

A Sermon Series on the Lord's Prayer
Part Nine: *"forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors"*
Matthew 6:9-15; Luke 11:4a
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The Sixth Petition: *"forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors"* /
Washboqlan khaubayn (wakhtahayn) aykanna daph khnan shbwoqan l'khayyabayn"
(Matthew 6:12)



Matthew 6:9,12,14-15 (NRSV)

⁹ *"Pray then in this way:*

¹² *And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors. ...*

¹⁴ *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

Luke 11:4 (NRSV)

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

Starting tomorrow at sunset, our Jewish brothers and sisters around the world will celebrate **Rosh Hashanah**, which marks the beginning of a new year according to their traditional calendar. I'm sure we will see people posting "Shana Tova," the Hebrew for 'A Good Year!' on social media. Rosh Hashanah will begin with the sounding of the shofar, an instrument made of a ram's horn, proclaiming that God is the King of the universe. With this Jews enter into a ten-day period of introspection and repentance called the "**Days of Awe**" that will conclude with **Yom Kippur** or the "**Day of Atonement.**" People are called to reflect on their attitudes, speech, and behavior over the course of the past year, to confess their sins to God, to repent for mistakes made, to seek to make things right with those they have offended, while reflecting on ways to be and do better in the upcoming year. This culminates in the high holy day, **Yom Kippur**, where they ask forgiveness of others.

Brenda Shoshanna, a Jew, has written that: *"Forgiveness is such a huge topic and mitzvah in Judaism and in the practice of making peace that an entire holiday, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is devoted to it. In preparation for Yom Kippur, you are to call each person you have interacted with over the past year and say, "If I have done anything this year to offend you, please forgive me." And if the person has done anything to offend you, you are to forgive that person as well. ..."*¹

I clearly remember one of my Jewish friends seeking me out a number of years ago on Yom Kippur, bearing a gift (some really nice tea) to ask forgiveness. It was a very meaningful encounter and it made me realize how helpful it could be to formally designate a day or official period of time where one can seek out others to ask for forgiveness from and vice versa, helping move forward when we might hesitate, making it less awkward somehow, and intentionally inviting God into the forgiveness space.

That day I thought about all the people I might like to go to ask forgiveness from, which for ministers can be a long list, since in our busyness and the many conflicting demands on our time, not to mention our preaching, we often can unintentionally slight or hurt someone. I wondered whether our Christian tradition might have partially failed us by not having something like Yom Kippur, an instituted day of forgiveness, where we could make amends to those we had wronged. I thought about how the asking of forgiveness from and forgiving others is an important spiritual practice for Muslims during Ramadan.

¹ Brenda Shoshanna in *Jewish Dharma*

Turning to the Eastern world, the Jains, whom I love, actually have an entire forgiveness month as part of their religious practice. Listen to what Satish Kumar, a practitioner of the Jain religion, writes:

*“It was August 1979, my birthday month as well as the month of **Sanvatsari**— the great Jain festival of forgiveness. During this month, all Jains celebrate the annual event of total reconciliation by forgiving and begging forgiveness of all creatures. This I had been taught as a way of healing wounded relationships. If I had harmed any man or woman, any animal or plant, I begged their forgiveness. If I had, knowingly or unknowingly, shown any disrespect or disregard for humans and nonhumans, I sought their forgiveness. Through this act I retrieved all my offensive and careless thoughts, words, and deeds. In a similar spirit, if I had been hurt by anyone in any way, I forgave them totally and utterly. I declared my friendship with all beings, I had no enemy.”*²

As I was bemoaning that we Christians don’t have a formalized forgiveness practice the way the Muslims, Jains, and Jews do and how I wish we did, I realized that we Christians have a forgiveness ritual indeed, but it doesn’t just happen in the Jain month of *Sanvatsari* or during the ten days leading from Jewish period of Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, but our radical founder, Jesus, requires forgiveness to be a **daily practice** for us, a daily way of life made possible through our relationship with God. It is the most important thing we do!

We remember that Peter asked Jesus (Matt 18:21-22): **“Lord if my brother [or sister] sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”** In other words, Jesus invites us to make forgiveness a permanent attitude and way of being in the world in our relationships and encounters with others. Jesus tells us that every single day we are to make forgiveness a spiritual practice, as seen in the petition in the **Lord’s Prayer**: forgive us our debts / trespasses / sins as we forgive those who sin against us. *“Church council records from sixteenth-century Switzerland tell of a man who pretended that he could not remember the Lord’s Prayer because he knew that if he said it he would have to forgive the merchant who had cheated him. This was something he had no intention of doing!”*³

² Satish Kumar in *Path Without Destination*

³ L. Gregory Jones, “Forgiveness,” in Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), p. 134.

We know that Jesus' primary teaching was about forgiveness "*for everything, for everyone, in all circumstances and deeds.*"⁴ We are told that we are to offer forgiveness and make amends on our way to the altar!

Did you know that two thirds of Jesus' teachings and at least a third of Jesus' parables are about forgiveness? The parable of the prodigal son and the parable of the unforgiving servant immediately come to mind, where our narrow, immature notions of forgiveness in the retributive realm are dismantled and we are sometimes pulled, kicking and screaming, into a radical, countercultural, counter intuitive way of living and being in the world. We recall stories such as the adulterous woman to be stoned, the woman at the well, the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair, Jesus offering forgiveness to tax collectors and the underbelly of society. The list could go on and on. I encourage you to look through your Bibles for stories of forgiveness. I think you will be amazed at just how many there are.

On the cross, shortly before he took his final breath, Jesus pleaded out to God "***Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!***" (they are clueless!) giving God an explanation for the adolescent behavior we exhibit here on earth and giving God a rationale for extending forgiveness to us yet one more time! The very first thing that Jesus is reported to have done in the Gospel of John after the resurrection was to say to his disciples: "***Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you. Then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. 'Receive the Holy Spirit,' he said. 'If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'***" (John 20:19-23)

In other words, not only have we ourselves been forgiven, but we also have been given the power to forgive others, which is the most precious gift we can ever give anyone. Have any of you experienced the joy and freedom that comes when someone forgives you? It is the most amazing feeling in the world! While the Roman Catholic Church has taken this scripture and sacramentalized it to give only priests the power and authority to forgive people in the formal rite of Reconciliation in the confessional booth (and this is a powerful, life-giving sacrament indeed as people have been rediscovering the power of confession), we Protestants, at least in the free church tradition of our denomination, have democratized this process, saying that God has given every single person the mandate and power to forgive others. It is, indeed, our very purpose for being and our primary Christian mandate.

⁴ Megan McKenna in *On Your Mark*

Now while there are all kinds of studies that show the forgiveness is good for our emotional and physical health (withholding forgiveness, for example, leads to the suppression of our immune system, making us more susceptible to disease), and it certainly is good for our spiritual health, the real reason Jesus teaches forgiveness as the core of his message is not just about the individual absolution from guilt but *“its central goal is to reconcile, to restore communion — with God, with one another, and with the whole creation.”*⁵ Jesus was always sending the people he forgave back to live in community, wasn't he? I sometimes sit and daydream about what happened to the many New Testament characters whom Jesus tried to restore to community: the divorced woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery, the blind man, the sick, the mentally ill, the tax collectors. (That might provide fodder for an interesting sermon series!) How were they received when they returned to their families and community? How do we receive people who have been incarcerated back into our community? Or those struggling with addictions, PTSD, mental illnesses? People who have made mistakes in their personal or professional lives? People who have committed adultery? The marginalized? Do we open up a welcoming space at our tables for them in our churches, homes, and lives? Do we help restore their dignity and help them get back on their feet?

So this, of course, begs the question of what forgiveness is. And to carve out a definition of forgiveness we need to first look at what it is not. **First, forgiveness is not condoning, excusing, or forgetting unjust behavior.** My teacher and friend Marjorie Thompson, who has written two books on Forgiveness has written: *“Perhaps the most pernicious block to forgiveness comes in the erroneous idea that to forgive is to excuse. Our sense of fairness, our convictions about justice, our need to hold persons accountable for their behaviors all argue strongly against excusing harmful attitudes and actions. Evil ideologies and destructive behaviors are inherently inexcusable. Fraud, theft, violence, abuse, exploitation, denial of basic human rights—who would ever claim these are excusable? Excusing such behavior condones them. Forgiving is not tolerating the intolerable. ... In some situations it is not desirable to forget. It would be further arrogance for people of European descent to ask Native or African Americans, under the guise of forgiveness, to forget the history of their shameful oppression in this country. Our Jewish friends rightly insist that we never forget the horrors of the Holocaust. Some things must be well remembered if we are to find our way to a life-giving future.*

⁵ L. Gregory Jones, p. 134.

*Some things cannot, humanly speaking, be forgotten. However, the people involved may over time be forgiven.”*⁶

[This, by the way, is the crux of the debate about Critical Race Theory, or talking about systemic racism in schools. One group believes that we must remember the atrocities that have been committed so that we can work together to create a more just world. The other group believes it is better to whitewash over that history as a way to overcome festering divisions.]

Marjorie Thompson continues: *“Forgiving does not require us to forget but to remember without rancor. To remember well is to hold both the victim and the victimizer in God’s grace, with prayer for every form of healing and blessing for both.”*⁷

Second, forgiveness is also not a clear-cut one-time decision or action, but a process, a journey (Wuellner), **an attitude one brings to life** (Rami Shapiro / MLK).⁸ Martin Luther King Jr made this clear with his statement that *“Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude.”* It is an attitude that we must work on continuously.

Finally, forgiveness is not easy. In fact, forgiveness is the most difficult thing you ever will do! Marjorie Thompson has said: *“In the final analysis, forgiveness can only emerge from great strength of soul.”* And in the Bhagavad Gita we find written: *“If you want to see the brave, look at those who can forgive. If you want to see the heroic, look at those who can love in return for hatred.”*

So forgiveness does not mean to excuse, condone, forget. It is not a one-time act and it certainly is not easy. So what is forgiveness? I’m not going to define it for you today but rather encourage you to come up with your own definition as I read to you two of my favorite Buddhist parables, which some of you probably already know but which never grow old. The first goes like this:

⁶ Marjorie Thompson, *Companions in Christ: The Way of Forgiveness* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2002), pp. 60-61.

⁷ Thompson, p. 98.

⁸ There are people who talk about various “stages” of forgiveness and the contemplative thinker William A. Meninger has even written a book called *The Process of Forgiveness*, not only in relation to five different states but also in relation to each of the 9 Enneagram types.

A senior monk and a junior monk were traveling together. At one point, they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a very young and beautiful woman also attempting to cross. The young woman asked if they could help her cross to the other side.

The two monks glanced at one another because they had taken vows not to touch a woman.

Then, without a word, the older monk picked up the woman, carried her across the river, placed her gently on the other side, and carried on his journey.

The younger monk couldn't believe what had just happened. After rejoining his companion, he was speechless, and an hour passed without a word between them.

Two more hours passed, then three. Finally, the younger monk could contain himself no longer, and blurted out "As monks, we are not permitted to touch a woman! How could you then carry that woman on your shoulders?"

The older monk looked at him and replied, "Brother, I set her down on the other side of the river a few hours ago. Why are you still carrying her?" (circulating on the internet)

The second, more contemporary Buddhist parable is *"about a monk who was robbed at gunpoint at a bus station. Immediately after that encounter, he felt great fear. Moments later, he felt great rage at the perpetrator. These emotions continued to wash over him, and by the time he got home he was crying. When the monk told his student this story, the student said, "After all you've been through, why are you crying?" The monk replied, 'I realized that if I had been raised by that man's family and if I'd had his experiences, I would have been the man with the gun'.*"⁹

Tomorrow our Jewish brothers and sisters enter into the Days of Awe leading from tomorrow's Rosh Hashana to the day of Yom Kippur when they are asked to extend forgiveness to all those they have offended. I challenge all of us, who are followers of the Jewish teacher Jesus of Nazareth, who himself celebrated the Rosh Hashana in the manner of his times, to remember that forgiveness was Jesus' central teaching.

⁹ Daniel Gottlieb in *Learning from the Heart*

Let us reflect upon and repent of our shortcomings as we resolve to do better in the future, remembering that Jesus asked us to do the hardest thing in the world as we are daily asked to pray in unison: ***“forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”*** Knowing it was the most difficult thing in the world, after giving the Lord’s Prayer in its entirety, Matthew’s gospel has Jesus singling out and reinforcing this one petition when he says: ***“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”*** (Matt 6:14-15). But even though forgiveness is the most difficult thing in the world, it is also the most important and the most beautiful for, as the Rev. Johnny Youngblood says: ***“Every time someone forgives another person and is liberated from the past, there is a resurrection goin’ on.”***¹⁰

So let’s roll up our sleeves and get out there and work toward bringing forgiveness into our hurting world so that we can get some resurrection going on. As we go out into this brand new week of life that God has gifted us with on planet earth, let’s take on the challenge given first to the church in Ephesus and then to all of us:

²⁵ So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not make room for the devil. ... ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:25-27, 31-32)

Closing Prayer: Lord, we have heard that an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind. Instead of closing our minds, hearts, and hands to others and letting bitterness fester like a seeping wound within, may we be able to enter into their world, see things from their perspective and work toward offering genuine forgiveness as we thank you for forgiving us. In the name of your son Jesus, who modeled through his life and his death what true forgiveness is, we offer up this prayer. Amen.

¹⁰ Johnny Youngblood in *Frederic Brussat’s Twitter Collection*