

# Forgiven So I Can Forgive

Matthew 6:9-15

## Intro

When we look at Matthew 6:9-15 we often call this passage of the Sermon on the Mount “*The Lord's Prayer*.” But that's not the best name for it. If you really wanted to find the prayer of our Lord Jesus you'd need to go to John 17. The prayer in John 17 is the prayer of our Lord just before He gave Himself as an offering for our sins. If any prayer deserved to be called “*The Lord's Prayer*”, it would be that one.

A better and more accurate name for the prayer in Matthew 6, however, would be “The Disciples' Prayer”; because it's a prayer meant to be prayed by Jesus' followers. It's not a prayer that Jesus Himself would need to pray. After all, He is the sinless Son of God; and would never need to ask the Father to forgive His debts, or ask Him not to lead Him into temptation in the way that we would. Instead, this is a prayer that He is offering to His disciples and followers as an example of what is to characterize their own prayer. It is the model prayer of a follower of Jesus.

I'm not going to preach on the whole prayer that the Lord taught us but I'm going to focus on one element of the prayer. It is found in verse 12 and verses 14 to 15. The theme is on “Forgiveness.”

## WHAT FORGIVENESS IS

**Verse 12, “*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*”**

In other words what Jesus is teaching us in prayer is this: “*Father, forgive us to the same degree that we forgive others.*”

Here, Jesus teaches us two important things we need to acknowledge in our prayers whenever we have been wronged. The first is that we ourselves have wronged God often. We are certainly unworthy of His forgiveness; and yet, He graciously pardons us whenever we confess our sins and repent. And the second thing is that we ourselves would therefore be wrong to not forgive others when they have done wrong against us.

## **What is Forgiveness?**

What is forgiveness? What does it look like?

Let me begin with a definition of forgiveness from the Puritan writer of Thomas Watson about 330 years ago. He is commenting on this passage and he asks, “*When do we forgive others?*”

His answer: “*When we strive against all thoughts of revenge; when we will not do our enemies mischief, but wish well to them, grieve at their calamities, pray for them, seek reconciliation with them, and show ourselves ready on all occasions to relieve them*” (Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*, page 581).

I love Thomas Watson's definition because it's very biblical.

- Resisting revenge. Romans 12:19, “*Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord.*”
- Don't seek to do them mischief. 1 Thessalonians 5:15, “*See that no one repays another with evil for evil.*”
- Wish them well. Luke 6:28, “*Bless those who curse you.*”
- Grieve at their calamities. Proverbs 24:17, “*Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles.*”
- Pray for them. Matthew 5:44, “*But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.*”

- Seek reconciliation with them. Romans 12:18, *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”*
- Be always willing to come to their relief. Exodus 23:4, *“If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him.”*

All these point to a forgiving heart. The heart is very important because Jesus said in Matthew 18:35 *“...unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”*

**Verses 14-15**, *“14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”*

If we harbour unforgiveness in our hearts toward one another, God Himself will withhold forgiveness from us.

### Illustration

In his book "What's so Amazing about Grace," Philip Yancey tells a story about a man and wife who one night had an argument about how supper was cooked; it was so intense that night they slept in separate rooms. Neither approached the other to say, "I'm sorry" or to offer forgiveness and they remained in separate rooms years after the argument. Each night they would go to bed hoping that the other would approach them with an apology or forgiveness, but neither did. How miserable and oppressive that home must have been!

God's forgiveness does not wait for repentance but it initiates and calls out repentance by offering forgiveness.

This is why some people have great difficulty forgiving people. Either they hate confrontation and don't want to confront someone with their sin, so instead they stew in their unforgiveness and they do not want to do the hard work of taking the first step toward forgiveness.

### **Unforgiveness is not Healthy**

Did you know that medical science has proven that carrying grudges is bad for a person's health? It raises the levels of stress hormones and leads to inflammation which in turn leads to heart disease, stroke, and cancer – the leading killers. Forgiving and being free of resentment is also health to the body.

### **Forgiveness is hard**

It's not easy to give up our right to be hurt, to be angry and to get back, to hate the other for what they have done. You may have had terrible things done to you by someone you loved and trusted, and they hurt you and broke your trust. You may have been emotionally wounded because of someone's actions.

The Bible tells us of the story of Joseph whose ten brothers first planned to kill him but they had a change of heart and sold him as a slave to the Egyptian slave market. Joseph went from slavery to prison after being falsely accused. Then after prison he was promoted to Pharaoh's court, and finally to being in charge of all Egypt second only to Pharaoh himself.

When famine drove his brothers to Egypt Joseph had them in the palm of his hand. He plays with them for awhile to see if they are still evil, but they are really more pathetic than evil. Just before he reveals himself to them in order to forgive them, we are told that he wept so loudly that the whole palace heard it. We are not told why he wept, but I imagine it was because what he was about to do was hard, and painful. By society's standards he had the right and the power to kill them, but instead he embraces them, but it is not easy, it is hard.

It is not easy to forgive, but God in his grace gives us the power to do it. We are able to forgive because God is in charge.

Joseph says to his brothers: *“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives”* (Genesis 50:20).

We are also able to forgive because God takes even the things that were meant to hurt us and he uses them for good if we allow him. The Bible says, *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”* (Romans 8:28).

### **Forgiveness is an act of faith**

I like what Philip Yancey said, *“...forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God’s hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy.”* (Philip Yancey, *What’s Amazing about Grace?* pg. 93)

Forgiveness is an act of faith, because we are saying, “if there is any punishment that is needed, or any giving of mercy, God will look after it just fine.”

Paul says in Romans 12:19-21 *“Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

## **WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT**

### **1. Forgiveness is Not the Absence of Anger at Sin**

Forgiveness is not the absence of anger at sin. It is not feeling good about what was bad.

There was a pastor who told the story about a woman in his church who, he noticed after he shortly came to the church, never took communion. He probed and found that 15 years earlier she had been separated from her husband because he repeatedly beat her and sexually abused their children. She said that every time she came to communion she would remember what he had done and felt so angry at what it cost her children that she felt unworthy to take communion.

The pastor told her, *“You are not expected to feel good about what happened. Anger against sin and its horrible consequences is fitting up to a point. But you don't need to hold on to that in a vindictive way that desires harm for your husband. You can hand it over to the Lord who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23) again and again, and pray for the transformation of your husband. Forgiveness is not feeling good about horrible things.”* And he encouraged her to forgive him in this way and to take communion as she handed her anger over to God and prayed for her husband.

You see, the Bible says *“In your anger do not sin”* (Ephesians 4:26). That means you can have righteous anger but do not be bitter and resentful in anger.

### **2. Forgiveness is Not the Absence of Serious Consequences for Sin**

Forgiveness is not the absence of serious consequences for sin.

In other words, sending a person to jail does not mean you are unforgiving to that person. There is a pastor who had the difficulty of putting two of his members in prison for sexual misconduct. Can you imagine the stress on that congregation as they come to terms with what forgiveness is! Scripture warns us; *“Be sure your sin will find you out”* (Numbers 32:23). Also in Galatians 6:7 says, *“A man reaps what he sows.”*

### **Psalm 99:8**

Psalm 99:8 sums it up like this: *“O Lord our God, you answered them; you were to Israel a forgiving God, though you punished their misdeeds.”*

So forgiveness is not the absence of serious consequences for sin.

### **3. Forgiveness of an Unrepentant Person is Most Difficult**

Forgiveness of an unrepentant person doesn't look the same as forgiveness of a repentant person. In fact I am not sure that in the Bible the term forgiveness is ever applied to an unrepentant person.

Jesus said in Luke 17:3–4, *“So watch yourselves. ‘If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”* So there's a sense in which full forgiveness is only possible in response to repentance.

But even when a person does not repent (cf. Matthew 18:17), we are commanded to love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us. In Luke 6:27-28 Jesus teaches this truth, *“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”*

The difference is that when a person who wronged us does not repent with contrition and confession and conversion (turning from sin), that person cuts off the full work of forgiveness. We can lay down our ill will; we can hand over our anger to God; we can seek to do that person good; but we cannot go on to reconciliation or restoration until the person truly repents and asks for forgiveness.

I like what Thomas Watson said: *“We are not bound to trust an enemy; but we are bound to forgive him”* (*Body of Divinity*, pg. 581).

You can actually look someone in the face and say: I forgive you, but I have a hard time trusting you. That is what the woman whose husband abused her children had to say.

### **Conclusion**

I would like to share with you a powerful story about a woman whose name was 66730, or at least that was the name she went by. Her father and sister died in a German Concentration camp. Her freedom, her dignity, her humanity had been stripped away by those who imprisoned her and yet she survived. They had robbed her of everything she ever possessed but they couldn't rob her of the one who possessed her, Jesus her Lord and Saviour.

She saw every day at the concentration camp in Ravensbruck a chance to minister to someone more needy than herself, and then one day she was released. When the war was over she began traveling and speaking about Christ and the vision that He had given her. And then one day, something happened, something that shook her to the very center of her being. Let me read you her account of what happened. You probably wouldn't know her as 66730, but you would know her as Corrie ten Boom. She writes:

*“It was at a church service in Munich when I saw him, the former S.S. Nazi man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there, the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, my sister Betsy's pain blanched face.*

*He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message Fraulein," he said. "To think, as you say, He has washed my sins away!" His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendall the need to forgive, I kept my hand at my side.*

*Even as the angry vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of this man. Jesus Christ had died for this man: was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile; I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.*

*As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.*

*And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that this world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself."*

We must forgive those who have hurt us because God commands it, because our own forgiveness hinges on it, AND because it is the best thing for us. When we refuse to forgive the bitterness grows like a cancer within us and it eats away at us, causing stress and illness and great lack of joy. The only therapy for this sickness is the surgery of forgiveness. When we refuse to forgive, we allow the sin that was committed against us to hurt us twice: once when we were first sinned against, and again by keeping us from receiving God's forgiveness. We need to stop the pain and forgive.

Is there someone who you need to forgive?

Is there someone who you haven't talked to in a long time because of what they did?

Is there someone who you avoid like the plague?

Ask the Lord to help you to truly forgive.