

## FORGIVE US?

To the modern mind the Bible seems out of date. Some may have decided that it is even irrelevant to the “pursuit of happiness.” At the risk of sounding like I am completely out of touch with modern reality, I encourage you to use the Lord’s Prayer daily if not several times a day. It is a remarkable, Biblically based if sometimes troubling prayer.

Troubling? Why should a prayer that Jesus gave to his disciples that has survived for nearly 20 centuries be troubling? Well, there is more than one answer to that question. I invite you to read the Biblical text that forms the basis for it ([Matthew 6:9-16](#); a shorter text is found in [Luke 11:2-4](#)). Then say the prayer. Go ahead! Say it right now.

It is a well-known prayer. In fact, it is so well known that even quite elderly people in assisted living and nursing home facilities remembered it and were able to recite it in worship services that I led in these facilities. This was true in every northern New England town where I served as a pastor. It was also true for people with a significant degree of dementia. They had learned the Lord’s Prayer early in life and, apparently, it was an important part of their faith expression in earlier years. It remained available to them when prompted by someone leading worship or visiting and offering to pray with them.

Come with me into what I consider the most demanding part of the prayer—demanding for us, that is, not for God. In [Matthew 6:12](#) we discover that Jesus included the need to ask for God’s healing power to forgive us our wrongdoing: “And forgive us our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors.” In another version of the same prayer we substitute “trespasses” for “debt.” “And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Then there is the ecumenical version of The Lord’s Prayer. This is arguably the most demanding way to express our sense of guilt as well as our need for God’s mercy. It reads, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”<sup>i</sup>

Sin and guilt are, of course, dimensions of life that the modern mind, at least in North American liberal churches, is often unwilling to face. We don’t want to think of ourselves as sinners. Some of us don’t believe that we should have to ask anyone, even God, for forgiveness. It all seems so repressive. Whatever behavior cannot be denied, hidden or blamed on some one else is best described as a mistake in judgment or an error to be corrected in the future.

Nevertheless, the key words are “*Forgive us . . . as we forgive those . . .*” It seems clear that Jesus knew the relationship between sin, guilt, and forgiveness. Many of us, at some level, also recognize their interconnections. However, we get so incensed with those who “trespass” or “sin” against us that we are not always willing to forgive them—even when the person or group who injured us asks for that forgiveness. What is difficult to face is that forgiveness is not a gift that we seek simply for ourselves. It most certainly is not a blessing that God gives us as if we were the only ones affected by our sin. Instead, forgiveness is a gift bestowed in the context of the Christian community. It is to be shared generously.

One way that I make sense of the need to forgive others is to imagine God’s grace washing away our sin and guilt. We make this possible when we accept God’s grace for ourselves and then allow that grace to “flow” through us by forgiving those who hurt, offend, dismiss or otherwise deprive us of the love that is God’s gift to each person. God’s love is also the singular mark of the Christian lifestyle and the only real basis for eternal life.

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<sup>i</sup> [The United Methodist Hymnal](#) (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 894-896.