

South Bay Community Church
Sermon Reflections
Forgive Us As We Forgive
21 & 22 January 2023
Minister Doug Ericsson

Scripture Text: Matthew 6:12

Sermon Preamble

We are in the sermon series titled, “Thy Kingdom Come” taking a deeper look at the scripture, commonly known as the Lord’s Prayer or the disciples’ prayer, and how this prayer shapes the life of the believer. We hope to be saturated with this prayer so that it becomes our new prayer for a new year with fresh winds from the Spirit that fills us. In this message, we will focus on the fifth element of the Prayer: “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us” found in Matthew 6:12. Forgiveness is a universal need which is sorely lacking in our world today. Our lives are much diminished without forgiveness. Forgiveness is a manifestation of the Kingdom of God coming into our midst. This Kingdom of God manifests when we ask for forgiveness and when we give forgiveness to others. These words are simple to say, but illusive to live out.

Forgiveness is a total reversal of the way of the world

The natural tendency is not to generally acknowledge our shortcomings. Furthermore, we are more likely to retaliate in kind than to forgive. To reverse these natural tendencies shows the presence of God’s rule and will in our lives. The human life of Jesus manifested the reality of the reign of God. When we follow Jesus, we are entering the Kingdom of God.

Jesus gave us an example of forgiveness in the Kingdom of God when He expressed on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Jesus forgave those who nailed Him to the cross. Jesus extended unlimited forgiveness in this most unjust circumstance in history. No sin we have committed is too great for forgiveness, because Christ forgave in this way from the cross.

As we accept forgiveness, we are free to forgive those who sin against us. Christ’s forgiveness releases us from the prison of our bitterness and resentment. The forgiveness of Jesus empowers us to forgive people by forgiving ourselves and those who have hurt us.

Forgiveness is extremely difficult to practice

We can understand forgiveness with our mind, but too often we find our hearts are very resistant. It takes the Holy Spirit to show us how much we need to be forgiven and to free us to forgive others, as in the Kingdom of God. Forgiveness is the totally counter-cultural reality where God’s Kingdom resides. Our world doesn’t understand it; our world doesn’t choose it; our world thinks it is crazy not to get even, but instead we turn the other cheek.

Learning to receive God’s forgiveness is a lifelong journey. Jesus is teaching us to pray this simple but radical prayer. As we walk in God’s light throughout our life, we discover more and more dimensions where we fall short. When we receive God’s powerful forgiveness, it is reflected in how much we forgive ourselves as well as forgive others.

Forgiveness is a universal need and keeps the channels to God open

Jesus taught us that forgiveness we offer should be boundless, continuous, beyond measure, without limits, and mirroring God’s forgiveness to us. “Then Peter came to him and asked, ‘Lord, how often should we forgive someone who sins against me - Seven times?’ ‘No, not seven times,’ Jesus replied, ‘but seventy times seven’” (Matthew 18:21-22).

The three dimensions of forgiveness reflect each other and is the greatest need for change in our world. We receive forgiveness from God; we forgive ourselves; we forgive others. All three of these dimensions of forgiveness are interconnected.

The need for forgiveness is overwhelming in our world today. It is a universal need. We see it globally, with continuous wars, ethnic cleansing, and racial hatred. We see it domestically with our history of slavery and its aftermaths, treatment of indigenous people, and widespread poverty. We see it politically with politicians and their entrenched followers. We see it within communities with attitudes of us versus them. We see it present within marriages, families, and social affinity groups.

Lacking the ability to see or acknowledge our errors, we react and point at others. Defending our “rights,” we trample on others. The repercussions continue. The vicious cycles continually repeat. Like Adam and Eve, humans seek their own way. Frank Sinatra sang, “I did it MY WAY.” Since we do it our way, how can we be a debtor?

“Our debt” is a relational debt to God that God has paid for us

The King James Version of Matthew 6:12 states, “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” This word debtor is confusing for us today. We don’t have debtor’s prisons anymore. Instead, bankruptcy is our pattern of accountability without payment for debts. It is difficult for us to relate to being a debtor with the consequence of prison. Today, we might have credit cards to pay off, a loan on our car or our house, but these things will not result in prison. Today, some may not owe anything. What does it mean that we are debtors?

Our debt is far more than financial. Our debt to God is a relational deficit beyond our ability to conceive or to pay. We are forever in the Lord’s debt for life, for mercy, for second chances, and for not treating us as we deserve. Facing our debt to God can be very difficult because of our limitations, our needs, and our ability to make things right. We cannot pay off our debt to God, yet God has paid it for us.

Some people can understand God’s forgiveness on an intellectual level, but they find it much more difficult to accept that forgiveness is for them. In most cases, this relates to issues of self-worth with people questioning whether they are worthy of the forgiveness from God. Learning to forgive ourselves comes slowly, but it breaks through when we grasp how profoundly God loves us and forgives us.

Other translations, instead of “debt”, use the words “wrongs,” “trespasses,” and “sins.” Focusing on the word “sin” instead of “debt,” what does sin mean?

Sin is anything that breaks relationships with God, nature, self, or others

Sin is to miss the mark, falling short of God’s standard. God’s Word expresses sins in the Ten Commandments, such as stealing, coveting, not honoring parents, adultery, etc. God’s Word also expresses sins in Proverbs 6:16-19: “There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him; haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.”

Let us note the items not included as sins. Such items are the life-crushing not-to-do items that some have erroneously preached and taught. These items include dancing, watching movies, smoking, drinking, showing ankles, playing cards, and celebrating life.

We handle our sins by acknowledging sins, confessing sins, and receiving forgiveness for sins

We might try to defend ourselves against seeing our sins by ignoring them, denying them, minimizing them, and by comparing ourselves to others. Instead we can deal with our sins by acknowledging sins, confessing sins, and receiving forgiveness for sins.

David Montgomery, a Presbyterian Pastor in Belfast, Ireland wrote an article with an excellent quote about forgiveness. In the article, The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity, he wrote, “Forgiveness is excruciatingly difficult. There are a hundreds reasons why one cannot forgive and a

thousand easier, more appealing alternatives. Many of these alternatives will accomplish something worthwhile. Some will enable us to forget the pain, others will help us understand our feelings, and still others will enable us to transfer our hurt or anger onto something or someone else. But none of them will totally heal or restore the broken relationship.”

Our natural tendency is to excuse our sins. We deny it, defend it, or justify it. Likewise, on our own strength, wisdom, determination, and effort, we do not forgive others. As Alexander Pope once said, “To err is human; to forgive is divine.”

It is hard to acknowledge our sin: denial, deflection, distortion, pride, comparison

We deny, deflect, and distort sins. We do not want our difficulties to be seen by ourselves, by others, or by God. We need to keep up appearances. We cannot hide from God’s light inside of us by polishing our exterior. “The human heart is the most deceitful of all things and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? But I, the Lord, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve” (Jeremiah 17:9-10).

We engage in pride, false self-righteousness, and comparison to others. Our pride gets in the way from facing our sin. We excuse our actions by pointing to others who are worse than we are. The point is not to wallow in our sinfulness, but rather, since God knows us from the inside out, we must humbly acknowledge our shortcomings and receive God’s welcome. Jesus told a parable of two men praying in the temple: a Pharisee and a despised tax collector. “Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt. The Pharisee standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God I thank you that I am not like the other men; extortions, unjust adulterers, or even like the tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone who exalts, he will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14).

It is hard to forgive others because: repeated harms, too much hurt, forgiveness doesn’t seem just, resentment, revenge, removal from contact, and others not acknowledging their sin

We may not forgive because we may have been hurt too much by repeated harms. We may not forgive because it doesn’t seem just to forgive others when they have not even acknowledged their sin or asked for forgiveness. Instead we hold on to revenge, resentment, or just ignore others treating them as nothing. We treat those who hurt us with indifference. Indifference is the opposite of love.

Forgiveness is not possible from our own resources. It takes the provisions of God to remove the harm and address the offense.

Forgiveness is possible because God healed the breach with humanity

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). God created us. God allowed Adam and Eve to rebel against God’s authority causing the breach of relationship. God already had a plan to rescue us as revealed through the history of God’s chosen people. Jesus Christ lived a sinless life and was a perfect sacrifice on the cross enabling us to experience forgiveness. The gift of restored relationship with God, with us, and with others made in the image of God is now possible.

This wonderful gift of forgiveness is ours if we acknowledge our sins in turning away from God, and embrace the reconciling sacrifice the Son of God made for us. Rather than defending ourselves, let us surrender and confess our need for a Savior. This surrender brings us relief like David experienced when he declared, “¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ²Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit. ... ⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” (Psalm 32: 1-2, 5).

“Us”, “Our”, and “We” in Matthew 6:12 emphasize the community, shared nature of sin

Sin is a shared experience in our world. We all inherited this scar on our lives. Its impact is passed down through the generations and we continue to perpetuate it today. Generations after us will continue to pass down and perpetuate sin.

Our communities actively support this rebellion away from the Will of God. As a society, we are blind to our wrongs. For example, today our society celebrates revenge songs of Taylor Swift – “We are Never Ever Getting Back Together”, Miley Cyrus- “Flowers”, and Shakira -BZRP Music Sessions #53”. In our culture, we commonly hear justifications for our destructive, unforgiving responses like, “he should be put in front of a firing squad. We respond by minimizing the reality of our unforgiving words like “Oh, I did not mean it”, or “I was just joking”, or worse doubling down and defending our righteous indignation with asserting that “They deserve it”. Public name calling and shaming seems to be a participant activity in our world today. Just like we do as individuals, we explain away, cover up, and deny altogether our abuses in society, culture, and race.

The reality is that we all share in societal destructive speech. Isaiah encountered the Lord high and lifted up and confessed this reality of destructive speech: “Then I said, ‘It is over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the Lord of Heaven’s Armies” (Isaiah 6:5).

We forgive others because we are forgiven by God

What does the hinge word “AS” mean in “Forgive us our debts, AS we forgive our debtors.”? We do not earn God’s forgiveness by our own forgiveness of others. We adopt an attitude that makes our forgiveness of others possible. The forgiveness from God comes first. The initiative is always with the Lord. “As” does not mean because of, but rather “As” means in the same manner. Mathew 6:12 is a petition to us to forgive our debtors in the same manner as God forgives us our debts.

The Lord provided the way, and we need to respond. Forgiveness always starts with the Lord’s action to forgive. Yet we struggle with forgiveness. Not forgiving is the way of our world that shows up as holding a grudge, seeking punishment or retribution, wanting condemnation, or being callous or merciless. These are things that make our lives together miserable.

Jesus taught the parable of the unmerciful servant, recorded in Matthew 18:221-35. We need to respond with forgiveness. A King forgives an enormously large debt of one of his servants. Later, the same servant refuses to forgive the small debt of another man. The king hears about this and rescinds his prior forgiveness. Jesus says, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matthew 18:35).

The dynamics of prayer invites us to greater intimacy with God

When we pray from our heart throughout our lives, it is a lifelong journey which transforms us, and is reflected in our response to others. This prayer captures our core connection with God. It is not a static, rote, or perfunctory event. As we draw closer in a lifelong journey, God reveals more areas for us to seek forgiveness.

Signs of the Kingdom coming: facing our sins, humbling ourselves, and receiving forgiveness enables us to forgive others, reverses the world’s values, and foreshadows the reign of God

As we face our sins, we are acknowledging the truth about ourselves. We must humble ourselves to pray for forgiveness and accept our neediness. We receive God’s gift of forgiveness that opens the door to forgive ourselves. The gift of forgiveness from God enables us to forgive others like we have been forgiven. Ultimately, this prayer reverses the world’s values and foreshadows the reign of God. This reversal changes everything. Rejection, retaliation, and reprisal are released; they are replaced with acceptance, peace, and reconciliation that is the Kingdom of God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS INCLUDING FOR USE IN FAMILY GROUPS

Sermon Preamble

-What are some circumstances in our world today that are sorely lacking the gift of forgiveness? In what ways would forgiveness improve the situation?

Forgiveness is a total reversal of the way of the world

-What are some ways of the world that take us away from forgiving ourselves and others?

Forgiveness is extremely difficult to practice

-Why is forgiveness extremely difficult to practice? Why is forgiveness a lifelong journey?

Forgiveness is a universal need and keeps the channels to God open

-Since forgiveness is a universal need and keeps the channels to God open, how often should we forgive ourselves and others? Why is there no limit to the number of times we should forgive?

-We are some justifications we provide to avoid forgiving others?

“Our debt” is a relational debt to God that God has paid for us

-What does it mean to “forgive us our debts”, both financially and in relationship with God?

-For the original hearers in Biblical days, an unforgiven debt resulted in prison time. Why is there a biblical principle that failing to forgive imprisons us away from our spiritual growth in growing together with each other?

-How do you feel about the realization that you have an individual debt payable to God that God paid for you out of God’s love and forgiveness?

Sin is anything that breaks relationships with God, nature, self, or others

-What is sin?

We handle our sins by acknowledging sins, confessing sins, and receiving forgiveness for sins

-How do we handle sins? Why is this different than the natural tendency to excuse our sins and not forgive others?

It is hard to acknowledge our sin: denial, deflection, distortion, pride, comparison

-Why is it hard for us to acknowledge our sins?

It is hard to forgive others because of: repeated harms, too much hurt, forgiveness doesn’t seem just, resentment, revenge, removal from contact, and others not acknowledging their sin

-Why is it hard to forgive others for their sins?

Forgiveness is possible because God healed the breach with humanity

-How and why is forgiveness possible?

“Us”, “Our”, and “We” in Matthew 6:12 emphasize the community, shared nature of sin

-Why should our prayers and actions respond to the shared sins that dominate our communities of the overall society, culture, and race in opposition to God’s invitation of love and forgiveness?

We forgive others because we are forgiven by God

-Why is it not true that you earn forgiveness from God because you first forgave others?

-What prior actions of God make our forgiveness possible?

-How and why do we adopt an attitude that makes our forgiveness of ourselves and others possible?

The dynamics of prayer invites us to greater intimacy with God

-In what ways and why do the dynamics of prayer draw us into greater intimacy with God in our lifelong journey?

Signs of the Kingdom coming: facing our sins, humbling ourselves, and receiving forgiveness

enables us to forgive others, reverses the world’s values, and foreshadows the reign of God

-How does praying about forgiveness answer the request for a sign that the Kingdom of God has been coming?