

The Lord's Prayer: A Trade
Dr. Stuart Bond
July 13, 2008

What a journey this has been! For those of you who haven't been with us, we have been going through the Lord's Prayer. Many of you have told me how much you are enjoying seeing some new angles on this prayer that we have said hundreds and thousands of times. Today we come to one of the most challenging aspects of the entire prayer.

I said last week that in this section of the Lord's Prayer we begin three petitions or requests for our own needs. Last week the emphasis was on our daily bread. We reflected on the gift of manna that lasted only for a day and was given every day. Then we heard Jesus' say that he was the manna sent from heaven. We need financial resources to make it every day, but we also need something more. That hole in our heart is only filled by the one who is the living bread and with him we will never hunger or thirst.

Now we come to the second request. The first was for resources. The second is for relationships. Not just any relationship: it is for retrieving relationships, for healing relationships, for turning them back from hot anger or distant tolerance to something that is life-giving. It is one of the most unusual prayer requests we have ever heard, and yet we pray it over and over again. So today, listen again to the request for healed relationships: forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

I have called this message, "A Trade." Kids playing marbles trade two cat's eyes for a steely. Cars get traded in for...a smaller car with better gas mileage. We all understand trades.

But this trade is something entirely different. The plain meaning of this prayer that Jesus taught us is that we are offering God a trade. "Lord, we want you to forgive us. Here is our trade: Forgive us exactly as much as we forgive others."

Who prays that? Who says, "God, don't treat me any better than I treat others."? Who uses themselves as the standard and holds themselves accountable for how they treat others? Not me! I want to be let off the hook completely! I want just-in-case forgiveness. I want forgiveness without even having to admit I did anything wrong. Our prayer is more like this: "God, I know I didn't act quite correctly in that particular situation, although as you know I have my reasons, and anyway she provoked me. But I did act...a little crazy and say some stupid things and even, you might say, sinful things. It is an old word, God, but you seem to use it a lot. Anyway, if you feel there is anything to forgive, please forgive me. Let's start over again. And I have learned my lesson! I am never going to speak to her again!"

That's our prayer. Jesus understands how we pray. He knows how we think, how we see our own side far better than someone else's. One of the questions of the day that rabbi's pondered is how often we should forgive someone else. A leading opinion in Jesus' day

was three times. After that, if the same thing keeps happening, it is unlikely that the offender is sincere in wishing to correct their behavior. So when Peter asks Jesus the same question, since he knows that Jesus seems to be so into forgiveness, he goes from three to seven. “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’” (Matthew 18:21)

Jesus responds with his famous answer which translates either as we should forgive 70 times 7 or 77 times. In either case, we get the point. Become a forgiveness machine. Practice phrases like, “It’s OK. I understand. Listen, it could happen to anyone. Let’s start over.”

We aren’t sure we like that. It undercuts our emphasis on our own rights. It doesn’t seem fair. After all, we are the good guys. In the analogy of a trade, it seems like we are getting a lousy deal.

Jesus disagrees. He says that, in fact, we are getting an excellent deal. Because it is not really true that we are so wonderful. He would say, we are in debt to God up to our eyeballs. We are Charles Barkley owing Vegas \$400,000.

He said our situation was like a man who was so in debt a king was going to throw him into prison and sell his family into slavery. He begged for mercy and the king relented. Then the man went out and put the squeeze on someone who owed him only a few dollars.

Matthew 18: 26 He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

29"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

30"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

32"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Maybe you've heard of these international academic contests where students compete from around the world. It may not surprise you to discover that we, perennially, have done terrible in math against the likes of Japanese and Indian children. We rank somewhere near 27th in the world. But it turns out they measure more than the academic score of the children. They also measure how the children fe-e-e-l about their skills. Guess what? In the area of confidence in abilities and an overall, sunny self-assessment, our kids rank number 1.

We do the same thing with sin. The actual score is not too good, but we imagine that we don't have a problem there. Mark Galli writes about the challenge for us to see ourselves as sinners:

I look at myself some days and it's hard to imagine that I am a miserable offender and that there is no health in me [as the Book of Common Prayer suggests]. I go to church. I read my Bible. I help at the homeless shelter once a month. At home, I do the dishes, take out the trash, and don't beat my children. I don't even ground them. Most nights, when I close my day with prayer (see there, regular prayer—another jewel in my crown), I usually have nothing but peccadilloes to confess—a little sloth here, some impatience there...

Add to this the twentieth-century fascination with self-esteem and a society hooked on affirmation steroids, and it is no wonder that we have created a faith that can hardly pronounce the word [sin].

(Mark Galli, *Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of an Untamable God*, pp. 34-35)

The truth is we have a sin problem. We have a debt. But there is a greater truth: we have been forgiven. The cross means that the debts have been cancelled. We got a deal, the Bible says. Now, pass that along to others.

Do this not just because you are grateful. Do this because you know that the world has changed. The coming of Jesus means that the Kingdom we prayed about at the beginning of this prayer is coming to our world. And one of the surest signs that God is coming near is that forgiveness takes hold. God forgives us and we start to love and forgive others.

In the Old Testament they spoke of the Year of Jubilee, when every debt was erased and people would get to start over again. In Isaiah they looked towards a spiritual cancellation of debts: "Though your sins are as scarlet they shall be white as snow."

When John the Baptist came he baptized them into the forgiveness of their sins. Jesus took that from the river to the streets and from the kingdom coming to right now.

That's why, when the paralyzed man with four, enterprising friends lowers him through the roof—a story that was a focus for an entire day at our VBS—Jesus looks at the man and looks at his friends grinning down from the roof and he says, "Your sins are

forgiven.” The room explodes with outrage. “Who is he to forgive sins?” they ask. Jesus replies, “Which is easier: to forgive or to heal? Rise and walk!”

When we read this, we think how amazing it was that he was healed. For those first hearers, they would have been just as amazed at the claim to forgive sins. If this was the time when sins were being forgiven then the Kingdom of God was beginning to happen. The time that Isaiah had foretold and the time the Year of Jubilee was pointing at is now. The healing is just icing on the cake (although I am pretty sure the paralytic appreciated it a great deal).

Forgiveness is not just a fine, moral thing that Christians should consider. We are followers of the one who died with the words “forgive them” on his lips. We follow the one who rose again so that we could know God’s forgiveness trumps our sin. In response, we are to embody and live out God’s love for others.

Which is a sentiment we all agree with and nod our heads in assent. We want to live out God’s love for others and we would be glad to...if it wasn’t for the actual people we encounter. It is the surly check out person and the overly helpful mother in law and the put-off-the-improvements landlord and the auto mechanic that charges how much for that repair. It is the jerk who thinks your lane on the 101 is his and the cop who could have given you a warning instead of a ticket and that interloper who is sitting in your pew right now!

And it gets worse. It is people who deeply insult us and hurt us and even abuse us. I wonder if you saw the article about JonBenet Ramsey, and how a new DNA test shows that they had nothing to do with their daughter’s murder. The DA’s office in Boulder is very sorry. But how do you forgive what John Ramsey and his late wife have been through this past decade?

When we face a hurt like this, we want to make sure it will never happen again so we keep our distance or we demand some protection. We cut off the bad relationships and keep the good ones. The result is that we are hemmed in and controlled by petty angers and old wounds and unfounded perceptions until we are a ball of rage and there is no exit for us. None, except one. We learn to forgive.

William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas write this:

In commanding us to forgive others...Jesus is refusing to let sin have the last word in our story. In commanding us to forgive Jesus is not producing a race of doormats...Rather...Jesus is inviting us to take charge, to turn the world around, to throw a monkey wrench in the eternal wheel of retribution and vengeance. We don’t have to silently suffer the hurt, to lick our wounds, lying in wait for the day when we shall at last be able to return the blow that has been dealt to us. We can take charge, turn things around, be victors rather than victims. We can forgive. (William

Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*, pg. 84)

There is a large church in Tacoma, Washington named Life Center. Some years ago, their enormous sanctuary was under construction. It was almost finished when a fire broke out. The flames were so hot the steel beams were melted. Today, if you go into their chapel off the main sanctuary, you will see a steel girder cross in front. It was a result of that fire, where the heat welded one beam into another to form the cross.

In this prayer, Jesus is welding our lives to his. I want to be forgiven—I must forgive. Jesus is also welding heaven to earth: the forgiveness that we experience spiritually—the vertical beam—is forever bound to the forgiveness we dole out to others—the horizontal beam. It is a practical extension of the earlier request from the Lord's Prayer: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. At this practical, personal level, we learn where heaven and earth meet. They meet right at the juncture of the cross, at the point of forgiveness.

If I seem to imply this is easy, that is not what I mean. Forgiveness requires a great deal from us. At the same time, it changes everything.

On October 2, 2006 Carl Roberts entered a one-room, Amish school house armed with a 9mm hand gun, a 12-gauge shotgun and 30-06 rifle, along with 600 rounds of ammunition, a stun gun and two knives. He dismissed all but ten young girls, age 6-13, who he methodically shot, one by one. Finally, he turned his gun on himself.

It is a tragedy that we can still feel; a monstrous act. Sad to say, it is not as much of a rarity as we wish it were. It has been followed by other killings, like the terrible events at Virginia Tech.

So you could say that, for all the sorrow, this act is just one more illustration of how hard our world can be. But there was something different about this event. Within hours, a group of Amish were headed to the shooter's home. They wanted to get there as soon as they could so that they could deliver their heart-felt message. Would they discharge their rage at the ungodly events? Would they ask how this wife and his children could ever show their face again? Would they seek some retribution? The Amish did none of these things. Instead, they wanted to get to the home of his family to say, "We forgive you."

I was at a Presbytery meeting just after these events. A panel of pastors had prepared some remarks around the theme, "What is wrong with the Presbyterian Church?" It is a fun and inexhaustible topic, I assure you. One of the presenters was a young man who reflected on the Amish situation. He compared the faith of those people to his church and he said, "I thought our ministry was pretty effective. I thought we were changing lives. But when I look at how these people have sought to forgive that man—I have to stop and take another look. Those people are being transformed by Christ."

Forgiveness turns a tragedy into a signpost of the kingdom of God. Forgiveness changes things.

Dave is a man I knew from my single's ministry in Gig Harbor. He became single the hard way. His wife, who had served as a missionary and was the great love of his life, was killed by a drunk driver. He told me how he went to the trial day after day, just staring at that man.

But while he stared with hatred, there was a battle raging in his own heart. He knew there was something wrong, something that did not honor God. Only in the penalty phase did he finally understand what he had to do. When it came time to make a statement, he told the criminal what he had done. He told them how rich a life he and his wife had shared and how his daughter will now grow up without a mother. He told the man all of this, and then he turned to the man whose head had been lowered the entire time and said, "Look me in the eye! I forgive you." He asked the judge to give him mercy. "I have forgiven him. I would like you to do the same."

It was Dave's finest hour. It was the only solution to the battle. I don't recall what the sentence was for the man, but I do recall that the Dave I knew left that court room a free man. Forgiveness changes things.

One more story: Her dad left when she was in sixth grade. The math was clear to the young girl: her sister went with her dad so she needed to stay with her mom. Years of financial hardship kept this bright, young woman from going away to a four year college. She worked two jobs and garnered scholarships to earn a degree in radiation technology. Through those years her dad's contacts were few. By the time she entered the work world, she figured she would never hear from him again.

In her thirties, she received a phone call. "This is your dad. I wondered if I could possibly visit you. I just didn't want to go through the rest of my life never having met my grandkids." The meeting was arranged and, as they saw one another, he began to explain the years of absence. She just held her hand up. "It's the past. Let's start new."

That young lady is my lovely wife, Cindy. Forgiveness was her only route to give her boys and herself and her dad what every one of them needed. Forgiveness changes things.

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

I realize that many of you came today because this is what you normally do on Sunday. Others of you are making this a new habit for yourselves. You are coming because you find some strength here for your life. The music works for you, the people are warm, and the sermons, hopefully, connect God's Word to your life. And others of you are here this morning because we asked you to have your children here to sing.

No matter which group you are from, I'll bet not many of you got up this morning saying, "Boy, I'm looking forward to having my life changed!" That is exactly why we meet, though. In the Bible it says, "Behold, I am making all things new." That includes you.

So, if I may say so, forgive me for such a challenging, personal message this morning. The truth is that we all have some ways to grow. And since the Lord's Prayer is nothing if not practical, I thought it would be wrong to end this message without making it very practical for each of us.

There is a card in your bulletin that is blank. On that card I would like you to write down the names of the people you need to forgive. (If you are writing down the name of the person sitting beside you, just use initials.) Take some time to think about this. It may be that one of those is yourself. You cannot help from constantly criticizing yourself for the mistakes you have made. It may be that there is someone from your past that you will never see again you need to forgive. Write that name down and make the decision that you will forgive them this week. But let me challenge you to make sure that at least one of those people whose name you write down is someone who is in your life right now.

To begin with, realize you need God's help to live out this kingdom value. You want to be someone who represents God's forgiveness. Then think about how you would act towards them if you no longer held a grudge against them, if you viewed them as wonderful and honorable people. Make a decision to go out of your way to connect with them, just like you would a dear friend.

Write those names on the card. When you are done with that, I would like our ushers to pass the plates again. I'd like you to put the card in that plate. I want to pray over these cards as a commitment on your part to do something about your need to change the world—and change yourself—by forgiving someone.

God, I have called it a trade. We should live forgiveness because that is how you live. Maybe it is better to call it a transfer. You, as the forgiver, need to transfer to us the power to forgive. These cards and names, and many that were not written but who have been brought to mind—they represent years of hurt. Me and my friends here have been deeply wronged and it is not easy to forgive.

Free us, Lord, to do so. Free us to forgive and to be released from this terrible noose that chokes the life of our spirit.

And for these people, whose names I pray over: God, they have a story too. They are your children too. To our unending frustration, you love them, too. Change us, God, to be your kingdom bringing, forgiving people. Let the prayer be true: forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Amen.