and withholding forgiveness rarely hurts the offending party. So if you've been hurt by someone, forgiving them is as much about YOU and your healing, if not more than the offender.

Let me just give you some quick counsel about forgiveness if you've been hurt and you find yourself wanting to be able to forgive an offender. First, every-one has their own journey and timetable for forgiveness, and some will take longer to work through their trauma than others. The only wrong thing is to refuse to go on the journey. You might start with the simple prayer, "Lord, I don't want to forgive so and so. But I know there is freedom and healing if I do, so please help me get there." That's all you need! God will work gently with you, on your own timeline.

How do you know when you've forgiven someone? Well, first, understand that forgiveness and trust are two different things. Just because you forgave someone doesn't mean you should trust them. Forgiveness is free, trust is earned. Forgiveness is free, trust is earned. Forgiveness doesn't mean you should even have a goal of trusting the offender. Now, God may lead you to reconciliation and rebuilt trust, but it takes BOTH parties to be willing to submit to the process for trust to be rebuilt. Otherwise, it can't and won't. You can't trust your offender without your offender's cooperation and willingness to earn it back.

And by the way, forgiveness is NOT forgetting. We are not capable of forgetting things like that – only God seems to be able to do that when he says that he won't remember our sins (Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrews 8:12).

The only thing I can say is that you'll know you've forgiven the person when you genuinely do not wish them any harm.

Forgiveness shouldn't be something we manipulate or pressure people into, but at the same time, forgiveness *is* beneficial to those who forgive. Those might seem like opposite thoughts, but we can hold both of these truths in tension. God wants us to be healthy and happy. God does not desire us to be harmed physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally, or sexually. So yes, forgiveness should be both preached and practiced, but it should not be coerced, nor should it be used as an excuse for offenders to keep sinning, nor should it be used as a reason to stay in toxic, harmful relationships without healthy boundaries.

Jesus' focus on forgiveness in verses 14–15 is not meant to be a threat we use against others. It is not about pointing out other people's need to forgive but *is* instead about examining our own need to forgive.

This season of Lent *is* a time for us to reflect collectively on our own sins, *not* to point out the sins of others.

That's exactly why the very next chapter in Matthew warns us against judging others – it's yet another warning against hypocrisy and against pressuring others in unhealthy and damaging ways. Our focus is not to be the lack of forgiveness of others; our focus should only be our own lack of forgiveness toward others. And that's the final point of this passage...

3. Self-Examination

What would happen if we considered the debts that other people owe us in our own lives in light of this passage we've read? Sometimes relationships are ruined over things as simple as \$20 debts. How would forgiving these debts create freedom – for both ourselves and for others?

Are there sins that have been done to us that we are holding onto? Whether we are waiting for an apology or something greater, what is being robbed from us in the waiting? What can we release in order to find greater freedom?

Where are we hypocritically telling others they should forgive? Or seeking applause for our displays of forgiveness? What would it look like to forgive in secret, just like we are asked to pray and give in secret?

There was one time that a pastor colleague of mine asked to meet with me, so I met him in his office. As I walked in, he announced that he had forgiven me. I had no idea what I had done to him that needed to be forgiven. So I said, "Well, thank you, I guess, but can you tell me what I did? Because I certainly didn't mean to do anything to you." He said, "There's no point in bringing it up – I've forgiven you." I said, "But what did I do?" He said, "I've forgiven you – it's as if it never happened." He was proud of his magnanimity toward me, and sure wanted me to be impressed with that. But it felt like his forgiveness was a way to have more power over me.

Are there times when we bullied, coerced, or harassed others in unhealthy ways to forgive? How can we make these situations right? How can we create a safer environment for those who have been victims?

Are there times when we have been bullied, coerced, or harassed into unhealthy forms of forgiveness? Remember that God does not want us to be harmed. Is there an action we need to take to be free of that and to live life more abundantly?

Where do we recognize that we have been the one who has sinned and need to seek forgiveness? What does a true apology look like? What does it look like to seek forgiveness while respecting the healthy boundaries of others?

Forgiveness is deeper than rote apologies. It's a releasing of something we feel we are owed, sometimes in a literal sense. When we pray the forgiveness part of the Lord's Prayer, we are praying into existence a kingdom where we are equals who do not hold things over others.

In Lent we confront the hard truth that we are called to forgive what is owed to us, to release the pain of our wounds. But we also know that we live in a messy world where

some wrongs are unspeakable. We know that God desires good for us and not harm, so we acknowledge that forgiveness doesn't mean we return to the way things were.

In Lent, we also confront the hard truth that often we are hypocrites who seek praise even in the ways we forgive, and who find it easier to point out the sin of others than to examine our own hearts. So we confess, we repent, and we seek a different way. As we do this hard work of forgiving, of laying down our hypocrisies, and of holding in tension challenging truths, we meet a God who is slow to anger and quick to forgive. And according to God's Word, Christ is faithful and just to forgive us (1 John 1:9).

Prayer

Pastor Casey:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Colossians 3:12-14, niv)