

Forgive Us our Trespasses

In the name of him whose blood purifies us from all sin, dear friends in Christ: Last week in our Lenten meditation we considered the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer, which is "Give us this day our daily bread." And in the course of that discussion we took note that the petition marked a decided shift in the focus of the prayer that Jesus taught us. Whereas the first three petitions address what are our most vital *spiritual* concerns, the fourth is all about the *physical* needs of our bodies. And this makes sense: having taught us to pursue first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, Jesus now directs our attention to our more earthly concerns – that is, from things above to things below. That being said, another aspect of this shift in focus has to do with the petition's scope. The first three petitions, which deal with spiritual matters, have no self-imposed limits, nor can they because in them we ask for such things as God's infinite Word, his omnipresent Holy Spirit, and the coming of his eternal kingdom – things that really can't be quantified or measured. They are simply too vast. And yet as vast as they are, we want them in their entirety. No one wants only a fraction of God's Spirit or for only half of his kingdom to come. So in these petitions we're asking for the whole shebang. But in the fourth petition we deliberately limit the request by asking only for our *daily* bread – just what we need for today.

There are several reasons for putting a cap on this petition. One is that our physical needs are naturally limited. We can only take in so much at a time. So, for instance, it wouldn't be particularly helpful to have all the food you need for the rest of your life right now. In fact, it would probably create more problems than it would solve. You'd have to worry about where to store it and how to keep it from going bad and so on. But what's more important from a spiritual point of view is that it wouldn't be good to have everything we need right now because of the question of *trust*. The Lord wants us to trust in *him*, not in things. But because of the way we are, that is naturally sinful and untrusting, we're not inclined to do that. We'd like to see everything up front. We want to know exactly *how* the Lord is going to take care of our physical needs tomorrow, and next week, and in the years to come. By directing us to pray for our *daily* bread alone, Jesus is teaching us to concern ourselves with today only and to trust God to take care of tomorrow and all the days that follow.

That (in part) is what it means to live by *faith*. In faith, you don't have to see *how* he's going to do it to know that God will still be taking care of you tomorrow. And this is true regardless of your circumstances. Say if tomorrow you lose everything: your house, your money, your family, your health, and now you're alone in the hospital hooked up to all kinds of machines with blinking lights making beeping sounds, your intellect says, "This is pretty bad – about as bad as it gets"; but your faith says, "I don't know how the Lord's going to get me through this; but I know that he will. Besides, the worst-case scenario is that through all this he calls me home – and that's something to look forward to. So, I can't lose as long as I trust in him."

So, with the fourth petition there's this day to day, moment to moment, breath to breath aspect that calls us to trust in the Lord for everything our bodies need for the present – because that's where we actually live our lives: in the present—and we live in the present by faith. And with all that in mind, there's a very similar thing going on now with the fifth petition. You see, as long as we are in this fallen flesh living from moment to moment we are going to be sinners. We can't help it. Like St. John says, "If you claim to be without sin you're deceiving yourself." And because we are sinners, we're in a state of tension at all times. On one hand we are the children of God who truly want to do our Father's will. At the same time, we are incorrigible sinners who only want to follow our own evil and selfish desires. The result is to create what might be thought of as a sort of spiritual hunger in us. While we know that Christ's righteousness covers us at all times so that the Lord always sees us as his forgiven children, yet when we sin again – and we do – we don't feel forgiven anymore. All we can see is the guilt of those latest sins. This is actually a good thing. If you don't feel guilt when you sin then you've got another problem: namely, you aren't a Christian and you need the Spirit to bring you to repentance and faith all over again. But as a child of God you will naturally feel bad about not living up to the standards that our Father has set. And as his child will want to hear again that your sins are covered, forgiven, and forgotten.

The old hymn *I Love to Tell the Story* has a line that captures this thought very well. It goes, “I love to tell the story for those who know it best, seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.” That’s absolutely true: those who know best the story of God’s love in Christ want to hear again and again that they are forgiven precisely because they are most conscious of what terrible sinners they are. And so just as Jesus directs us to pray for daily bread to fill that empty feeling we get in our stomachs, daily he would have us pray to God for forgiveness to fill the emptiness in our souls caused by our sins.

This is important too because the devil knows how to capitalize on our feelings of guilt to get us to stop praying to our heavenly Father. You know, when you were young and did something that made your parents extremely angry, you quickly learned that that was not the best time to ask for any special favors. You could almost guarantee that the answer would be “no”. So, you forgot about your request and went without whatever it was you wanted to ask for. Jesus doesn’t want the same thing to happen to us with our prayers. So we need to be assured of God’s forgiveness every day to prevent Satan from planting ideas like, “Who do think you are to go to God in prayer? Why should he listen to you or consider the request of someone who constantly disobeys him?” By teaching us to pray for forgiveness, Jesus is giving us the answer to such accusations of the devil. It’s this: “You’re absolutely right. I do not deserve the things I’m asking for. But God has forgiven me for the sake of his Son, and for his sake he has promised to hear and answer my prayers.”

Another reason we need daily to ask for forgiveness is because it enables us to forgive others who sin against us. The more we see ourselves as sinners constantly in need of Christ’s washing, the more we will see others in the same light and be forgiving toward them. This is the truth highlighted in the parable of the unmerciful servant. The foolish servant had no appreciation whatsoever for the great gift his master gave him. He owed a debt of ten thousand talents. And to help you understand how much that is, you need to know that one talent is roughly equivalent to what the average working man would earn in two years’ time. So ten thousand talents is like twenty thousand years’ wages – and that’s gross income, not net. The point is that it’s a staggering sum that he could never hope to pay off. Yet his master forgives the debt outright. It’s an unheard of act of generosity. It should have floored the guy, filled him with immense gratitude, and made him eager to be like his master in extending kindness and forbearance to others. Instead, as soon as he leaves his master’s presence, he chases down a fellow servant who owes him a comparatively paltry sum and drops the hammer on him. His behavior is beyond reprehensible.

The point that Jesus is making, of course, is that’s what we’re like when we don’t forgive people who sin against us. Not forgiving others proves that we don’t understand or appreciate the great forgiveness we have been given – and therefore it proves that we are not, in fact, living by faith in the promises of God – so we are not forgiven. And so, Jesus directs us to pray daily for forgiveness to help us comprehend that we are every single day forgiven a debt that far exceeds ten thousand talents – and by that I mean an eternity of suffering in hell. When we have a firm grasp on that, how can we not freely forgive those who sin against us?

It’s worth mentioning here that forgiving others means more than putting up with those minor peccadilloes that get under our skin and other offenses that are relatively easy to forget about. No, in the parable that Jesus tells, the fellow servant owes 100 denarii; which is the equivalent of 100 days’ wages. So if you count Sabbaths and holidays, you can figure it would be his total income for four months. That’s quite a bit: in today’s terms something like ten to twenty thousand dollars. *That’s* the kind of debt the master expected the servant to freely forgive in light of the grace he had been shown – and by extension, that’s the kind of sins we should be willing freely to forgive: the kind that really hurt us. But when we live day to day in Jesus’ blood bought forgiveness we can do this. After all, we know how much it hurt the Lord to forgive us our debt.

And so we can use our willingness to forgive others as sort of a measure of our faith. But I want to be careful here not to put the cart before the horse. Our forgiveness for others is not a prerequisite for receiving forgiveness from God – he does that freely for Christ’s sake; but it *should* be the natural result of having experienced God’s forgiveness. So my forgiving others can be seen as proof that I am indeed forgiven myself, just as my lack of forgiveness should call the sincerity of my faith into question. But I don’t want to take this too far. Because the sinful nature still clings to us, our forgiveness for others will never be as perfect or complete

as is God's forgiveness for us – which itself is yet another reason that we need to pray daily for forgiveness: we need to be forgiven of our inability to forgive like God does.

Yes, it turns out that looking for sin in our lives is sort of like digging a hole in the ground. You can dig and dig for weeks on end and there'll always be another shovelful of dirt. You never run out. Small wonder, then that our Lord Jesus taught us to pray daily, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". In his holy name, Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!