

INTRO: I’m going to start this sermon on forgiveness by asking you to forgive me. Please forgive me for using a sermon illustration I’ve used before. I think the best cinematic depiction of forgiveness is in a movie that’s over thirty years old starring Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons and Liam Neeson. I’m talking about *The Mission*.

There’s a scene midway through the movie that is the turning point in the plot. Robert De Niro plays a Spanish slave trader, Rodrigo Mendoza.

It’s the 1700s in South America and there is a huge demand for slaves to work the plantations and haciendas of the Spanish and Portuguese colonists. Rodrigo Mendoza leads his mercenaries into the jungle where they raid unsuspecting Indian villages. They capture men, women, and children, put them in chains, drag them to the city, and sell on the market. They leave death and destruction in their wake. They kill everyone who resists, they burn villages. Rodrigo is feared and hated by these jungle tribes.

After one successful raid he comes back to the city and finds his fiancée in a compromising position with his younger brother. He’s furious and challenges his brother to a duel and kills him. There is an inquiry, he’s acquitted, but he’s plunged into guilt and despair.

Then an old childhood friend comes to see him. He’s a Jesuit missionary named Father Gabriel (who is played by Jeremy Irons). Father Gabriel has been working in the jungle, gaining the trust of the very tribe that Rodrigo and the slavers have been decimating. He’s led many to Christ. And he has started a church, a mission station, in one of the villages.

So he says to Rodrigo, Come with me to my church in the jungle. But you must take all your armor, your sword, your weapons, wrap them in a big bundle, tie that bundle to a rope around your waist, and then carry that symbol of your violent godless life on this journey. So they set out, and the movie portrays this very dramatically— Rodrigo dragging this bundle over mountains, through rain, and rivers.

When they finally reach the Indian village, he’s a wreck. He’s filthy, he’s in rags, he’s unshaven and exhausted. It’s more than just physical, it’s symbolic of his emotional and spiritual state.

He's a man broken over his sins. He's finally repentant.

The Indians recognize him—their enemy, the slave trader.

They rush out and surround him, shouting in their language.

One of them pulls out a knife and holds it to Rodrigo's throat, but then cuts the rope, cuts him free of burden, and the Indians push it over cliff and into the river.

And Rodrigo Mendoza, this once hard man, begins to weep with joy because he knows that his sins, his many terrible sins, against God and his fellow man have been forgiven, and he has been set free.

It's the turning point of the movie—

from that point on, from the point of his repentance, things are set right.

He is right with God, he has a peace and humility before Lord never had.

He's right with his fellow man—he begins to serve and love Indians.

And he's at peace with himself. No longer enslaved to his anger and violence.

His life isn't easy or simple.

In fact, in the second half of the movie, he has to make a terrible decision—but he does so as a forgiven man.

And not only is being forgiven a matter of life and death—
extending forgiveness is as well.

There are many, many people who have been wronged by other people, truly wronged and hurt very badly.

If they refuse to forgive, it can destroy their lives, turn them cynical and angry and unable to open their hearts to anyone.

It's only by forgiving that they can be set on a path of health and healing.

The first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer are about God.

Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done.

Then the last three petitions of the Lord's Prayer are about us.

Give us our daily bread. Forgive us our debts. Lead us not into temptation.

The Lord Jesus is teaching us the importance of praying for ourselves.

First, he says, pray for your daily bread.

Then second, Jesus says, pray for forgiveness.

But don't just pray about being forgiven, pray about extending forgiveness.

It's not just "Forgive us our debts."

It's "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

And that takes on even more importance when you read the words of Jesus right after the Lord's Prayer when he very clearly suspends your forgiveness by God

on whether or not you forgive other people from the heart.
Are you a person who both asks for forgiveness and forgives?
Is this part of your life of prayer?

Let's look at this under three points:

1. Understanding forgiveness
2. Asking forgiveness
3. Extending forgiveness

And hopefully see how this relates to prayer.

MP#1 Understanding forgiveness

I'm sure you've noticed that when some churches say the Lord's Prayer they say, "Forgive us our debts" and others say, "Forgive us our trespasses."

We sent our children to St Paul's Lutheran School when they were little.

Adrienne told us: In chapel I say trespasses but I'm thinking debts.

In Luke 11 the word trespasses is used. Here in Matthew 6 it's the word debts.

Those are just two different ways of talking about the same thing—sin against God and other people.

But the word debts does give insight into the nature of sin and forgiveness.

If a neighborhood kid put a baseball through your living room window he would be in your debt. He would owe you for that broken window.

You could make him pay, or you could forgive him.

But if you forgave him, the debt wouldn't disappear.

The window still has to be fixed.

But who pays it? You do. You absorb the cost.

Let's go a step deeper: What if someone has not just broken a window—what if he has broken something much more precious?

What if someone breaks your happiness by doing something cruel to you?

Or what if someone shatters your dreams with lies and betrayal?

Or damages your good name, or hurts people you love?

When a person wrongs you deeply, he's in your debt. He owes you.

It's not a monetary debt, but it's still a real debt. It's a moral debt.

It's the price of very precious things that often can never be recovered.

What if a child is abused? His innocence and happiness taken from him.

There is no way to put a price on that in dollars but there is clearly a debt owed.

What does it mean to forgive someone who has wronged you like that?

What's the cost that has to be paid? We're going to answer that a bit later.

Before we get there, we need to go one step deeper.

What's the debt of your sin against God? He gave you life and breath.

He commands you to love him and love your neighbor as yourself.

And instead you've lived a selfish life. Look at the Ten Commandments.

You've broken every one of them in thought, word or deed.

When the law is broken, somebody has to pay.

The Bible makes it clear that the debt for breaking God's law is death.

How are you going to pay that? By trying to be a good person?

Even if you could be perfect from this moment on (which you can't!),
that wouldn't pay the debt for your past sins.
The good news is that God paid. God paid by sending his own Son to the cross.

Jesus paid. He willingly suffered on the cross to pay the debt for all your sins—
past, present, and future.

The way his payment is applied is by believing in him. Trusting him.

When you believe in Jesus you become united with him.

Are you personally trusting in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only
payment for your sins? Or are you trying to pay for your sins by being good?
Jesus paid it all, and you can have complete forgiveness in him alone.

That brings us to the Lord's Prayer. If we've been forgiven by the cross,
then why does Jesus teach us to pray daily for forgiveness?

Because our salvation is both justification and adoption.

If you trust Jesus, you are already forgiven of all your sins—past, present, future.
That completed forgiveness is called justification.

Justification is a judicial act of God whereby he pardons all of our sins
on account of what Jesus Christ has done on our behalf.

God acts as a judge and says: You deserve to die and go to hell for your sins.

But if you have faith in my Son, I declare that his death on the cross counts as
your death and perfect life counts as your life.

When God looks at you through Christ, it is just as if you had never sinned.

In fact, he sees you clothed in the perfection of his Son.

But your salvation is also adoption. In adoption God relates to us as a father.

That's where you live the Christian life day by day—
in the family of God, as his sons and daughters.

And as your Father, God expects you to obey him and love him.

When you don't, when you sin, you break fellowship with your Father.

If you let wrongs and hurts and pile up in a family what happens?

In the popular terminology of the day—you have a dysfunctional family.

Unhappiness at every level. Lack of communication. Distrust. Selfishness.

What happens when Christian let wrongs pile up against their heavenly Father,
and against other people—you develop a dysfunctional soul and suffer guilt.

So in one sense, forgiveness is the way you get into the Christian life.

The debt has been paid by Christ and you receive complete forgiveness

of all your sins by faith.

But in another sense, forgiveness is the way you live the Christian life.

Daily confession, repentance, and asking our Father for forgiveness.
That brings us to the second point

MP#2 Asking forgiveness

When you ask another person for forgiveness, what's the right way to do it?

Do you just say: Hey, I'm sorry. Forgive me. And think that it's all done?

If that's your approach, then you probably aren't repentant, you're just sorry you got caught, and you want to get over the unpleasantness as soon as possible.

No. You have to name it. You have to say what you've done.

I love Paul Tripp's example.

Don't say, I sorry, I didn't mean to say that.

Say, Please forgive me for saying exactly what on my mind.

There's a place for saying I'm sorry to smooth over social situations, but when you have really hurt someone, wronged someone—then you have to name it and ask for forgiveness.

And then you have to humble yourself before that person and open yourself up to his or her questions. They have a right to ask you questions.

Depending on the situation, there might be details they want to know, what you were thinking at the time, and so forth.

That's real confession.

The English Puritan Thomas Manton called confession the vomit of the soul.

It gets out of you what spoils, upsets, irritates, degrades, and endangers—and it purifies your inner life again.

So first, confession to our heavenly Father must be specific.

We have a general confession of sin in the worship service.

The church has done that since the days of Moses.

But when it comes to your private prayer with God—he wants specific confession.

He wants you to ask for forgiveness for specific sins of your thought, words, and deeds. Specific things you have done that you ought not to have done.

And thing you have left undone that you ought to have done.

For example, if you have said cruel things to your spouse—confess that.

And second, as you confess, listen for God's questions that lead you to deeper repentance. He's going to probe through your conscience and the Holy Spirit.

Why did you do that? Why did you talk to your wife or husband that way?

Lord, I'm selfish and I want things my way. Forgive me of that too.
Don't you remember you are supposed to love your wife as Christ loves church?
Don't you remember you are supposed to honor your husband as to the Lord.

Yes, Lord, forgive me for that too. For forgetting your word.

For not reflecting Christ in my life.

Do you see how much more real that is? A wise Christian said:

“Far better that you confess some sins particularly than all sins generally,
if you would have your confessions to God be sincere.”

Third thing is that real, specific confession to your heavenly Father
will sometimes require you to confess to another person.

If you have wronged someone, you can't just confess to God.

In order to receive full forgiveness, have to ask that person for forgiveness.

The Holy Spirit is going to prompt you: What unfinished business do you have?

You've asked God for forgiveness, but now you have to ask your wife.

You have to go to her and say: The way I spoke to you was wrong, please forgive.

If you ignore those promptings of the Holy Spirit, and say to yourself—

I don't have to ask that person for forgiveness, I just have to ask God.

This is just between me and God—you're fooling yourself.

You haven't really confessed your sin to God, you've been talking to yourself—
and you will not enjoy the blessings of forgiveness.

You won't enjoy the restoration of fellowship with your Father,
and a sense of the smile of his favor.

Bonhoeffer says you have to take this step to break the circle of self-deception.

God continues to forgive the sins of those who are justified,
you can't become unjustified, you can't fall away from grace.

But as an adopted son, you can fall under his fatherly displeasure and the light of
his face will no longer shine on you—until you humble yourself,
confess your sins, ask his forgiveness, and renew your faith and repentance.

And that brings us to the third point:

MP#3 Extending forgiveness

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors . . . For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

It’s clear, isn’t it, that part of our prayer life has to be extending forgiveness.

Refusing to forgive other people can harm your walk with God just as much as failing to repent and ask forgiveness yourself.

As Christians, we ought to be experts on forgiveness.

We are forgiven people—that’s our identity.

We’ve been forgiven by God through Jesus Christ.

So we ought to know how to apply the forgiveness we have received from God to the people who have wronged us.

When someone wrongs you, it’s natural to want that person to pay.

He took something from you. He is truly in your debt.

But what is the payment for a moral debt?

Listen, if someone smashes your car or breaks your window, the payment is clear—it’s monetary. But what’s the payment for moral wrongs?

The only way the person can really pay for moral wrong is by suffering.

He has to suffer at least as much as you have suffered, and he has to know he is suffering because of what he did to you.

But when you focus on how this person deserves to suffer for what he did, it can take control of you. You start to fantasize.

You fantasize that he will lose his business and all his money.

You fantasize that she will fail in her new romance and be heartbroken.

You want a punishment to fit the crime.

Maybe you are prone to more theological fantasies.

You imagine the shock this person is going to get when he stands before God and has to answer for what he did to you.

You might not admit it, but really fantasizing about this person going to hell.

These fantasies end up poisoning your soul.

When somebody wrongs you, you can try to make him pay, or you can forgive him.

When you forgive, the debt doesn’t go away—You pay it. You suffer.

You pay through a painful internal struggle that is like death.

You give up your desire for revenge, give up all your vengeful thoughts, and replace them with prayers for God to bless the person who wronged you.

That’s what Jesus is teaching us in the Lord’s Prayer.

There are so many powerful examples of this in church history—
Christians who have been deeply wronged
and who have prayed blessings instead of curses.

I shared this example a few years ago from Darlene Deibler's autobiography.
She and her missionary husband were put in a Japanese prison camp in
Indonesia at the start of World War II.

The women's camp was run by a Japanese officer name Yamaji.

He had a violent temper and would beat the women for the slightest provocation.

Darlene describes the brutal beating he gave one young woman
named Elise because she had not come to roll call quickly enough.

First he broke her wrists with his cane, and then, when she fell to the ground
he kicked her until she was temporarily paralyzed.

This is what Darlene wrote about her prayer that night:

“In weariness of spirit and emotionally drained, I stretched out on my rack, reviewing what had happened, still seeing Elise's battered body and bruised face. Phrases from the Gospel of Matthew were going through my mind: ‘Love your enemies.’ ‘Do good to those who despitefully use you.’ ‘Pray for your enemies.’ All right, Lord, I'll pray for him. I sincerely don't want the man to be lost eternally—but I really would like it if you would curdle the food in his stomach tonight. How very much easier it is to be philosophical about and forgive the wrongs done to oneself than to forgive the injustices done to the people we love. With sufficient provocation, there is within each of us the potential to violence—but for the grace of Almighty God. With a prayer for God to have mercy on the man, I drifted off to sleep.”

I like the honesty of her words.

Because they show that there is a cost for forgiveness.

It's not easy to bless those who have wronged you.

So where does the power come from? Once again, it comes from the cross.

Not only does the cross show us our sin, and that we are really no different
from the person who has wronged us. And not only does the cross show us
the greatness of our forgiveness, and how we ought to extend that.

It shows us something else.

Jesus Christ, the perfect Son of God.

The only man who lived a life of perfect love, spit upon, reviled,
and pierced looking at his tormenters and praying . . .

Do you remember what he prayed?

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Those mocking him said, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!”

He could have done it. He could have sent them all straight to hell.

And if he had done it, he would have been perfectly justified.
But as Peter says: “when they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate;
when He suffered He made no threats.”

Who do you need to forgive? Listen to the teaching of Jesus then look at the cross.
Look at forgiveness in action, and then bow your head and pray for God
to forgive your debtors. You’ll pay. It will be a fight with yourself.
But you’ll be blessed with a deeper sense of God’s forgiveness—
and your unshakable position as his beloved son or daughter.