

A PRAYER FOR THE HOPELESS

SERIES: TEACH US TO PRAY



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Matthew 6:12-13
Final Message
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I want to begin this morning by taking us back 2,000 years into the heart of the Roman Empire. Well, not quite 2,000 years. More like 1,800 or 1,900 years to the second and third centuries A.D. In these days, Christianity had spread considerably from the relatively small following that Jesus had during his life to a religion with followers throughout the Roman Empire. Rome didn't know quite what to make of these Christians. In fact, they called them cannibals because they ate the body and blood of Jesus and "incestuous" because they called each other brother and sister.

While Rome did not know quite what to make of Christians, one thing is certain: they felt threatened by them. They believed this new "cult" to be a threat to Roman culture, religion, and power. So Rome did what Rome did to anyone who threatened them: they killed them. This is the period of church history in which martyrdom became so prominent. Christians would be rounded up and asked to recant their faith. When they refused, they would be burned at the stake or thrown into the arena to face the lions or the gladiators. In the face of this kind of persecution, it was obvious that people needed to depend on God for protection, provision, and everything else in life.

In the fourth century, things changed significantly. The Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Christians now enjoyed legal protection, and martyrdom became a concern of the past for most Christians. This new and safer life presented a new kind of challenge for the church. As life became safer, the church became more concerned with wielding its newfound power than actually following after Jesus. Some Christians began to notice this, and they knew they needed to do something about it. There was no giving up the cultural power and comfort that the church had gained, but individual Christians recognized that they could give up their power and their comfort to place themselves in situations where they were again forced to depend on Jesus for protection and provision, as their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents had been forced to do. This group

of Christians is called the desert fathers and mothers because the desert was the place where they went to give up their power, comfort, and safety. Sometimes, these followers of Jesus are called "bloodless martyrs" or "white martyrs" (in contrast to the "red martyrs" who came before them). These white martyrs were martyrs, not in that they gave up their lives or spilt their blood for their allegiance to Jesus, but rather because they gave up their comfort and security in order to gain some of the *spiritual benefits* of those whose lives were in danger because of their faith.

White martyrs recognize that it is more challenging to follow Jesus when your life is easy than when it is hard. They recognize that it is more challenging to become like Jesus when your life is comfortable than when it's rocky. White martyrs recognize that it is harder to depend on Jesus when your life is safe than when you recognize that your life is a battlefield.

This morning, as we finish The Lord's Prayer, Jesus will remind us that we are not safe. Left on our own, we are not safe. We are in grave danger—danger in this life and the life to come. Left on our own, we are *helpless*. But he is also going to remind us that we are not alone. We are never alone. Rather, we are in the loving hands of our Father, who is in the heavens. As his children, we can come to him—helpless, needy, vulnerable, and desperate—and he will provide for us. He will protect us and he will save us.

This is our final week in The Lord's Prayer. We have called this series "Teach Us to Pray" because this is the request that Jesus' disciples bring to him, and this is the request that we also ought to bring to him. "Jesus, teach us to pray." In this prayer, Jesus certainly teaches us how to pray—this prayer is a model for our prayers—but learning how to pray must begin first with learning *to* pray. To that end, we have been intentionally giving ourselves to prayer over the last four weeks and have used the Lord's Prayer as a way to do that.

So, would you please stand as we pray The Lord's Prayer together one last time. Let's pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
The power, and the glory,
For ever and ever.
Amen.

Praying for forgiveness

As we have noted, the Lord's Prayer is comprised of a series of six petitions or requests. Last week, we looked at the third petition, "Give us this day our daily bread." That prayer was a prayer of dependency in which we recognize that we cannot provide for our own physical needs (i.e., for food, shelter, clothing, relationships, peace with our neighbors, etc.). We cannot provide for our own needs, so we ask God to provide for us. In the last two petitions, which we will look at today, we recognize that we are not only unable to provide for our own physical needs, but we are also unable to provide for our spiritual needs.

Let's take a look again at the first of these final two petitions.

Matthew 6:12:

and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

You may have noticed that we used different language when we prayed the prayer together earlier than when we read that text from the ESV. The ESV says, "forgive us our debts" rather than our "trespasses." The ESV is a bit more literal here. The word used here (*opheilemata*) literally means "debts," as in the money you owe someone. However, it is clear that Jesus uses it to refer to our spiritual debt rather than our financial debt. Jesus is talking about forgiveness of sins. Notice, though, that he doesn't just use the generic term for sin. Rather, he uses the word "debt" because he wants us to understand something important about our sin—namely that our sin leaves us indebted to God. We owe God something because we have sinned against him.

Today, it is much more common to hear people talk about "brokenness" than "sin." *This world is so broken. My life is so broken. We need God to come in and heal us, fix the world, and restore all that is broken.* Absolutely. That is a perfectly accurate, perfectly biblical way to talk about sin. But it is not a sufficient way to talk about sin. If we are going to be honest about our situation before God Almighty, we must not simply acknowledge that we are broken. We must acknowledge that this brokenness has left us with a debt—a spiritual debt that we owe to God. It is a debt that we cannot pay. No amount of goodness can pay back that debt. At the end of time, we will not stand before God while he weighs our good against our bad to see if we have sufficiently made up for the debt that we owe. When it comes to our sin, when it comes to our spiritual debt, we are *helpless*.

In the Lord's Prayer, we are invited to admit that we are unable to save ourselves. Just as we are unable to provide bread for ourselves without the Lord's help, so too we are unable provide salvation for ourselves. In the face of our sin, we are helpless.

But The Lord's Prayer is a prayer for the helpless. And so Jesus teaches us to pray, "Father, forgive us our debts." This is where the spiritual life starts—admitting that we are helpless, admitting that we have a debt that we cannot pay, and asking God to have mercy on us.

Every time we pray The Lord's Prayer, we are reminded of that. We are also reminded of the grace that we have been given in Jesus. We are unable to save ourselves, but Jesus has paid our debt. He left heaven and came down to earth. He took on flesh so that he could experience what it's like to be human. He lived a perfect life so that he had no debt of his own to pay back. Then he paid the price for our sin in his death on the cross.

The Apostle Paul puts it like this in Colossians 2:13-14: "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

What is it, exactly, that God nailed to the cross? The body of his only Son, Jesus. As he did, he nailed our debts there with him so that we could be forgiven and made alive together with him.

If you have never prayed this prayer, if you have never asked God to forgive your sins, I hope that you will today. God loves you. He sent Jesus to die for you.

He wants to be in a relationship with you, and that relationship starts with confessing your sin and trusting in Jesus. The Bible tells us that if we confess our sin, God is faithful and just to give us our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Confess your sins to God and ask for his forgiveness so that you can experience life and love in him.

Many of us here have prayed that prayer already. We have already given our lives to Jesus and experienced his forgiveness, so we might feel this prayer isn't for us. However, The Lord's Prayer is a prayer for believers. Only followers of Jesus can truly pray, "Our Father." It is those who have placed their faith in Jesus that are called children of God. So this is a prayer for believers. We are the ones who are told to pray, "forgive us our trespasses." Why is that? If we have already been forgiven, why must we ask for forgiveness again and again and again?

It is not because we sinned again since the last time we prayed. It is not that we have created for ourselves another debt that must be paid back. Jesus has paid the debt. When we place our faith in him, he forgives all of our sins—past, present, and future.

Rather, when we come to God in prayer, confessing our sins to him and asking for forgiveness over and over again, we are becoming white martyrs. We are willingly adopting a practice—the practice of confession—that places us in a situation where we are reminded anew of our need for God. We are forced to depend on him. By regularly confessing our sins to God, we are reminding ourselves that we cannot save ourselves so that we might constantly live in the grace of the one who died for us.

I have a few rhythms of prayer that I use each morning and evening. As a part of that, each morning, I preach the gospel to myself. I remind myself that I am in Christ—that I am forgiven and accepted by God. God no longer holds my sin against me, and he has invited me into this family as his beloved child, all because of his grace, not my works.

Each evening, I ask God, among other things, to show me where I was in sin that day. I walk through the events of the day with the Lord and ask him to show me where I was in sin. Then I confess these things to the Lord and remind myself that I am forgiven. The next morning, I start the day again by preaching the gospel to myself—I am forgiven and accepted by God.

How do you start your day? By reading the news? Checking your email? Jumping on social media?

How do you end your day? Falling asleep to Netflix? Catching up on Instagram? Worrying about all that you did not get done that day and what you need to get done the next day?

Let's start and end the day with the gospel—confessing our sins, asking for forgiveness, and reminding ourselves that we are God's beloved children and he is our gracious Father.

Praying for transformation

The prayer for forgiveness, however, does not stop with God's forgiveness toward us. It also extends to our forgiveness towards others. Look again at Matthew 6:12:

and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

God's forgiveness of our sins is linked to our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us. This connection is picked up again in verses 14-15, the verses that immediately follow The Lord's Prayer. There, Jesus says: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

If this was the only word in Scripture we had about forgiveness, we might conclude that God's forgiveness is conditional on our forgiveness. If we forgive others, God will forgive us. But if we don't forgive others, then God won't forgive us either. That's what it says, after all. But when we read the rest of Scripture, it becomes abundantly clear that God's forgiveness is conditional only upon our faith in him. If we place our faith in him as our Lord and Savior, then we will be forgiven. God will not withhold his forgiveness because he knows we haven't forgiven someone else. Rather, Jesus is saying that a heart that forgives is evidence of a heart that has been forgiven. If we have truly been forgiven by God, then that forgiveness should naturally flow out to those around us.

When we pray, "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," we should ask ourselves, "Do I forgive others the way that I want Jesus to forgive me?"

A few years ago, I had a friend do something that felt like a complete stab in the back. This friend had made a decision that was incredibly hurtful to someone I loved, but it wasn't too late to undo that decision. I talked to

this friend several times in the days that followed and begged him to reverse the decision. Even though I was angry, I was ready to forgive this friend if he would just undo the damage. But he wouldn't. And for some time, I didn't forgive him.

When I hear Jesus' words, "forgive us our trespasses, as we have forgiven those who trespass against us," I think about that incident. Is that the way that I want God to forgive me—forgiveness that is conditional on me undoing the damage of my sins? No way.

Why is it, then, that I had such a hard time forgiving my friend? Why is it that many of us have such a hard time forgiving those who have hurt us so deeply, whether that be a parent who abused us or a spouse who left us or a friend who turned their back on us? Is it because we haven't truly been forgiven by God?

For some of us, that might be the case. Paul tells us to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). If you cannot forgive someone, it is worth asking whether you have put your faith in Jesus and received forgiveness from him.

However, it might also be the case that you have been forgiven—that you have been reconciled to God by faith in Jesus, and that you have been born again into new life in Christ—but you have not yet been transformed into the image of Jesus to the degree that you are able to forgive those who sin against you. You have the Spirit living in you, but he has not yet transformed your heart to the degree that allows you to truly forgive like you have been forgiven.

That was me. Perhaps that's you as well. If that is you, you need to admit that you are *helpless* rather than trying to muster up the strength to forgive. You are helpless when it comes to your salvation, and you are helpless when it comes to your sanctification, the process of becoming more like Jesus. You are unable to change yourself. We are unable to change ourselves.

Alcoholics Anonymous, which was founded by Christians and had its roots in Scripture, begins with this assumption. Step One in A.A. says, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable." If an alcoholic is going to break their addiction to alcohol, they must first admit that they are powerless.

The same is true for all of us with any of our sins. We are powerless. On our own, we cannot just find it

in ourselves to become more like Jesus. We cannot will sin out of our lives. The problem is that, for many of us, lives seem manageable. We are able to control and suppress our sin enough so that we have the illusion of being in control. Then we begin to think that we are the ones responsible for our own sanctification.

No, no, no! We can't change ourselves. We are not able to do so. But, we have been given the Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is transforming us into the image of Jesus. It is his power that brings about change in our lives. If we are going to forgive like Jesus has forgiven us, then the only hope we have is to admit our inability to change ourselves and look to the power of the Spirit within us to help us become more like Jesus.

This is what we read in 2 Corinthians 3:18: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

Transformation is the work of the Spirit.

But in order for the Spirit to work, we must recognize that we are helpless. This pandemic has helped many of us recognize our helplessness. If you are anything like me, then you have been at your worst more than once over the last 18 months. Hardship has a way of bringing out our worst, but hardship is also often the catalyst for change. Psychologists call this post-traumatic growth—the personal growth that tends to take place in someone after they experience a trauma. Does anyone feel a little traumatized right now? Use it as an opportunity to admit your inability to change yourself and invite the Spirit to do his transformation work in you.

Not all of life is lived in a pandemic, thank God! Not all of life is a trauma. When life begins to feel manageable again—and perhaps for you, it feels like it already is—then we have to find ways to remind ourselves of our weaknesses. We need to become white martyrs. In prayer, we must continually admit to God that, without his help, we cannot forgive others as he has forgiven us. We need God.

We need God to save us. We need God to change us. We also need God to protect us, and this is what Jesus asks for in the final petition of the prayer.

Praying for deliverance

Matthew 6:13:

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

This final request comes in two parts, one negative and one positive. Don't lead us into temptation. Do deliver us from evil. This is a prayer for spiritual protection.

The first part, "lead us not into temptation," is a prayer that God would not allow Satan to tempt us. God does not tempt us. He tests us to refine and purify us, but he does not tempt us (as James 1:13 makes clear). Satan, —the devil, the enemy of God, the prince of darkness —does tempt us. This prayer is a prayer that God would not allow Satan to tempt us, and that we would not fall into temptation when it comes our way.

The flip side of the coin is that God would deliver us from the evil one. The word translated "evil" can also be translated "evil one," as the NIV and New Living Translation do. Given the context, a direct reference to Satan here seems to make most sense, although both are possible and nearly synonymous in this case.

I think it is helpful to talk about *the evil one* in particular instead of just *evil* in general for similar reasons that it is helpful to think about our sin as a debt, not just brokenness. Nearly everyone recognizes that this world is broken, it doesn't function as it should. Many people also recognize that there is evil in the world—there are evil people who do evil things. Hitler and the Holocaust make this hard to ignore. But the Bible tells us that, in addition to evil people and evil actions, there is also an evil power that is wielded by the evil one. That is to say, Satan is real. He is not a little red cartoon character with a pitchfork and a tail. No, he is the enemy of God. He hates God. He hates you. He wants nothing more than to pull you away from God, to steal your joy, to keep you off mission, and to surround you with fear and darkness. Not only that, but he is a million times stronger than you.

Here is the hard truth that we are forced to recognize in The Lord's Prayer: We are unable to protect ourselves. Against the attacks of Satan. Against the lies and deception of which he is the prince. Against the evil that he would rain down against the world and our souls. We are unable to protect ourselves from the evil one.

But we have not been left on our own. God has overcome the evil one. When Jesus was on his way to that cross, Satan thought that he had won. As Jesus hung there, writhing in pain and agony, mocked and shamed, Satan thought that victory was his. But then, Jesus looked at those soldiers who were crucifying him and prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Then he said, "It is finished." In that moment, the battle was won. Satan was defeated.

In Colossians 2:15, just after the verses that we read earlier about God canceling our debt by nailing it to the cross, Paul says this: "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him."

In Jesus' death, God disarmed the rulers and authorities—that is, Satan and his demons. He took away their power. He stole their victory. He triumphed over them. So even though the battle continues, the war has been won.

In John Bunyan's classic allegory about the Christian life, *Pilgrim's Progress*, the main character, Christian, is on his way to the Celestial City. At one point along the journey, he is approaching a lodge where he hopes to spend the night.

Then, Bunyan writes:

...looking very narrowly before him as he went, he espied two Lions in the way. Now, thought he, I see the dangers that Mistrust and Timorous were driven back by. (The Lions were chained, but he saw not the chains.)

Then he was afraid, and thought also himself to go back after them, for he thought nothing but death was before him: But the Porter at the lodge whose name is Watchful, perceiving that Christian made a halt as if he would go back, cried unto him saying,

"Is thy strength so small? Fear not the Lions, for they are chained, and are placed there for trial of faith where it is, and for discovery of those that have none. Keep in the midst of the Path, and no hurt shall come unto thee"

...Then I saw he went on, trembling for fear of the Lions, but taking good heed to the directions of the Porter; he heard them roar, but they did him no harm.¹

He heard them roar, but they did him no harm. Because of Jesus, this is where we find ourselves. He has chained the lion. Satan cannot touch us, if we stay on the path. He may roar. He may threaten us and frighten

us. He may lie to us and tempt us. But he cannot touch us because God has overcome the evil one.

We can pray

In the last three requests of The Lord's Prayer, Jesus reminds us that we cannot do much on our own. We can't provide for ourselves. We can't save ourselves. We can't change ourselves, and we can't protect ourselves. But there is one thing we can do: We can pray. We can present our requests to God. We can place our concerns in the loving hands of our Father. We can confess our sins to him. We can ask him to save us, change us, and protect us. We cannot do much, but we can pray.

I am not sure where you are on your journey of prayer, but I hope that the last four weeks have taken you deeper in that journey.

Endnotes

1 John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Quoted in *Fuel For Pilgrims*, "Fear not the Lions, for they are chained," <https://fuelforpilgrims.wordpress.com/2014/01/29/fear-not-the-lions-for-they-are-chained/>.