

## The Lord's Prayer: Prayer of Cleansing & Release

Matthew 18:21-35

August 22, 2010

One of the things that steals our peace is guilt and shame over the harm we may have done to others. If we are ashamed about something we've done, we will lie about who we are. With each successive trespass and corresponding secret, we wall ourselves off even more from those around us – we isolate ourselves, lest they should know our secrets.

Maybe you feel guilt over the things you have done. If so, remember that imperfection is not unique to you. Jesus *assumed* we would trespass in others' lives in hurtful ways, when he taught us to pray, *forgive us our trespasses*. He assumed this because he understands the fullness of what it means to be a part of fallen humanity better than anyone else. He knows that while our intentions may be good, we inevitably are going to make a mistake.

One of my favorite shows on TV is "Keeping Up Appearances." It is one of those British shows on PBS. The main character is a woman named Hyacinth Bucket. The truth of the matter is that she is a middle class woman married to a middle class civil servant. However, she expends a great deal of time and energy trying to make people think she is something she is not. She desperately wants people to think she is a refined woman of high society – so much so that she will not allow anyone to pronounce her last name "Bucket," but insists it is "Buckét." Her days are full of high stress as she attempts to keep others from knowing exactly who she really is.

This show may be a comedy, but you and I do this every day of our lives in one shape or form – and it robs us of the peace we could be enjoying. So, how do we throw off the façade and embrace our own truth? Confession.

I read that one ancient definition of the word *confession* is "to declare or reveal one's identity." That definition fits nicely. Because when we confess to God or to someone else we are sharing our whole self with them – both the good and the bad. We tear down the walls that separate and isolate us, and re-establish community. Once we are honest about who we are and what we have done, then (and only then) can we drink deeply of the healing grace and unconditional forgiveness of God.

It's interesting to me that when a Catholic person goes to confess their sins to the priest, upon entering the sacred space of the confessional, the first thing they normally say is, "Bless me, for I have sinned." Not *forgive me*, but *bless me*. So then, perhaps a sin is an opportunity to be blessed. But how? Author, Wayne Muller, writes, "When we confess our trespasses in prayer, we can begin to hear the teaching embedded in each mistake. ... We make the same mistakes again and again, until one day we hear their message; there is a better path, a truer way to live."

What a blessing it is to have the Holy Spirit reveal to us a better way – a way of peace and a way of blessing.

Once we have asked for forgiveness for our own trespasses, we come to the only action we are commanded to do in the entire prayer: the act of forgiveness. “Forgive us our trespasses, *as we forgive those who trespass against us.*”

Most people hang on tightly to anything done to them. Anytime the offending person enters their thoughts their fist tightens around the hurt. When we choose not to offer forgiveness, we condemn ourselves to being trapped in a dance of suffering with that person forever. The main problem with such a dance is...usually the person who offended you doesn't realize that you have chosen them for this perverted dance relationship.

It is the context of being forgiven as we forgive others that our Matthean story shines. I believe the story is relatively simple and self-evident in its truth, so I'm not going to spend a great deal of time unpacking it. However, it illustrates that forgiveness is not a simple act of reciprocity. In other words, we have been forgiven a pound, so we should forgive a pound in return. Instead, the reality is you and I have sinned against the holy God of Creation. Our sin is enormous and incalculable. Others' sin against me is minuscule in comparison. Forgiving those who sin against me should be an overflow of the forgiveness I have already received from the Lord.

Forgiving others can be very difficult for us. However, we are told in the passage today, and in The Lord's Prayer, that as we forgive others so will we be forgiven. It has been said that a man came up to John Wesley one day and said, “I can never forgive that man!” Wesley said, “Then I hope you never sin.” Forgiveness is a two way street. Don't burn the bridge you will need as well.

In teaching about forgiveness Pastor Rick Warren says, “You cannot receive what you are unwilling to give.” I would take that further to say that when you forgive another person, you become more like God, in the sense that we are one step closer to regaining the full image of God in which we were created. God is a giver and a forgiver, and we were created in His image. So, when we choose (with the help of the Holy Spirit) to give and forgive, we leave a little bit of fallenness behind and help to usher in a little more of the Kingdom of God.

So, how do we move toward forgiving others – especially for the things that have hurt us very deeply?

There is a Tibetan parable about water and salt. First, take a palm-full of salt and stir it into a glass of water. If you drink the water it will leave terrible taste in your mouth. But if you take that same palm-full of salt and dissolve it in a clear mountain lake, and then drink some of that water, the water still tastes sweet.

The problem, the Tibetans say, is not the salt. The problem is the size of the container that holds the salt.

Again I turn to the wisdom of Wayne Muller. He says:

Forgiveness requires a deep willingness to become more spacious. When we pray to be able to forgive, we are praying to be made larger – to become so ample and clearheaded that we can bear even this hurt...while still feeling blessed by the deep and faithful company of God.

I would add to Muller's idea the notion that spaciousness includes the heart of God. If we want to be able to move beyond the hurt, then we should ask the Holy Spirit to help cultivate in us a God-sized heart.

There is one thing to remember, however. Coming to the point of forgiving others does not mean that the other person's act did not happen, or that the hurt associated with it completely goes away prior to forgiveness being offered. The salt is still in the water...if you get my meaning.

To forgive as we have been forgiven, means to identify more with Christ, and in so doing, become more Christ-like. To forgive is to bear what we have been given, to take refuge in our heavenly Father, and come to realize that the Kingdom of God is so much larger than our sorrows so that we can do no less than Christ did from the cross when he offered, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

When we seek to put aside the façade through confession – the façade we have tried so hard to maintain, we take a step toward peace. And when we offer forgiveness that has been given to us, we take another step toward peace. It is my prayer that you will prayer this prayer – and do this prayer – so that you may enjoy peace with people around you...and peace with God.