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God Started It: Forgiving

Matthew tells us in his gospel that the Lord's Prayer was taught to the disciples as part of a larger sermon. By comparison, in Mark and Luke, the prayer is presented simply as a response to a question from one or more of the disciples who ask Jesus to teach them to pray as John the Baptist taught his disciples. But in Matthew the prayer is included as part of the Sermon on the Mount and what Jesus says immediately preceding the prayer helps to explain it.

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then in this way: (Matthew 6:7,8)

At this point Jesus shares with the disciples the prayer many of us have offered many times. More than the Lord's Prayer, it is our prayer. Christians of every stripe repeat it over and over again. Now, for sure, I think we do okay when we do that, yet I wonder if that is what Jesus had in mind for the prayer when he first shared it with the disciples. The downside of praying it so often is that we have less excuse for not following it. At the same time, ironically, its meaning can get lost through the repetition. There is really only one thing we promise to do in the Lord's Prayer, yet we may have broken that one promise as often as we made it.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. (Matthew 6:12) It's a brief sentence just like Jesus said our prayers should be. Nonetheless, we have heard the line in different ways. The gospel of Luke renders it; *forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*. Many Lutherans and Catholics say, *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*. The phrase we use in the United Church of Christ is right out of the gospel of Matthew; *forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*. Now, why those terms debts and debtors or trespasses and trespassed against? Why not just say sin as in the gospel of Luke? In what way, exactly, are we guilty before God and others, and others guilty before us? Just what is it, in other words, that requires forgiveness?

A basic understanding of sin is that it is the breaking of God's law; not the breaking of human law, but the breaking of God's law. Only when the human law is also a law of God is the breaking of any human made law a sin. For instance, theft is a breach of God's law as well as human law and so theft is also a sin. On the other hand, God never decreed any motor vehicle traffic laws. To receive a traffic citation will cost us the civil penalty but speeding or making an illegal right turn or jaywalking are not technically sins because prohibitions against them are civil statutes not God's laws. Someone might argue that breaking a traffic law is also a sin because God wants people to be obedient to secular authorities, but that idea also concedes the point. It is God's law which must be broken for an action to be a sin. A sin is also more than a simple error or mistake. Making an error in arithmetic, for example, is not a sin. We don't need to ask God to forgive us for it. If we are painting our house and paint drips on the sidewalk we have made a mistake but we have not committed a sin. We are not guilty before God for it. Sin is a uniquely religious word. It has to do only with the breaking of the law of God. It is a transgression; a word used especially in the Old Testament to reflect a breaking or a breaching in some way of God's law.

Now, what is God's law for us? From the point of view of the Old Testament and ancient Judaism it begins with the Ten Commandments and then expands from there. Perhaps the rich young ruler wanted some sort of simplification of it all when he queried Jesus about which is the greatest commandment and Jesus responded, *to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself (Mathew 22:34-40)*. Because all the other commandments of God "hang" on these two, if one followed these two perfectly one would never break any law of God.

How to understand sin as a debt or a trespass might be a little more nuanced. God bases God's law on God's own nature, a loving nature which desires peace and goodwill among all people. When we break God's law we break that peace and goodwill, we bring instead conflict and strife, sadness and heartbreak, and thus damage God's world. When we do that we fall into a sort of debt to God, we owe God until we undo the damage we caused. Of course, we can not undo the damage we caused, not completely anyway, and so our debt to God remains unpaid. Because of this there is only one chance we have to be on good terms with God, and that is if God forgives us our debt and fixes up the damage for us, including our broken relationship with God and other people.

To trespass is to be where we are not allowed. In terms of sin we might think of this as doing something wherein we have gone beyond the boundaries God has set for us, we have morally wandered off the right path. In addition, perhaps we can even think of literally trespassing in God's world when we sin. God welcomes us into the world as long as we follow the rules of living here but when we break the rules it is like we are trespassing in God's world. God would have every right to tell us we are no longer welcome here because we did not abide by the laws of the land owner. The only way we can be allowed to stay is if God forgives us and lets us stay anyway. This idea of sin as trespass could be represented by the story of Adam and Eve, who were welcome in the garden as long as they followed the laws God gave them, but when they broke one of

those laws they were in breach of contract. From that point on they were trespassing in the garden and were no longer welcome there.

We might properly imagine additional subtleties in all this and like biblical scholars both ancient and modern we could spend a lifetime considering them, let alone one sermon, and never be finished. The point is that we have broken God's law, all of us, no exceptions, *all have sinned, John said, and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)*, and we all have sinned more than we shall ever know. If we think we might be doing fairly well by the Ten Commandments lately, but then consider the greater law, the one that seems to have no end of ramifications, to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves, we might think, wow! How many times have I come up short in some way regarding that?!

Well, the Christian Good News is that God forgives us for the damage we cause the world and the damage we bring to our relationships with God and others. In this way God saves us since forgiveness is our only hope of being at peace with God and people. On a lighter scale we might think of the situation as similar to that of parents and children. Perhaps a child does something wrong, breaks a law, maybe God's, maybe just a home rule, and the parents decide as penalty to send the child to his or her room, and a question might be, for how long? Well, who knows what is right here? Is there a right amount of time for this type of thing? What punishment ever fits the crime? How does any punishment ever undo all the damage the misbehavior caused? So what is the hope of every happy home, of peaceful parent child relationships? It is forgiveness. It is continuing to love the best we know how in spite of the misbehavior, in spite of the sin. Isn't this the case? Isn't this finally the only hope we have for peaceful relationships of any kind? In the final analysis, successful happy people accept forgiveness for themselves, and do a lot of forgiving of others as well. And the first time anyone was forgiven God did it. God started it.

Even when it comes to forgiveness we can pay it forward, we can be the first to forgive where there is a broken relationship or damage to the peace and harmony to any part of God's world where we reside. We can offer it first to others, because God showed us how, God gave it first to us.

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)