

Sermon Series: The Lord's Prayer -- "God's Conduits"

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Salem United Methodist Church

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Today we study another phrase in the prayer that Jesus taught us in our continuing sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. How does this plea and promise impact our lives? I think this passage reminds us that we are God's conduits. A conduit is a channel or tube through which water or electricity can be conveyed from one point to another—You and I are God's conduits.

Forgive us our trespasses... This part of the prayer speaks to our deepest need: forgiveness, a desire to be restored to a life-giving relationship with God, to wholeness and peace. It is also where traditions diverge in their translations and debate the use of trespasses, debts, or the safest choice: sins... For me, trespasses, while the most familiar, is also the least accessible word in this context. It reminds me of signs posted on trees to keep the hunters out of wooded private property. The original Greek suggests financial debt, a Jewish figure of speech for sin. All of these words refer to our failure in duty and obligations, the willful or deliberate disobedience which throws us into a place of estrangement from God.

Sin becomes the focus of the rest of this prayer- its commission, temptation, avoidance, and forgiveness. Sin is said to mutilate or mar the image and likeness of God in us. It separates us from God. So to what sins does this prayer refer? Our failure to meet the very obligations to God we have just listed in this prayer: hallowing God's name, living by the laws of the Kingdom, doing God's will. We fall short...miss the mark. Our less than loyal rebellion of our loving and generous creator sets up a great debt.

The good news is that God is eager to forgive and pull us back into relationship. God pours the gift of grace into us. But we are not God's buckets. Tell your neighbor, "I'm not a bucket." This prayer reminds us that God's grace and forgiveness is meant to flow through us and extend to others as well. This is why God models forgiveness for us over and over again. There are many examples of forgiveness throughout scripture- today we are looking at the big picture of forgiveness as part of God's reign or Kingdom and how it has always been an essential feature of knowing God and living as God's people.

We are meant to respond to God's model. Forgive us our trespasses...as we forgive those who trespass against us. There are two parts to this phrase- a vertical plea and a horizontal promise. We ask to be in better relationship with God through forgiveness for ourselves. We respond to God's love by reflecting it... or by conveying it to others. This response is emphasized in Jesus teaching through one of the many parables about the Kingdom of Heaven found in Mathew. The parable of the unforgiving servant evokes the memory of Jubilee. The Jewish practice of Jubilee is about God's reign of compassion- restorative social justice and a total reorientation of society. It is economic reform on a 50 year cycle which includes slave release, interest free loans, debt release and the restoration of the land to original owners as signs of God's reign on earth. Though listed in the Hebrew Bible, it is doubtful that Jubilee was ever actually enacted...why? Because we tend to fall short of our obligations to God when they compromise our comfort and self-advantage. Yet Jesus' story describing life in the Kingdom sounds a lot like the practice of debt release.

The parable of the unforgiving servant is about the transformative power of God's mercy. This parable is often thought of as a warning against ingratitude, hypocrisy, and a lack of forgiveness—it is all of these things and more. The most important instruction is the mutuality required of citizens of the kingdom of heaven- the people of God. God has designed a kingdom of conduits, not containers- not buckets- of mercy: God's forgiveness is meant to transform and spread throughout the kingdom, not merely satiate individual recipients. After receiving life-giving mercy a person must extend mercy to others in the same way that mercy was received in order to create a world which reflects the reign of God. The breakdown of the intended system of God's mercy is offered as an antithetical example in this parable.

To begin with, Peter wants a formula. How many times must I forgive? This question reveals how far Peter is from understanding God's forgiveness. Jesus needs us to see differently to know God's intentions concerning forgiveness. This parable is part of Jesus' specific instruction to his disciples and the people on how to live in the church and the kingdom of heaven establishing community in accordance with God's will. He prepares his followers with understanding so that they may become bearers of the kingdom on Earth through their actions, specifically as conduits of forgiveness, mercy, and love.

In this parable a wealthy king decides to settle his accounts by requiring payment from his debt-slave. The debt owed to the king is ten thousand talents: an impossible sum for one person to pay since one talent was equivalent to more than fifteen years of a laborer's wages. This amount is hyperbolic, culturally understood to be the largest conceivable number, an astronomical number. The king's initial response is historically acceptable as the fair and rational decision: selling the slave, his wife, children, and possessions to recover payment (18:25). However, the kingdom of heaven does not work like the old system. Instead of following the old rules, the king does what must seem unthinkable to the

audience: he forgives the entire debt, exercising compassion and mercy without payment or enslavement (18:27). Already, Jesus has illustrated the compassionate generosity of God's mercy offered to humanity in the forgiveness of sins. To be reconciled with God is to be fully forgiven an overwhelming debt which we could never pay off ourselves— just like the slave in the parable.

The parable continues to reveal something about humankind; our capacity for sin despite God's pardon. In an ugly and ironic twist the newly forgiven slave is quick to enact merciless and severe cruelty on his fellow indebted slave regardless of the generous pardon he has just received (18:28-30). Adding insult to injury, the amount of the debt highlights the pettiness of the slave and his unwillingness to show compassion. In contrast with the first slave's incredible debt, this fellow slave owes a measly one hundred denarii. Given that a denarius was the usual day's wage for a laborer, this amount could be paid back in about one hundred days. The unforgiving slave lacks patience and compassion but most importantly he exemplifies diversion from the will of God. By ignoring the merciful model of the king the slave does not spread mercy and continue to build the kingdom of heaven through his actions as God intends. The conflict is between two systems of living. In the old system the debt was due and a prison term was an acceptable response to an outstanding payment; however the slave has experienced the generous mercy of the kingdom of heaven, a new system which requires transformation of the treatment of debt to better enact the will of God.

The need for transformation into a conduit is addressed by the king's rebuke of the unforgiving slave. The intention of God is to bestow a gift of mercy so powerful that it changes the receiver causing a predisposition for the practice of generous and heartfelt mercy, even to those who have offended. The king's words and the lesson given at the end of the parable recall the conduit lesson on mercy; that is, the principle that mercy must flow out of the person as it poured into the person, which is repeatedly presented in Matthew's Gospel. It is seen in Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: "blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (5:7). It appears again when Jesus instructs on piety and prayer when the model phrase "forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors" is followed by explicit explanation "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (6:14-15). Speaking about forgiveness as commissioned in the Lord's Prayer and elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew, Michael Brown says "mutuality is necessary for any society that seeks to fulfill the will of God" (94). When merciful relationships exist between God and humanity, and among people on Earth, God's intention for creation is restored to wholeness in the kingdom of heaven.

What does it look like to be a conduit of God's mercy in the kingdom of heaven? In Matthew's Gospel forgiveness is both received and practiced. Humanity accepts the gift of God's mercy; and the comfortable reconciliation it offers, allowing it to transform them. "Gandhi stressed the potential of the individual to be transformed from within and believed that the transformed individual would in turn transform the community" (1593). The unforgiving servant failed to be transformed by God's mercy. He happily received forgiveness as a bucket which can only hold and limit the outpouring of God's love. God intends shalom: peace, complete reconciliation of all things to God, wholeness, completeness, harmony, and a total sense of wellbeing in the kingdom of heaven. Shalom is not the result of God filling buckets; it results from the abundant flowing of God's love throughout the kingdom. This parable illuminates God's desire for the radical transformation of individuals who outwardly extend forgiveness, playing a critical role as disciples building the kingdom of heaven. We are all in the place of the unforgiving servant: living due to great mercy, yet capable of sin. We must allow God's model, the Holy Spirit, and grace of God to transform us into conduits of God's forgiving love in order to build the kingdom of heaven on Earth.

In conclusion, three points made in this parable, God's forgiveness comes first --Like the king forgiving the servant's enormous debt God forgives us and welcomes us into the Kingdom. Second, human forgiveness is a reflection of God's forgiveness--this forgiving love which enables us to live under God's reign in this way is given as a model. Third, God's forgiveness can become real for us only when we are willing to forgive one another. It is this forgiving of others which opens the channels of God's love in our lives and in the world. When we shut down the outward flow of love to others, then the inward flow of God's love begins to shut down. When we refuse to forgive we block God's love and place ourselves apart- where we cannot understand or receive love. Have you ever seen a bucket of standing water? Gross. The bucket becomes stagnant. On the other hand, when we forgive others, God works in us, changes us, makes us conscious of his life-giving presence...and love flows continuously.

Loving God and neighbor- the two greatest commandments- Love by giving and forgiving- are emphasized in the prayer. This is not about balancing the cosmic books or scales of justice. Forgiveness begins as a gift from God, radical and liberating like Jubilee. Our forgiveness of others is a response to God's good gift. Our refusal to forgive is a failure to love. Like the Golden rule- Do unto others as we would have God do to us. We ask we ask for daily bread, we must help feed the hungry...we ask God to forgive us, we must forgive. This is how to live as God's people in the Kingdom.