

Best Practices for Followers of Jesus: Prayer, Part 4 - Forgiveness
From the Series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe"
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Introduction

In 1940, the state of Washington celebrated a big event: The opening of the first Tacoma Narrows Bridge. Located 20 miles south of Seattle, the bridge was going to solve a big problem for the northwest region of Washington state. To over-simplify the problem: There's a lot of water in that area, and this would make it much easier to get around. It's not unlike the bridges that surround the isle of Manhattan.

In its day, it cost 6 million dollars. To put that in today's money, this bridge is comparable in size to the new Tappan Zee Bridge, also known as the Mario Cuomo Bridge. That one cost over 3 billion.

When it was completed, it was the third largest bridge of its kind in America. You can imagine that it was built by the best engineers and builders of its day. It was a proud accomplishment.

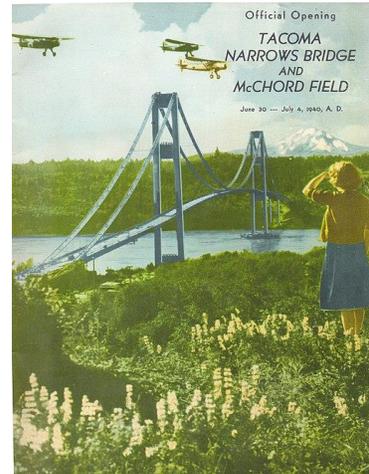
Unfortunately, it had a problem.

The problem became apparent only a few months after its opening. On November 7, the wind in the surrounding area whipped up to 40 miles per hour. That a lot of wind, but it shouldn't be a problem for a well-designed structure. No houses or office buildings blow down in that kind of weather.



Bridge Collapse, November, 1940

However, when you build a bridge of this size, there are certain kinds of vibrations that occur when the wind hits at that speed. These vibrations were not yet discovered in 1940. The vibrations started small, but grew and grew until eventually, the main span was moving up and down and back and forth so badly that the bridge had to be closed. In only a few hours, the vibrations put so much stress on the bridge that the main span tore apart. There was very little in the original bridge that could be saved. To this day, this bridge is used in engineering classes all over the world as an example of how NOT to build a bridge.



Tacoma Narrows Bridge Opening Ceremony Brochure, July, 1940

Think about that – a bridge worth in today’s dollars over 3 billion dollars broken apart and useless. As we said, that’s a lesson for engineers. But, is there a lesson for us who want to be followers of Jesus Christ? Is there something that, if we fail to understand it, it can cause our spiritual lives to be destroyed? It turns out there is. There is something so important that failing to understand it can make a wreck of not only your life, the lives of people around you. On the other hand, understanding it can lead to a fulfilling life following Jesus.

We’ll learn about it today.

We’re in our series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe.” We’re working our way systematically through the Gospel According to Matthew. Recently, we entered chapter six where we started a sub-series called, “Best Practices for Followers of Jesus.” For the last few sessions, we’ve been learning about best practices for prayer. Among those best practices is to follow the pattern for prayer that Jesus gave to his followers.

Let’s read once again:

This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’
(Matthew 6:9-13)

We’ve learned that this pattern breaks into two main parts. The first focusses on God. The second involves us and our needs. We’re in that second part now. Last week, we looked at the fact that Jesus instructs us to pray for our physical needs, represented by daily bread. Today we’re going to start learning about prayer for our spiritual needs. This starts with a clear relationship with God. The starting place for this involves forgiveness of our sins.

Forgiveness is a vitally important topic for followers of Jesus. If you understand it, it can help you to have a joyful and dynamic walk with the Lord. If you don’t understand it, it can make your life a wreck. We’re not just talking about your spiritual life, which is bad enough. It’s not just your daily walk with the Lord. It’s your place in eternity. If that weren’t all bad enough, if you fail to understand forgiveness, you wreck the lives of others around you. You can wreck your church.

So, let’s learn about this vitally important topic.

I. What is forgiveness?

Let’s start by asking the question: What is forgiveness? I’ll mention that some of our discussion will involve the basics of the Christian faith. I appreciate that our more advance listeners are always willing to be patient at times like this. We’ll get to more advanced and practical material in just a bit.

Jesus says that we should pray, “forgive us our debts.” There is a little confusion here. If you ever recite the Lord’s prayer in a group, most of it is the same, except for this verse. Some will say “forgive us our trespasses”; others say “sins”. The New International version that we’re reading says “debts”. Why is this? It’s a long story. Words have a way of changing meaning over time - Especially over centuries. So, if someone was translating this in say the 1500s in England, they might choose the word “trespasses”. That’s why that word shows up in older traditions. When I was young, I spent a few years in an Episcopal church where they use this word in their liturgy. So, to this day, if I recite this Scripture, I tend to say “trespass”. With 21st century English, though, the best way to translate the original language is the word, debts.” That’s why it will appear that way in most modern English translations.

So, what does “debt” mean? The word “debt” means that someone owes something to someone else. Maybe you owe money because you borrowed a certain amount and it should be paid back? Maybe you broke something that belongs to someone else? If you broke something, you should pay to have it fixed or replaced. Maybe you broke a law? That’s where words like “transgress” or “trespass” come into play. If you broke a law, you must pay a penalty or a fine. The payment may be money. The payment may be time and work. The payment might be confinement in a prison.

Debt is a function of an important function of government: Justice. Justice says that debts must be paid. But now, we bring in a function of personality and character: Mercy. Justice says if you owe a debt for any reason, it should be paid. Mercy, however, says that a debt does not need to be paid by the person who owes it. In that case, we say that we forgive a debt. So, forgiveness means a person who is owed something does not demand payment - They choose to show mercy.

Jesus tells us that whenever we use the pattern for prayer that he gave us, we should include a request that we be forgiven of our debts - In other words, that we be shown mercy.

This brings us to another question.

II. Why do we need to be forgiven?

So, why did Jesus do this? Why did he instruct us to ask that God forgive our debts? Why do we need to be forgiven?

Well, because we have debts. And remember the context: We’re talking to God. We owe a debt to God. We are in debt to God. Why?

Here’s where we need to understand something very important about God and our world. We said earlier that one of the reasons a person can owe a debt is because they broke the law. This is what’s important to understand: Laws are usually made by others in authority. Once a law is in place, you are responsible to obey it.

You are even responsible if you don't know about it.

For an example, we'll consider automobile laws. Let's imagine a person that we'll call Albert. Albert is a rare person. He is rare in that he knows nothing about cars and driving. But he sees others doing it. He decides he wants to try it someday.

One day, he sees someone stop their car. The driver steps out of the car and leaves the engine running. They run into a fast-food restaurant nearby. Albert thinks to himself, "Gee, I'd like to find out what driving is like." So, he gets into the car and starts to drive. He doesn't know what he's doing, so it doesn't take long before he's in a car accident - He drives into a tree. Fortunately for Albert, neither he nor anyone else has been hurt - But the car is a wreck.

Of course, the vehicles with red lights show up very quickly. A police officer approaches Albert. After seeing that Albert is not injured, the officer says, "I need to see your Driver's License, Registration, and Proof of Insurance."

Albert says, "License - what's that?" We could go on to registration and proof of insurance, but you get the point. These documents are all required by law. So, Albert is in a lot of trouble. He's going to be hit with all kinds of fines and possibly jail time. It doesn't matter that he didn't know about the laws. If you want to drive a car in America, there are laws you must follow. It's **your** responsibility to find out what they are.

And once you find out what they are, you have to follow them - Even if you disagree. One of those laws involves speed limits. I live in a town where the speed limit is 25 miles per hour. - Everywhere. Sometimes, it makes sense. Sometimes, in my estimation, it's dumb. The main road in my town is four lanes wide with wide sidewalks on either side. You could safely drive much faster than 25. But 25 is the law, whether I like it or not. If you're traveling at 50 and you get pulled over, you can't tell the police officer that you think the speed limit is dumb. You'll get a traffic ticket anyway. The people who made the rules don't think they're dumb. What you and I think doesn't matter.

Here's where this all relates to God: He is the king of the Universe. He makes the laws.

What does the Bible say about God's laws?

The law of the Lord is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.
(Psalm 19:7)

We're told that God's laws are perfect. There are no bad laws with God. There are no laws that God will ever reconsider. He will never say, "That law was a bad idea - What was I thinking?"

And more important: We can never sit in judgement of God's laws. We can never say, "Well, I disagree with that one, so I don't have to obey."

It is our responsibility to learn the laws of God. They make wise the simple – that would be us. The best way to learn is to read the most published book in history: God's word, the Bible. According to the Guinness Book of World Records, over 5 billion copies have been printed.

"But", some might say, "What if people don't have access to a Bible?"

Let's read something else from Psalm 19:

1 The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
2 Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
(Psalm 19:1-2)

If you want to learn about God and his laws, all you have to do is look up. Anyone who stops and ponders the universe should realize that the Creator is the king of all he has made. So, ignorance is no excuse. If you break one of the laws of God, you are subject to a penalty of some kind. You owe. You are in debt to God.

Another word for breaking the law of God is sin. Sin is one of those things that we can look at in a number of ways. Here, Jesus focusses on the fact that sin, breaking God's laws, creates *spiritual* debt.

So, why do we need to be forgiven? Because we are in debt to God.

This brings us to another question.

III. What does God do when we ask him to forgive us?

What does God do when we ask him to forgive us? This one isn't hard at all. He forgives us.

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

This one isn't long at all. But we need to know more about it. So we ask another question:

IV. How does God forgive us, and why?

How does God forgive us, and why?

The answer to this question starts with the way that Jesus tells us to pray: “And forgive us our debts...”

Notice, we are not told to say, “God, accept the hard work that we do to pay off our debts.” Why not? Because there is no way we can pay off our debts to God.

Here’s what the apostle Paul said about sin: “For the wages of sin is death...” (Romans 6:23)

Please remember, God makes the rules, not us. That means, God sets the penalties, not us. Remember, his law is perfect. That means his penalties are perfect, too.

In one sense, if you only sinned once, I suppose you could die for your one sin. But what if you sin more than once? You can only die once. That’s just one way of thinking about it. Actually, it doesn’t work that way. I’m just using that to get us thinking about the size of our sin and the size of the penalty. No, we can not pay off our sins. We must ask God to forgive – to show us mercy.

So, how does God forgive? The infinite God sends his infinite Son to pay the penalty for our sins.

18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, (I Peter 3:18)

Also, Paul tells us: “...you were bought at a price.” (I Cor 6:20)

Because we couldn’t pay, Jesus did. We should have been nailed to that cross, but Jesus went there in our place. As we read, “The righteous for the unrighteous”. Think about it: If there was any other way to pay for our sins, why did Jesus have to go to the cross? He went because that was the only way God could forgive us.

So, how does God forgive us? He pays the penalty for us.

Why does God do it? Because he loves us.

V. Why is this all important, and why does Jesus include this in his pattern for prayer?

So, why is this important? And why does Jesus include this in his pattern for prayer?

First, understanding forgiveness is important because it determines our place in eternity.

But your iniquities have separated you from your God; (Isaiah 59:2)

Sin separates us from God. It's bad enough if sin separates you from God in this life. However, if you enter death separated from God, you will be separated for all eternity. We don't want that for anyone. Talk to us and let us tell you how you can know and understand forgiveness. If you understand your sin and God's forgiveness, you can lead a life where you are secure in the knowledge that you will spend eternity with God - Not separated from him. We'll have some links at the end of this article.

There's a second reason why this is important: Understanding forgiveness is important because it determines our place in eternity.

This is where people look a little nervous and scratch their heads. Isn't that what we just read for reason number one? Yes, it is. Here's why I'm bringing it up again:

There are lots of people in churches who think they understand this, but don't.

That's a scary thought. We said a moment ago that understanding forgiveness determines your place in eternity. You enter eternity either separated from God, or able to spend eternity with him. If there are lots of people in churches who don't understand this then we have churches full of wonderful people who are in for a terrible surprise when they die.

How does this happen? The reasons are too many for us to recite in one session. Jesus will bring this up again in Matthew's gospel, so we'll go into more detail at those times. For now, Jesus gives us a symptom of people who are in this state. When we looked at the opening sentence of this topic, we only read the first half. Let's read the whole thing:

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (Matthew 6:12)

"As we also have forgiven our debtors." Why did Jesus add this? The reason for this is debated by theologians, but here's what I think: I think that when someone fully understands how much God has forgiven them, when they understand how God did it, by sending Jesus to die a horrible death for us, when they understand why, because God loves us, when they understand all this, it changes how they deal with others. In particular, it changes how they deal with others who hurt them in some way. It changes how they deal with people who sin against them.

If you fully understand that you have been forgiven, your inclination is to forgive people who hurt you. Sometimes, it's not a natural inclination. Sometimes, we need to be reminded. Many people, when this is pointed out, they understand. Some people, though, need a bigger push.

So, Jesus gives is to us. This is the only part of the pattern for prayer that gets a foot note from Jesus - It gets a fuller explanation. This is so important that Jesus gives this footnote at the end of the prayer before he moves on to the next topic.

Here's what he says:

14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15)

That's pretty clear. However, we have to understand the place of this statement in the context of the entire Scripture. We believe that God gives salvation, the forgiveness of sins to everyone who sincerely believes. You do not have to do good works to earn salvation. - As we said earlier, it's impossible to pay off our own debt. So, Jesus isn't saying that forgiveness is a good work that you must do to earn salvation. I think that Jesus is saying that the ability to forgive others is **evidence** that you have really understood and believed in the forgiveness that God has granted to you. Now, the opposite is true, too. The inability to forgive is **evidence** that a person has never really understood what God did for them.

Let me give two examples: First, a woman I'll call Sally. I spoke with Sally once, and she lamented how an employer mistreated her years before. In a later discussion, she repeated the same thing. I shared with her that God called her to forgive. She seemed to understand. I never heard her repeat the complaint again. When someone is reminded that they need to forgive others, and they do it, it's evidence that they understand the forgiveness that God has granted to them.

On the other hand, there a man I'll call "Mike." Mike came to me one time when I was very busy - In between services. That's a time when I'm usually helping to set things up for the service. A lot of people depend on my doing my job. He began to lament how a relative had mistreated him. I wanted to say, "If you come to my office during the week, I'll try to listen and help." I couldn't say that though, because Mike didn't take a breath. And he insisted on coming when it was obvious that I was really busy.

It didn't matter that at other times, Mike was told he should forgive. He would just move on to the next person and lament to them. It's been years. Given time, Mike will always fall to the pattern of lamenting about how his relatives mistreated him. I'm sorry to say that this is evidence that Mike doesn't understand how much God has forgiven him.

This is a big problem. If you understand forgiveness, you're building a joy-filled, effective Christian life. You can think of it like what the first Tacoma Bridge was intended to be. If you don't understand, here's what life is like. This person feels all kinds of unnecessary pain. And someday, they'll get a terrible surprise when they enter eternity. Their life is a wreck.

How about others around them? Let's say someone's in a hard place in life. They're thinking about Jesus. They go to Mike and say, "Mike, you're one of those Christians, right?" Mike says, "Yes. Let me tell you about my pain!" Do people who meet Mike want to become Christians? "If that's what a Christian is like", they say, "I don't want any part of it!"

What happens if Mike comes to church? I don't know how it happens, but the Mikes of the world have a funny way of searching out every first-time visitor. The visitor says, "So, how do you like this church?" Mike says, "It's all right I guess. But no one really listens to me here - "Let me tell you about my pain!"

So, not only is Mike making a wreck of his own life; Not only is Mike making a wreck of the lives of people around him; He's making a wreck of his church!

That's why it's important to understand forgiveness.

A moment ago I mentioned that Jesus gave us a footnote. Let me add one.

Daily

We were told earlier to pray for our daily bread. The hint is that we need to pray at least daily. Just as we pray for our physical needs daily, we must also pray for our spiritual needs.

There are two types of forgiveness. One type is the request that God forgive us the sins of our entire life through Jesus. If we have believed in our heart and asked in sincerity, God applies the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to us. That is a one time, once-for-all act. We don't need to ask again. However, it doesn't hurt to be reminded. So, by praying in this way, we are reminded daily of the reason we can happily stand before God as his children.

However, there are also what I will call daily, practical sins. We can talk about them more at a later time. They are covered by the blood of Jesus, so they don't keep us out of heaven. However, they prevent us from fully enjoying the gifts that God has given to us. They prevent us from enjoying full communion with God. So, we ask God daily to help us with those. We ask so that we can re-establish our communication and fellowship with God.

Finally, we also need to be reminded daily that we are to extend forgiveness to others. If we fully understand what God did for us, we will learn to do this.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

So, once again we have visited the pattern for prayer that Jesus gave us. In this session, we've been reminded about our need to seek the forgiveness of God. We've also learned that if we truly understand that, we will extend forgiveness to others.

This is really important. If we understand this, we can build a foundation for a joyful, effective Christian life. If we don't we create a wreck for ourselves, those around us, and our church.

May God help us to understand this vital topic. May we daily seek the forgiveness of God. And may we daily extend it to everyone else.

To learn more, visit our web site:

TrinityTeaneck.org

Or, visit Phil's site:

PhilBrainerd.com

If you want to learn how to start a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site:

PeaceWithGod.net

May the Lord richly bless you.
