

The School of Prayer
Part 7 – God is Running
Matthew 6:9-15

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 18, 2024 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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⁹“Pray, then, in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
 may your name be revered as holy.
¹⁰ May your kingdom come.
 May your will be done
 on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
 but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:9-15, NRSV)

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It is hard to overestimate the wretchedness of the sin.

A young man, the younger of two brothers, goes to his father one day with an outrageous demand. “**Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.**”¹ In those days sons would customarily inherit from their father all his land and possessions at the time of his death. A younger son like this stood to receive one-third of the inheritance. But for some reason, this young man doesn’t have the time or patience to wait around. He wants his piece of the pie now. And then we wants to skip town. He’s not interested in his father, only in his father’s stuff.²

Even today, such a demand would deeply offend. Imagine going to your own father and saying, “Listen, Dad, I’m not interested in staying around here to watch you get old and die. Since it looks like that may take some time, and because I’ve got things I want to do in this world and need some cash to do them, whatever you have pre-determined to pass on to me, please liquidate that wealth now and write me a cashier’s check so I can be on my way. To be perfectly honest, I’m tired of being with you and doing things your way.

From now on I’m going to live life on my terms – your money, my terms.”

Can you imagine? Everything this boy has he has because of his father. It’s hard to overestimate the wretchedness of the sin. And in Jewish culture this would have been especially offensive, not only to the man’s father, but to his family, even to his whole community. In Middle Eastern cultures even today, such a son would likely be beaten by his father. He certainly wouldn’t walk away with the cash.

But you know how the story goes. As Jesus tells it, the father actually gives his son everything he asks for, and then lets him go his way, no strings attached. It would have been one thing had the boy wanted the money to do something charitable in the world. Instead this kid runs off to Vegas and blows it all on prostitutes and wild living. But then the money runs out; life on his own terms takes its toll. It’s not long before he ends up feeding pigs to scratch out a living. Not a great job for a kosher Jewish boy. He’s so hungry he’s jealous of the pigs because they are eating better than he is. That’s when he determines to go home. He reasoning is simple. He knows that there’s not a chance in hell – I use that word intentionally – that his father will welcome him home as a son. But maybe, just maybe, his father will take him in as a slave. At least then he’d have something to fill his belly.

So who is the young man in this story Jesus tells? I think it’s fair to say that he is all of us. Is his story not the human story? Think about it, our Father in heaven has given us everything we have, our very lives. Anybody here choose to be born? And in response, we take what belongs to the Father, what he has entrusted to us, and we set out in this world to live our lives with his stuff on our terms. Now, I know you may not see it that way, because when it comes to evaluating our own sin we can easily be deceived into thinking we are better than we really are. Our problem, of course, is in the measuring sticks we use to evaluate ourselves. It’s easy to find people in this world who are morally more corrupt than I am. Compared to some people, I come

¹ Luke 15:12. Unless otherwise noted, this and all other biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

² I have to credit Tim Keller for this way of framing things in his book *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (Riverhead Books, 2008).

off looking pretty good. There are, of course, others who are far more righteous than me. But I try not to compare myself to those people. I don't want to stand next to the Mother Teresa's of the world. They make me look bad.

But what is the standard we are supposed to use? Of course, it's Christ. The only true picture we have of how humans are supposed to live in this world is Jesus. Every other example is deeply flawed. I say "deeply" because the standard Jesus set was the standard Jesus lived. He did what he commanded us to do, loved his Father with all heart, all mind, all strength, all soul. And then he loved every other person in the world at least as much as he loved himself.

And so how does your life measure up to *that* standard? We owe God everything, total, tireless, zealous love for him and selfless love for all people made in his image every moment of every day in the very pattern Jesus set for us. When I honestly hold my life up to this standard, it's clear to me that it is hard to overestimate the wretchedness of my sin. And I wonder, have you come to the same conclusion? If you have, you know that the you are the young man in the story. So am I.

Here is where this all leads, assuming we can see ourselves in this young man walking up the road to his old home, head hung low, spirit crushed, very little expectations, ready to get what he has coming to him. But you know what happens next. As the younger son makes his way up the road, ready to beg for slavery, his father, who apparently had been scanning the horizon in expectation, sees him while he is still a long way off and begins running down the road towards him.

One of the most vivid images in the entire Bible is this image of this man running.³ Today, running is not unusual. Lots of people run, all kinds of people, often just to keep in shape. Even the dignified run. Even Presidents, and most of us admire them for doing so. But in Jesus' world, you generally didn't run unless somebody was chasing you. And in a culture that had deep respect for the elderly, the older you were the less likely it was that you would even walk fast. To do so was undignified, even shameful.

Jesus doesn't tell us what is going through the mind of the young man as his father rushes towards him. We can only imagine. Nobody in Jesus' audience that day could have guessed what happened next. It was shocking enough to imagine this old man running. But then when he reaches the son, this son who essentially put a curse on him, disowned him, brought disgrace on

the whole family, instead of beating him and sending him away, the father wraps his arms around him, clothes him in his finest robe and jewelry, and then orders his servants to prepare a feast of celebration. He refuses to listen to any talk about returning home as a slave. Instead he declares, "**This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!**"⁴

If you are not able to see yourself in this young man, not able to recognize the great debt that you owe to God because of your unwillingness to live and love like Jesus, then I encourage you to spend time asking the Lord to help you see that scriptures like Isaiah 64:6 describe every last one of us: "**We're all sin-infected, sin-contaminated. Our best efforts are grease-stained rags.**"⁵ Or as 1st John 1:10 puts it, "**If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.**"

On the other hand, if you have been humbled to that place, then I want to ask you today to use your imagination. Jesus teaches us in his prayer to pray to our Father, "**Forgive us our debts.**" As you pray that prayer, imagine yourself coming up the road that leads back home, prepared to confess all the ways you have failed to love God and others, expecting the condemnation that you rightly deserve, and imagine that what you see instead is your Father in Heaven running towards you. Have you ever pictured God running? That's what Jesus wants us to do when he tells this story. Your Father, who knows everything about you, the most shameful things you would never want anybody to know, is running towards you, arms open wide, ready to welcome you home to his table, not as a slave but as a son or daughter he has never stopped loving. Again, one of the most vivid images in the whole Bible is that of a man running. Do you believe that this is how God responds to you in your sin when you turn back to him with a humble and penitent heart?

In this part of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to ask our Father in the heavens to forgive our debts. If you worship across the street at the Catholic church, it's "trespasses". Other traditions use the word "sins". Some of the variation comes from the fact that in Luke's Gospel he uses a different word in his version of the Lord's Prayer. Though the words have slightly different meanings – debts, trespasses, sins - they all essentially make the same point. How did Shakespeare put it, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Sin by any other name is still as wretched. The Greek word here in Matthew is the word *opheilema*, which

³ N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (Eerdmans, 1996), 35.

⁴ Luke 15:24

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (NavPress, 2002).

literally means “something that is owed.”⁶ The word for “forgive” literally, in the Greek, means “to hurl away” or “to cancel.”⁷ So Jesus is teaching us to pray here, “Father, hurl away the debts that we owe you.”

In exchange for what? For nothing. We have nothing to offer God in exchange for his forgiveness. And that makes this a very bold request. We still owe the bank a significant chunk of change on our mortgage. Imagine if I walked into their office tomorrow morning and asked them to cancel my debt, to give me the deed to my house outright? I’m sure the mortgage agent would be willing to do so in exchange for a check for the amount of the remaining principal. But no, that’s not what I’m asking. I just want you to forgive the mortgage and let me take full possession of the property. Just cancel the debt. Can you do that for me?

It’s an incredibly audacious request Jesus is teaching us here to make. Do you see that? Do you also see that this is why we must understand that God never just wipes debt away, in fact why he *cannot* just wipe debt away. I have often heard people ask, why did Jesus have to die on the cross? Why couldn’t God just decide to ignore our sin and forgive us? The reason the cross was necessary is that debt always must be incurred. If the bank somehow decided to forgive my mortgage and give me the deed to my house, that doesn’t mean the debt just vanished. Where did it go? Now it’s on the bank. Right? They have to pay the debt. Somebody has to always pay the debt.

This is true in relationships as well. Imagine we are friends – we are, I hope! – and one day you discover that I’ve been going around and saying unkind and untrue things about you behind your back, totally smearing your reputation. I have taken something from you, right? And now I owe you. I am in your debt. Can you now just erase the debt, pretend it isn’t there? You might choose to forgive me, to release me from making it up to you, but that doesn’t mean the debt has been erased. It just means that now you have to bear it yourself. Part of that debt is the damage which has been done, not only to your reputation but to our friendship. Part of it is the dissatisfaction you have to carry when you decide not to satisfy your instincts and seek revenge from me, to make me pay for what I did. Revenge, or at least restitution, is the thing we naturally want when others sin against us. When we give up our right to receiving it, we take the burden of that sin on ourselves.

Do you see what happened when Jesus, after having lived a righteous and holy life, went willingly to the cross and the grave, taking to himself the consequences

of our sin? The debt of our sin was not ignored but absorbed. And how great is the debt of our sin that nothing short of the sacrifice of God’s own Son would satisfy it? As the old hymn puts it, “What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss, to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul.” As we see Jesus spreading out his arms on the cross and giving his life to bring us back home, we must also see the Father running down to road to embrace us and assure us that in spite of all that we have done and failed to do, we are still his beloved children, still welcome at his table, still heirs of all that belongs to him, for he, at great sacrifice to himself, has paid our debt.

When we begin to understand what it is that God through Christ has done for us, we begin to see why Jesus teaches us to boldly go before God and ask him to hurl away our debt to him. Hebrews 4:16 declares, “**Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**” In Christ the debt of our sin – past, present, and even future – has been absorbed. We do not approach wondering whether or not our Father in Heaven will forgive us. He already has! He’s been scanning the horizon waiting for us to turn back towards home. Once we do, we will find that he is already running to meet us with open arms.

Do you believe this?

So why is it that we are taught to keep confessing our sins? Have you ever wondered that? If God has forgiven us of all our sin already, why do we have to keep dragging it before God time and time again? Commentator J.I. Packer makes a helpful distinction here between approaching God as Judge and approaching God as Father. If we are approaching God as Judge in our prayers, we would be right to come and plead with him to pardon us and remove our guilt, at least offer us some way to make it up to him. But while it’s true that God is our judge, he is a judge who has already cast his verdict. We have already been declared innocent, not because we are actually innocent, but because the debt has been paid in full by Christ. As he takes our sin, we receive his righteousness. Romans 8:1 declares, “**Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**”

This is why Jesus doesn’t teach us to pray, “Our Judge who art in heaven.” To approach God as judge you are anxiously approaching to find out whether you are innocent or guilty, accepted or rejected. We approach God as Father, knowing in confidence that because of Christ we now approach as beloved sons and daughters.

⁶ <https://studybible.info/strongs/G3783>

⁷ <https://studybible.info/strongs/G863>

And this gets us to the reason why we must continue to confess our sin, even daily. If my child sins against me, it does not change my love for her. I may be displeased with my daughter, but my love remains constant. But that doesn't mean the sin can be ignored. For the sake of the health of the relationship, it's necessary that my daughter comes to me and confesses her sin so that the space between us is made clear. It's necessary that we *both* keep confessing our sin against one another to each other. Have you ever tried to share close fellowship or friendship with somebody where there is unconfessed sin between you? It's difficult, if not impossible.

Biblical scholar, N.T. Wright, imagines that when we go before God it's always good that we admit to him that there are a few things we have done, or left undone, that we need to sort out. In response, he imagines our Father saying to us, "Yes, there are, aren't there. Well, let's get them out on the table, shall we? And then we'll sort them out. Don't be afraid, because you're not going to surprise me. Just tell the truth, and we'll go from there."⁸

This is why confession is something we do every week in worship. It's not the first thing we do, however. The first thing we do – and I hope you pay attention to this – is that we walk past the baptismal water in the back and are reminded that through Christ we have been absolutely washed clean. So we don't come into worship to get God to favor us, we come in as beloved children who are already favored more than we can imagine. But before we get too far into our time together in worship, especially before we are ready to hear whatever Word God has for us and to come and join him at his Table, it's good to get our mess out into the open. And so we confess our sin. As we do, we need not worry about God's response. Our prayers of confession are not the prayers of a frightened defendant coming before a harsh judge, but the prayers of loving children coming before our loving Father. And so we keep praying, "Father, forgive our sin."

Now, before I run out of time, we need to address the second part of this prayer Jesus teaches us. "**Forgive us our debts,**" we are taught to pray, "**as we also have forgiven our debtors.**" Throw away what we owe you, Father, as we have thrown away what others owe us. The two halves of this prayer make one whole, because as Jesus points out in verses 14–15, if we do not forgive others than we will find that God has not forgiven us. To be clear, however, Jesus does not teach us to pray, "Forgive us our debts *because* we have forgiven our debtors." That would not be God

canceling the debt, but rather us paying the debt, earning God's favor by forgiving others. That's not grace. We are to forgive *as* we have been forgiven.

Think about it this way. What can we say about the person who receives this extraordinary gift of forgiveness from God and then turns around and refuses to forgive his neighbor?⁹ Jesus once told a parable about such a person, a man who was forgiven a multi-billion dollar debt by his king but then immediately refused to forgive a hundred dollar debt his friend owed him. When the king found out, he threw the ungrateful man back in prison until he was able to pay his debt in full.⁹ Jesus' message was clear: grace received must be grace extended. When it is not, the problem is likely that grace was never received in the first place.

The early church father, John Chrysostom, once said, "To ask forgiveness from God as a great benefit, and then to deny the same to others, is to mock God."¹⁰ This is a hard but necessary truth we must receive. If you refuse to forgive others, it's not that God hasn't forgiven you, but that you have never actually received God's forgiveness, or perhaps never come to realize your desperate need for it. To the extent you will not forgive others is the same extent to which you don't realize how much you have been forgiven. Again, we are not forgiven *because* we forgive, for that would suggest we are paying our debts to God. Instead, forgiving others is the natural and inevitable fruit which shows up in our lives when we know God's forgiveness. One flows from the other. Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 4:32, "**Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.**"¹¹

Let's clarify, by the way, what forgiveness *is* and what forgiveness *is not*.

When I forgive you I determine in my mind and heart that even though you owe me a debt because of your sin against me, I will not seek to make you repay that debt. My natural instinct is to do so, to insist you make it up to me, or to wish that in some way you will get what you have coming to you because of what you did to me, even to take steps to make that happen. To forgive you, therefore, is to go against my natural instinct, to absorb that debt to myself. It's me deciding that I will not make you suffer for your sin. Instead, I determine to wish the best for you. On top of that, I commit to stop bringing up your sin – to you, to others, even to

⁸ Wright, 44.

⁹ See Matthew 18:21-35

¹⁰ Cited by Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2004), 310.

¹¹ Emphasis added.

myself.¹² This is not easy, of course. As C.S. Lewis once said, “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.”¹³ The only way we can do something so difficult and so unnatural as forgiving another, is to see that this is exactly what has been done for us, and done for us to a greater extent. You will never need to forgive as much as you need to be forgiven.

That’s what forgiveness *is*. So what is it *not*?

Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. If somebody hurts you, betrays your trust, cheats you, wounds you, abuses you, it’s actually unwise to just forget about it and pretend nothing happened. Trust must be earned again. Sometimes, in fact, we need to set clear boundaries between ourselves and those who have harmed us. Not only for our sake, but for their sakes as well. You can forgive the sinner and still remember the sin.

Forgiveness is also not the same as affection. In fact, forgiveness is much more an act of the will than of the heart. You *decide* to not seek repayment, even if repayment is really what you want. This is good news, because imagine if forgiveness required us to not only cancel the debts of others who have hurt us, but to feel warm affection and tenderness for them as we did. I would find that impossible. Of course, as we pray for the forgiveness of those who have sinned against us, and ask God to bless them even if we do so through gritted teeth, God may eventually soften our hearts and increase in us affection and compassion even for our enemies. But this affection is not a prerequisite. You do not have to feel forgiveness before you grant it. Instead, you eventually feel it because, with God’s help, you decided to grant it.¹⁴

Forgiveness is not only offered upon request. In other words, you forgiving others is not predicated on them asking you for forgiveness. Remember, that’s not how Jesus handled things with us. From the cross he prayed, “**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**”¹⁵ For somebody to experience the blessing and freedom of our forgiveness, yes, they must acknowledge their sin against us and ask for our forgiveness. But we must grant it whether or not this ever happens, not only because Jesus does the same for us, but also because holding onto a grudge is one of the most unhealthy things we can do to ourselves. As Anne Lamott famously said, “Not forgiving [because we

think in doing so we are hurting the other person] is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.”¹⁶

Having said that, forgiveness is not primarily given for our own benefit. While forgiving others does set us free, nursing a grudge can be quite pleasurable as well. Am I right? So though the freedom we receive when we forgive is a beautiful by-product of forgiving, the main reason we forgive others is because God has forgiven us, and when we forgive we honor God.

With all this in mind, let me end with a story. Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch woman who, along with her family, hid many Jews in their home in Holland from the Nazis during World War II. Eventually, however, they were caught and sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp. Corrie was the only one who survived. The death of her beloved sister, Betsie, was perhaps the most painful to endure. Her story is known to us because when she gained her freedom she spent the rest of her life speaking and writing about her devotion to Christ, and how he had been faithful to hear even in the midst of very dark days. You can read her story in her remarkable book, *The Hiding Place*.

A few years after the war, Corrie was in Munich at a church gathering where she had been invited to share the love of Christ with devastated Germans desperate to hear good news. She specifically told them about the grace of God, about his willingness to forgive our sins and, as she put it, cast them in the deepest ocean, gone forever. That’s when she noticed a balding heavysset man in a gray overcoat, clutching a brown felt hat between his hands. She knew immediately who he was as he approached. He had been a guard at Ravensbrück, one of the many who had treated her and her family with unspeakable cruelty.

Here is how she recounts the scene in her own words,

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: “A fine message, Fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!”

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

¹² 1st Corinthians 13:5 declares that true love “**keeps no record of wrongs.**”

¹³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Collins, 1952), 101.

¹⁴ I’m indebted here to Matt Smethurst & Tim Keller, “Tim Keller Wants to Help You Forgive”, *The Gospel Coalition*, November 8, 2022. Read the full interview at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/tim-keller-forgive/>

¹⁵ Luke 23:34

¹⁶ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (Anchor Books, 1999), 134. C.S. Lewis put it this way: “He who has not forgiven and enemy has never yet tasted one of the most sublime enjoyments of life.”

“You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk,” he was saying. “I was a guard in there.” No, he did not remember me. “But since that time,” he went on, “I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein”—again the hand came out—“will you forgive me?”

Can you imagine? She knew that she also needed God’s forgiveness, needed it every day. But her sister had died in that death camp, died a slow and terrible death. Could he erase what was done simply by asking? She goes on,

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us... And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

“Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.

And having thus learned to forgive in this hardest of situations, I never again had difficulty in forgiving? I wish I could say it! I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they didn’t.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned at 80 years of age, it’s that I can’t store up good feelings and behavior—but only draw them fresh from God each day.¹⁷

Let us pray.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the passage from Matthew 6:9-15 again. This translations reads “debts”. Other translations substitute “trespasses” or simply “sins”. Which word best captures the sense of the petition for you when you pray this part of the Lord’s Prayer?
2. How does the Lord’s Prayer define sin? How do you define sin?
3. If our Father in Heaven has forgiven us completely for all our sin, past, present and future, why do we need to keep confessing our sin to him daily? Or do we?
4. What is forgiveness? What is forgiveness *not*?
5. Why can unforgiving Christians rightly be called hypocrites? And if we refuse to forgive others, does this actually mean that God does not forgive us?
6. Imagine yourself being totally honest before God about the worst parts of you. Now imagine that as you do so your Father in Heaven is running towards you, arms open wide. How does this change confession for you?
7. Without naming names, think about somebody who you are reticent to forgive, somebody towards whom you still hold resentment or bitterness. This might be somebody you don’t even know personally, but whose sin has negatively affected you or others. Why has it been hard for you to forgive this person? What is standing in the way?
8. What do you take from the story of Corrie ten Boom? How might God be using her story to teach you how to pray (and live!) this part of the Lord’s Prayer?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



Why does Jesus tell us that if we do not forgive other people that God will not forgive us?

¹⁷ Corrie ten Boom, *Guidepost Magazine*, November, 1972. Read the full article at <https://guideposts.org/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-forgiveness/>