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Lord, Teach Us to Pray – Our Greatest Spiritual Need

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TEXT: Luke 11:1-4 (NRSV)

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

On a scale of one to five, how would you rate the frequency of your prayer life; one being non-existent and five being a constant habit of yours? I ran across a rather sad statement recently which read, "Prayer is the Christian's breath, but truth be told, too many people are holding their breath far too long." As the hymn says, "Oh, what peace we often forfeit. Oh, what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer." God gave us this privilege of turning to him in prayer, anytime, anywhere. He's approachable, available; a great gift has been given to us that we can turn to the creator and redeemer and sustainer of the universe, understanding that he's listening to us and he cares about us. And yet this great resource oftentimes remains unused in our lives. We have a variety of reasons for not doing it: busyness past disappointments with it, or for some, it's not being really sure of how to pray – lacking confidence. That's the purpose behind this sermon series – to learn how to confidently pray from the master of prayer: Jesus.

We know from the Gospels that prayer was a constant source of strength and direction for him as he carried out his ministry. And then we also know that God confirmed for us that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and that he knows what he's talking about when God raised him from the dead. So, as believers, it only makes sense that we would turn to Jesus for lessons on prayer. And we've learned a lot from Jesus so far during these past four weeks as we've examined the model prayer he gave his disciples to work from. He's taught us the importance of first talking to God about God, his person; calling him father, and that his name would be hallowed, worshipped. And then we talked to him about his program: "Thy kingdom come." And then we turn to ourselves and we ask for daily provisions: "Give us this day our daily bread."

This next petition in the Lord's Prayer is about our greatest spiritual need: forgiveness. After we ask for daily provision, we ask for daily pardon for our sins. Jesus taught "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." You see, until the very end of time, we need forgiveness from God for our sins. Now, what comes to mind when you hear the word sins? It's not a common word in today's world, we don't use it all that often in our conversations outside of a church service. It's looked upon as being outdated and even antiquated by some people. I remember years ago when Dr. Karl Menninger wrote a book, *Whatever Became of Sin?* It's a fair question, but as we look around us inside of us, we see it still does exist. Something is definitely wrong there, no matter how much we may try to deny it or ignore it or psychologize it.

Let's define sin, as Jesus has taught us: sins are acts of disobedience. That's what Jesus is talking about in this prayer: rebellion against the authority of God over us. It's saying no to God insisting on running my own life, living by my own rules. We all do it. It's missing the mark and falling short of God's standards for my life as I failed to keep his commandments. In Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer, a metaphor is used for sins. Jesus refers to them as "debts." Forgive us our debts. You see, we owe God a great debt every time we sin and we can't pay the debt. We're spiritually bankrupt before him and cannot make things right with him. And that's why God gave us Jesus Christ – to pay for our debts through his sacrifice on the cross. The cross is all about the forgiveness of sins.

And let's look at that word, "forgive." To forgive as Jesus is talking here, that means to sacrifice the right to get even. That's what you're doing when you forgive. It's to choose to actually absorb the cost of the other person's wrong, your debt that's been incurred.

For instance, let's say I steal your expensive car, a Rolls-Royce boat tail valued at \$28 million if you can believe it, and I wreck it. I have no way to pay for the repairs on this car. A lifetime of small payments wouldn't cover it. I have no insurance to take care of the damages. I'm guilty. No excuses. No way out. And I feel terrible and frightened and guilty – ashamed to even look at you in the eye. And you have every right to demand payment from me for all I've done, to get your justice. But imagine this: an amazing thing happens. Instead of throwing the book at me and exacting your pound of flesh from me instead, you say, "I forgive you, Steve. You don't have to pay the damages." What? Now, notice the car still wrecked. Someone has to pay to fix it. And who's going to do that? You are. You absorb the cost of my wrongdoing when you forgive me. That's grace, that's forgiveness. And that's what God and Christ did for us at the cross. Jesus paid it all.

So here Jesus is teaching us the importance of admitting that – of admitting our wrongdoings against our heavenly father and asking him to forgive us our sins because we still do them. We ask him to set us free from guilt and shame and so we can start over. Jesus has covered it and we don't have to carry the debt any longer. Why would I insist on doing that? In the church, we call this kind of preying confession. And we can do that every day of our lives as Jesus is teaching us. Forgiveness is our greatest spiritual need. God's greatest gift to us. As Martin Luther declared, "Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation." So, it's good and necessary for our souls to daily confess our sins to do a daily inventory; name them one by one and ask for God to forgive us and help us to start over. It's good for us to acknowledge that we've sinned against God in our thoughts and words and deeds, and that we haven't loved him as we ought or loved our neighbor as ourselves. There's not a day that goes by that we should not be mindful of the forgiveness and grace and compassion of God. This is a healthy reminder for a congregation and for individual Christians to think of themselves as participants in a weekly or daily meeting of sinners anonymous. True, we are saints in Christ, but we are also sinners. As followers of Jesus, we have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus and what he's done for us, but we still continue to sin. The old person is still there, self-centeredness and pride is still working inside of us, and there is also Satan, our enemy who continues to tempt and deceive us. So, we really do need God's forgiveness, cleansing, and renewal in order that we might be freed up from our guilt and shame; that we might be reassured of our status. And God has provided that for us freely through Jesus. A clean slate awaits those who confess their sins.

Forgiveness is free, as you know, it's not cheap, it came at a terrible cost: Christ's suffering and death on the cross. That's how much God loves us and wants a relationship with us, and through Christ, God generously offers to free us from our guilt and fear and shame. Therefore, it would be foolish to neglect asking for his forgiveness. Scripture tells us "If we say we have no sins, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God was faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." So, in this petition, we're humbly admitting who we really are. We're sinners in need of God's forgiveness, and we are expressing our faith in God and what he's done for us as our gracious and forgiving father.

You've probably noticed this confessional petition doesn't end with God, and me, though – moves on to my relationship with others: "for we ourselves, forgive everyone indebted to us." This petition reminds me that as a forgiven sinner in Christ, I am to forgive those who have sinned against me, who have hurt me, who have been mean to me. Jesus links the giving and receiving a forgiveness, if we expect God to forgive us, we must forgive one another. He says it in various places. "As God has forgiven you, you must forgive." A faithful child reflects the image and values of the father. So, Jesus reminds us here that we are to reflect the loving nature of God toward those who have sinned against me. After all, how can the world learn of God's great forgiveness and grace unless we manifest forgiveness and grace in our own lives? And how can we honestly say that we have truly experienced the immensity of God's grace and forgiveness towards us if we arrogantly hang on to grudges and resentments against those who we think owe us something? There's definitely something wrong in this kind of mindset. It's evidence that we still don't truly understand this grace of God or believe in it. We're still keeping him at arm's length and not trusting what he's done for us through Christ Jesus at the cross.

Jesus told a parable about this: the parable of the unforgiving servant. Perhaps you remember it. There was a servant who owed this king millions of dollars and it came time to pay the debt. And the servant pleaded, "Oh forgive, forgive me. Give me more time. I promise I'll pay you back." And the king took pity on him, and he forgave him the debt. Now, this same servant, Jesus said, went out and found a fellow servant who owed him \$25, and he grabbed him by the throat and he said to him, "Pay me what you owe me." And the fellow servants said, "I promise. Give me more time. I promise I'll pay you back." But instead you this servant, that was forgiven had the other servant

thrown in prison. Now, the king got wind of this and dragged back that unforgiving servant? And you know what he called him? Wicked. You know what he did to him? He sent him off to jail, had him thrown into the darkness. And Jesus said, "So it will be with you if you do not forgive your brother from your hearts." If I really understand the great thing that God did for me, saving me instead of destroying me or throwing me into the outer darkness for my enormous debt, how can I possibly refuse to forgive the persons who have hurt me? The petition is teaching us that as forgiven sinners ourselves, we are to act with humility and forgive as we've been forgiven. The ground at the foot of the cross is level ground. We're all sinners. We all need forgiveness and our hanging on to resentment and bitterness is doing nothing but poisoning ourselves, and that poison wrecks all relationships, including our relationship with God.

A few years ago, clever tongue-in-cheek book came out that was entitled *77 Habits for Highly Ineffective Christians*. I found it rather humorous and filled with truths for me to take seriously, and one of the habits listed was: hold grudges. It read as follows:

Like the elephant, the ineffective Christian finds it hard to forget things, particularly unpleasant ones. If you are to remain lukewarm in your faith, you must learn the fine art of holding grudges. Of course, a good grudge is one that is aged in anger and festering in the soul over years. This could be a grudge you had against a classmate or a teacher or a bus driver from childhood. But I find the best grudges the ones that really debilitate your faith are ones held against others in the church family. There could be instances where you were intentionally or unintentionally treated badly. Well, first, tell yourself you have the right to be angry. This is the mulling stage. Then move from the mulling stage to active hatred. Begin thinking of terrible things you'd like to do to that person. And then the third stage is holding. You see a grudge does you no harm unless you continually pull it out and poke and prod it or mentally play with it. Under no circumstances should you forgive the other person. You should never think "God's forgiven me so much, I shouldn't hold this against them any longer." Stay away from the concept of grace and make them pay for what they did to you. The more grudges you can hold at the same time, the more of the ineffective you'll become. So, here's an exercise to put into action. Think of someone who did you wrong many years ago. Now, grit your teeth. Imagine them being embarrassed in a social situation. Now, smile. Repeat the process again and again.

One of my favorite Lutheran preachers, Homer Larson, said this about this petition: "In a way this prayer, 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those indebted to us,' is a mental health prayer. We cannot be emotionally healthy if we're not living daily with the assurance and joy that God has forgiven our sins and we are forgiving others."

Think of what this prayer could do in family circles and among our friends and other associates. Using this prayer is particularly good for you and me. I found it has blessed my life with confidence and joy as I use it daily. And I'm sure it will bless yours as well as you talk with your heavenly father about your need for his forgiveness and your need to forgive. So, let's use this prayer petition right now as our guide as I close this message. Gracious father, we have sinned against you in our thoughts, our words, things we've done, things we've left undone. We're sorry and we asked that you forgive us, cleanse us, renew us so that we might delight in your will and walk in your ways, loving and forgiving others as we have been loved and forgiven by you. To the honor and glory of your holy name. Amen.

If you prayed that with me today, I declare to you in the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. Amen.