

“Lord’s Prayer: Praying for Humility and Growth in Faith”

Lord’s Prayer Fourth Petition

Sermon for Lenten Midweek March 30, 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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We take into consideration the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer this evening as Jesus our Lord taught us to pray: “And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” (*Martin Luther’s Small Catechism*, Lord’s Prayer, Fifth Petition (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986)).

In this petition, Jesus teaches us to pray for a specific spiritual and relational need that we have. This need works in relation to God and in relation to our neighbor, that is, our fellow human beings. We have a need in both directions, for which Jesus teaches us to pray.

Let’s talk about this in relation to God first. Jesus teaches us that one of the central aspects of our prayer with God is to ask God for forgiveness. In this, Jesus teaches us to approach God in humility and faith, not in pride and conceit, and in appealing to God’s mercy.

That humility is involved is evident from this simple fact. When a person asks for forgiveness, sincerely, they are admitting that they are in the wrong. This works against pride and conceit. When a person admits that they are in the wrong, they also admit that they do not deserve anything for which they ask. Thus, they ask only on the basis of God’s mercy. When we ask God for forgiveness only on the basis of God’s mercy, we are “throwing ourselves on the mercy of the court,” so to speak. In this, we are surrendering control to God. We want God to be God, for when we are at the mercy of the court, we are not in control, the court is.

Faith is needed here, that is, trust in God’s mercy and grace. For one could only want God to be God at the point of having exposed oneself in admitting one’s fault, if one is also confident of God’s mercy and grace.

So, asking God for forgiveness is an exercise of faith that goes to the very heart. Asking God for forgiveness is an exercise of faith in the Gospel and evidence that one understands and believes what the Gospel teaches. For the Gospel teaches us that God forgives our sins entirely by grace because of who Jesus is for us, and what He has done for us. We do not deserve forgiveness in the least. God forgives us entirely as gift, which Jesus has earned. In this way, when Jesus teaches us to ask God for forgiveness, He is training our hearts in humility and engages us in an exercise that strengthens our faith.

In this connection, Luther provides a nice understanding of what grace is. I have deserved nothing but punishment, Luther writes in the explanation to the fifth petition. Nevertheless, we ask that we would receive all the things for which we ask from God by grace. Thus, grace means receiving things from God as a gift we have not deserved, not having earned it; but solely on the basis of God’s goodness, kindness, and pleasure toward us on account of Jesus Christ our Lord. This is grace. It also means that God’s forgiveness is reliable precisely because we have not deserved it, but because Jesus Himself has accomplished it.

The second relation that Jesus puts us in with this petition of the Lord’s Prayer is our relation to our neighbor. Forgive us Father, “as we forgive those who have sinned against us.”

For starters, let us understand our neighbor in moving from closer to more remote relationships. The closest would be immediate family: spouse and children, mom and dad, brothers and sisters. This works between spouses. It works from parents to children and children to parents. It works among siblings. Then we could expand this further to more extended

relations.

The next most important move outward involves relations within Christian congregations. This is because Christians in congregations are knitted together by the same Holy Spirit and the same body and blood of Christ. They have actually made commitments to each other.

From there we could go to other important relationships in human society; friends, business associates. Then there is your neighbor next door or down the street. Then there is the neighbor that is a stranger.

It is significant that Jesus ties together our asking God to forgive us and our forgiving our fellow humans by that little word “as,” as we forgive our neighbor. He does indeed tie them together. If we do not acknowledge that, then we are disregarding what Jesus has actually said.

But how do they relate to each other. What I mean is how can we understand our asking God for forgiveness and forgiving our neighbor as tied together?

We could talk about it like this: They are tied to each other because the same human heart is involved with both. The heart that asks for God’s forgiveness is the same heart that either does or does not forgive one’s neighbor. The heart that is in humility before God in asking God for forgiveness is the same heart that would not be willing to forgive someone else, if that were the case. But being unwilling to forgive someone else is not the fruit of humility. It is the fruit of pride and conceit. It exhibits a sense of superiority, and therefore the sense of being so deeply offended that there is no way one could forgive that other person. Thus, if the heart that purports to be humble before God in asking God for forgiveness and yet does not forgive someone else is in a fundamental contradiction.

Significantly, the honest and forthright appraisal of this in one’s life then generates even more need to ask God for forgiveness.

We should not read the “as” as a condition, however, meaning that God would forgive us only on the condition that we forgive others. I think we should read it more like two sides of the humility of faith in the heart that are real at the same time, and one illuminates the other. To not be willing to forgive is not humility. This exposes pride. To ask God for forgiveness is humility. This humility before God works humility and the fruit of humility toward the neighbor. If one forgives the neighbor, one’s humility with God is being applied outwardly in relation to the neighbor.

But one of the objections is: That person has not deserved my forgiveness. Let the one who thinks so take note of what Jesus’ response would be: Well, you have not deserved God’s forgiveness, either. The dynamics are the same. God forgives us by grace. We forgive our neighbor by grace.

So, Jesus is teaching us in this petition to recognize that we have a great spiritual need. It is the need to undermine and reduce the power of pride in our lives. We need our Father’s great help in this regard. We also have the spiritual need of growth of our trust in God’s mercy. Jesus teaches us to ask for God’s help in both of these things when He teaches us the fifth petition.

This help takes on a practical aspect with respect to other people, particularly in Christian congregations. This is because the pride of not forgiving others tends to produce sin in the heart and pretty awful behavior that is also sin, as the Apostle Paul teaches in Ephesians chapter four. Not being willing to forgive produces bitterness of spirit. It also produces wrath and the things being angry does, particularly in speech, but also in actions. A couple of those things are “clamor” and “slander” (Ephesians 4:30-32).

Clamor means loud or vehement shouting or noise, according to the Oxford Dictionary. It also means protest and demand. When one puts clamor and slander together one gets the picture

of the noise of speaking evil about the person who one thinks has done one harm. The pride associated with not having a forgiving heart works these things. Worst of all, it generates malice, which is evil will.

All these things grieve the Holy Spirit, which is God's seal of our hearts in the new birth of faith for the day of redemption.

So Jesus teaches us in the fifth petition to be praying against these dark spiritual enemies of the soul, so that we would be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32).

There are a couple of other points to make. One is that with respect to our neighbor, it is assumed that the person who has done the wrong is asking for forgiveness. This is evident in Jesus's parable of the unforgiving servant, where He talks about both the unforgiving servant and the other servant begging for forgiveness (Matthew 18:26, 29). God is under no obligation to forgive us, so to speak. So, if we do not think we need forgiveness and do not ask for it, we have no reason to anticipate forgiveness from God. Likewise, it could be said that a person should not have an expectation of receiving forgiveness from someone they have wronged if the person does not ask the person they have wronged for forgiveness.

But let us be careful with this, lest one think that one can have a proud and unforgiving heart until the person asks for forgiveness. Having such a heart, one would scarcely be prepared to forgive when the need arises. But if the need and the call to forgive does not arise because the one who has wronged another does not ask for forgiveness, well then that is that.

Another consideration has to do with the wrong. No one is under any kind of need to ask someone else for forgiveness where no wrong has been done; and this is an objective standard. It is important to be cautious in "taking offense." The humility that asks God for forgiveness is also quite cautious about taking offense and finding fault, for the standard involved is an objective one. A person who is "taking offense" could very well be in the wrong in doing so.

We thank God for His grace and mercy toward us on account of Jesus that Jesus Himself has earned and which God gives to us as an unfailing gift. We ask Jesus to train our hearts in humility and deepen our faith in God's grace as we ask God to forgive our sins. We thank God that Jesus is our righteousness before Him. So too we ask God to work in us forgiving hearts with respect to our neighbor in the forgiveness He extends to us, so He too will train our hearts in kindness, humility, and peace. Amen.