

Sermon Text for August 30, 2020

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Genesis 33:1-9, Matthew 6:9-13

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

The great things about Christianity is that it's so easy. You come to church. Bring your sins, dump them on God, sing “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me,” get forgiven, and go home a new person altogether. What could be better than that? All of that works even in a virtual environment. Also, in case you forget, every single Sunday I tell you: Brothers and sister, hear and believe the good news of the Gospel, in the name of Jesus Christ, we are all forgiven. There really isn't a whole lot that we have to do, we just receive, and I've preached before on how the work of forgiveness is heavily weighed on God. Jesus died on the cross, Jesus rose again from the dead. The work was done by God.

But our phrase today should make us pause. Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors. Today we are going to talk about forgiveness, and when you come to church and hear about God forgiving you, well that is easy. But when we talk about forgiving others, or even worse yet, when we talk about forgiving ourselves, well, then that gets a lot more difficult. This topic of forgiveness is easiest when we talk about receiving it, because we consistently think that people have done us wrong and they should apologize. So we find it easy to point out people that should ask us for forgiveness, and when they don't then we feel justified in our actions that put them in their place.

Today we look at an Old Testament example of forgiveness. Today is going to be a difficult sermon to hear simply because in our culture today asking forgiveness for something that we have done wrong is seen as a sign of weakness. But Jesus shows us that saying that you are wrong and asking for forgiveness is the only path that we ought to take as we pursue the kingdom of God. It is hard to ask for forgiveness. It is easier to hear a fire and brimstone sermon where we learn that God has forgiven us than it is to seek out opportunities to forgive others or to ask for forgiveness from others. A parishioner once told a pastor, sorry, pastor, but I just don't forgive, I'm not wired for that. The pastor answered, well, I sure hope you don't sin then.

What we will learn today is that we must genuinely repent of our hardness of heart before expecting the grace of God. Our determination not to forgive another is a form of impenitence that blocks the flow of divine forgiveness. Let' read.

READ SCRIPTURE

You do know the story of Esau and Jacob, right? They were brothers and Jacob sold some soup to Esau in order to get his birthright. Then he and his mom plotted to get the blessing from his father Isaac and they succeeded. Esau was furious and looked to kill him but Jacob escaped. Decades had passed and the two brothers had not seen each other since Jacob had tricked Esau, and Jacob had lived his life in fear that one day his brother would find him and kill him. That day had come. The evening before he wrestled with God and received God's blessing. We pick up the Scripture where Jacob goes to an elaborate plan in order to ensure that he sets himself up as well as possible to receive the forgiveness of Esau.

Notice, he approaches the situation not with the understanding that he was in the right, he knew he had treated Esau horribly, he knew that he deserved whatever Esau gave to him. He bows 7 times as he approaches Esau, ready for whatever Esau might do to him. We have to see that Jacob faced his sin and was ready for whatever came next. That doesn't tend to be our approach. When we have harmed someone don't we normally double down and somehow try to discredit the person with gossip or with words to our friends and family before they approach us. The more we can make someone look bad, the better off we are, we think.

If I disagree with someone about something then I can speak badly of them and that will automatically discredit what they say, even if they are right. If I disagree with the politics of someone then if I say that they have obvious flaws then their politics must be wrong. But Jacob approaches Esau bowing and asking for forgiveness. When we talk about forgiveness let's start with asking for forgiveness and using Jacob as an example of how to do that. It reminds me of the son in the prodigal son who tells his father: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you."

Of course how Esau forgives is legendary and it gives us a warm comfort to know that God forgives us as Esau forgives. Look at vs.4, even before Jacob could say anything, just like the prodigal son by the way, "Esau ran to meet him, embraced him, fell on his neck, kissed him, and they wept." I want you this week to think of someone with whom you have a conflict. I know, it is their fault. Maybe you are someone that there are more than one person with whom you are in conflict. That's a different problem if you find yourself constantly at odds with people, then that is definitely a you problem. But for this week identify one and ask what would it take for this scene to play out between you and that person. Maybe you need to be like Jacob who bows seven times before Esau. Or maybe you need to be like Esau and run, embrace, hug the neck, kiss, and weep.

Our task is to ask for forgiveness like Jacob and forgive as Esau. Look at what Jacob tells Esau after all this drama plays out. Look at vs.10 where he says: “To see your face is like seeing the face of God.” Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Every wedding and every funeral that I officiate over I have to eyeball the crowd to see if there are more Presbyterians or Methodists so that I know which version of the prayer to pray, do I use debts or do I use trespasses? Why the difference? It began back in the 16th century when he translated the word in the King James Bible which states debts as trespasses and included it in the book of Common Prayer. As a result many of the Christian traditions that came to the new world and spoke English as a result used the word trespasses.

The title of the sermon today is forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. This is really what is meant by the prayer, so if we are going to rework the meaning of the prayer, like we have done in the past so far for this prayer, then we would do it again today by saying: forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. In the Greek the literal word for forgive us cancel, so we can take it one step further as we say: Cancel our sin as we cancel the sin of those sin against us.

One of the first Sundays in Salerno as young pastors after the service a retired pastor who was well into his 80's came up to me and said: Bob, you know that for decades the most terrifying part of the service for me has been when we say the Lord's prayer together. There is a single word that causes me pause and makes me not want to pray the prayer. It is the single word, *as*. Forgive us our sins *as* we forgive the sins of others against us. I want God to forgive me more than I am able to forgive others. I want God to forgive me even if I don't forgive others. I don't like the conditionality of that statement.

This part of the Lord's prayer is what makes it difficult. Jesus knew that which is why he gave a commentary on this phrase after he gives the Lord's prayer. Look at vs.14 and 15 in Matthew 6. If you forgive others then God will forgive you, if you don't forgive others, then God will not forgive you. Yeah, can't really get around that, can you. What if we changed the word and said: forgive us our sins if we forgive the sins of others. It means the same. This word “*as*” carries a lot of weight and ought to cast a bit of fear into our hearts if we have been hard of heart to forgive others. We've always been told that Jesus will forgive if we repent, which is true, but maybe all along there is truth to Jesus will forgive if we forgive.

Let's be clear. In the blood of Jesus Christ we do have forgiveness. As we read Colossians 1:14 we know that we have forgiveness of sins in him. As we read Hebrews 9:22 the redemptive work of Christ for the forgiveness of sins is re emphasized. As we read I John 1:9

we know that these verses build on each other. When we read Exodus 34:6-7 we read clearly that the God that we love and that we worship and that we serve is a forgiving God.

But today we hear that if Jesus is Lord, then we must forgive. We don't have an option to be a Christian and not forgive. If we profess that Jesus Christ is Lord then we are authorized to forgive, and to exercise fully and frequently the power of forgiveness. We have no excuse for holding on to anger, bitterness, or a grudge. Maybe Christianity is too easy, but the catch is you have to be willing to accept God's forgiveness. But you can't accept it for yourself until you learn to forgive others.

Okay, I can do that, I think, but you don't mean forgive everyone, right? Just those in my life that bother me, right? No, wrong, I mean those who attacked our country on 9/11, I mean those who look to hurt and harm us. I mean those who are on the opposite side of issues than I am. If we don't make peace with those around us, we'll never be able to make our peace with God.

There are some Scriptures I want you to hear and understand that are related to this. Look at James 2:13a, if you don't show mercy then you can expect judgment. Mark 11:25, if you forgive others it clears the way for you to receive the forgiveness of God.

So, what does forgiveness look like? Well, I can tell you that it does not look like in our lives a forgetting of what has taken place. Elie Wiesel when speaking about the Holocaust said that to forget is to commit a crime against justice and memory; to forget is to be the executioners accomplice. Some historical examples of righteous forgiveness could be seen in South Africa after apartheid fell apart Bishop Desmond Tutu and others instilled the truth and reconciliation commission. It brought out to the light the sins of the past. Our country needs something like that now. There are those who think our country has not sinned at all in its past with people of color, and there are others who think our country has to be turned upside down if there is to be any progress. I think the truth lies somewhere in the middle. But it has to start with asking forgiveness for past deeds and ensuring that the present does not reflect the atrocities of the past, which it currently is.

This is a phrase that should cause you to pause. Don't pray the Lord's prayer if you don't mean it. Unless you are truly ready to forgive others who have wronged you or if you are willing to seek forgiveness for wronging others. May God bless us and keep us as we look to understand how we are forgiven, so that we can forgive others. Amen.