

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
October 11 & 12, 2014  
John Crosby  
This Day: Be Cleansed  
Matthew 6:12**

A friend says that this part of the Lord's Prayer we are going through together should be called Getting Past Your Past because so often our past goes along with us. It infects our present, rules our future, and refuses to stay in the past. As a matter of fact, great literature and great movies all revolve around this idea, that something bad happens to somebody and there is a broken relationship between them and somebody else. That produces the tension that gives great literature and great movies their thrust going forward. How will it be resolved, and if it is not resolved, what tragedy will happen?

I'm in a small group of guys, and one of them joined us this week after being gone last month because he was out of state with his dying mother. He said the family gathered around their mom, telling stories and remembering. This guy is just a puppy, always has a smile on his face and never has a bad word to say about anybody. If you and he are on the outs, it is your fault. He is just a wonderful human being. He said that they were going around the circle and his sister who is 60 said, "Yeah, when I grew up, my brother was mean," and he realized she was talking about him. He realized that for 50 years, she's held onto that because the past doesn't stay in the past.

Psychologist Rollo May wrote that the greatest single predictor of joy in your life is the extent to which you are connected with other people in loving relationships. That also means that the No. 1 obstacle to joy in life, the biggest reason you and I can't grab hold of joy today, is because we can't let go of the pain, grief, hurt, suffering, anger or guilt from yesterday. Everybody in this room has something in their past that they would love to get rid of but can't.

C. S. Lewis says, "If we love at all, our hearts will get hurt . . . but if we wrap them up and lock them away to be kept safe, they won't heal or grow." He says, "They'll become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable stone." That's what is at stake here, your heart, the most precious part of you. It's meant to live and love forever, more each day of your life. Each day it's either the hardening of the heart, the hardening of the soul, or coming to life. That's why Jesus says,

<sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors [Matthew 6:12].

This is most clear to us in Matthew's version and do you know why? Because Matthew is a tax collector. He knows all about bad debts. He knows that when you borrow money from somebody, you have to pay it back. That is why they do not call them *loan puppies*; they call them *loan sharks*. Debts are serious. They must be repaid.

I learned in my study of the prayer this week that the most important word in this verse is not what it thought it was. I'd like to tell a story that Jesus tells to show you what the most important word in this verse is. This story is only found in the Gospel of Matthew, the tax collector.

**21** Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?" **22** Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. **23** "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. **24** As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.

Obviously, the king was a king of huge generosity who wanted to give people all kinds of things, but he was also about justice and about settling accounts.

**25** Since he was not able to pay, the master

that's the king,

ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

This is a very Jewish story. Justice is important. It is an eye-for-an-eye, a tooth for a tooth. The text says, hearing this

**26** "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'

Ten thousand bags of gold. Right!

**27** The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

It says the master "took pity on him." He didn't refinance the debt. He forgave it, washed it away. When Jesus is telling the story, the disciples are hating. "Get him. Get him. Get him." But when the master forgave the debt, the disciples go, "Oh! Oh! I get it!" Then the story takes an unexpected turn.

**28** "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. **29** "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' **30** "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. **31** When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. **32** "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. **33** Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' **34** In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

Jesus ends,

**35** "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart" [Matthew 18:21-35].

The most important word in that verse may well be *as*. "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," not so that we will be forgiven. N. T. Wright says, "The unforgiving saw off the branch we sit on; we burn the bridge laid down for us to cross. . . ."

The unmerciful servant never felt pity. He didn't want the king's pity. He never felt mercy. The servant wanted it to be about the rules. He wanted to repay the impossible so he could feel superior. He dodged grace like Jaubert in *Les Mis*, who has the great ability to experience grace, but judges others by the law he himself couldn't keep.

When Dallas Willard translates the *Lord's Prayer*, he uses the word *pity*. "Have pity on us as we have pity on others." He said only pity reaches our hearts.

The word *pity* makes us wince, as *mercy* does not. Our current language has robbed *mercy* of its deep, traditional meaning, which is practically the same as *pity*. To *pity* someone now is to feel sorry for them, and that is regarded as demeaning, whereas to have *mercy* now is thought to be slightly noble—just "give'em a break.

Today many Christians say "forgive us our debts" and mean "give me a break." In typically early 21st century manner, this saves the ego. "I am not pitiful. I am not a sinner. I just need a break." But I need more than a break. I need *pity* because I am broken. Anybody who prays this prayer is saying, "I am broken," but if my pride is untouched when I pray for forgiveness, when I say, "Give me a break," I have not prayed for forgiveness. I am like the unmerciful servant who got pitied by his boss. He didn't want to feel pitiful, so he held everybody else to standards. "I don't want someone to have pity on me. Thank you very much. *Mercy* is okay, but *pity* makes it sound like I am pitiful. Who wants to feel that?" Forgiveness is when we give up the right to hurt the other person back and learn to wish them well before God. Forgiveness is not an emotion. Forgiveness is giving up the right to hurt them back and wishing them well before God.

Let's take a look at that rock again. Where is that rock in your heart? What is that rock for you? What is it that's bad for you, that's turning to stone, that needs forgiveness? John Ortberg says forgiveness starts with deciding what's bad. Sometimes it's *my* bad, sometimes it's *your* bad, but sometimes it's just bad. Something in the past has happened and you can't get past it, so today let's talk about my bad and your bad.

**What is my bad?** My bad is anytime that you're less than honest. Every time you fudge your expense account or your tax return. Every time you're unloving with a five-year-old. Every time you should not have made that cutting remark. Every time you should have spoken up but didn't. Every time God gave you a gift and you were not grateful. Every time you gossiped. Every selfish act, every racist thought, every sexually impure thought or deed, every judgmental attitude is training the heart harder. Every human being is in this same boat. Every single one. I'm a pastor. I've devoted my whole life to spiritual growth. It took me about 30 seconds to come up with that list. You know why? Because my wife has done every single one of those things. Will I pay for that or what? No, that list is *me!* It's *my* bad.

The only way to get past my bad is to repent and say, I'm a person who does that. I'm a person who lies. I'm a person who is cruel. I'm a person who hoards. That's me. God, I want to confess

that and I want You to help me become a different kind of person. I want to make it right. Whoever I've hurt, I want to go back to them and make it right. I want to lay my guilt and my sin down at the foot of the cross because that's why Jesus died. I want to let it go and receive pity from Him so that I might have mercy and start again. When I look at the people I have hurt or the things I have done, the only way I know to get past my past with my bad is forgiveness.

**There is another category and that's *your* bad.** In your bad, I have to let go of something you've done to me. It's not my fault; you did it to me. Somebody hurt you. Somebody cheated you. Somebody bullied you. Somebody deliberately insulted you or disrespected you or there is a boss who was unfair to you or somebody violated you so badly, you're filled with anger. Then we have to go back to the cross because our heart has been turned to stone by that anger. We have to go back to the cross to see again how we've been shown pity, and then work toward having that same pity for others.

In the group of pastors I meet with every month, we went around and said, "What's one highlight of our fall? What's one thing we're struggling with?" I laughed and said, "I know what it is! I'm preaching on forgiveness this coming weekend and this last week, somebody impugned my integrity. Somebody said I mishandled money and it hurts so bad." I laughed and said, "How am I supposed to preach on this? It's illogical." But I have to ask for pity again and learn to give up the right to hurt that person back and learn to wish him well before God.

I need to understand what forgiveness is *not*, because when the church talks about forgiveness, we say, "Oh, it's okay." That is not forgiveness! "It's okay" is not forgiveness. "You're excused" is not forgiveness. Tolerating bad behavior is not forgiveness. To forgive someone is not to do what that other person wants. To forgive someone is not to run away from confronting something that's wrong. To have pity on someone, to forgive them, is not even necessary to reconcile, because reconciliation requires both of us to come to the middle and the other person may never come there. For some of you who have been abused, it is not safe go back and be reconciled. That is not forgiveness. Forgiveness is giving up the right to hurt them back in order to wish them well before God.

Whether it is my bad or your bad or **his bad** and his bad is somewhere there in the past, it's left you with regrets you can't shake. Whatever it is, it requires forgiveness to pay the debts, to wash the slate, to be free so that my heart will learn to beat with the love of God and not have any stony parts in it. Would you hold this rock in your hand please as we pray?

Lord, this is not academic. It is not about somebody else. When I say, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive others," it is about me saying, "My bad, I cannot fix it. My bad." Or "Their bad and I cannot change it. Their bad." Or we can turn to You, put our hands on the cross and with Your blood wash our sins clean and say, "Dear God, forgive my debts which I cannot repay as I forgive others who cannot repay me." In Your mercy, in Your pity, hear our prayer. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*