

Sermon for March 4, 2018 – Lent 3

Luke 11:4a (EHV)

Theme: **We pray for pardon. . .**

- 1) To be reminded of our need for forgiveness
- 2) To be reassured of the LORD's mercy
- 3) To show others the same love God has graciously shown us.

Forgive us our sins, as we also forgive everyone who sins against us. (EHV)

Why do we need to ask God to forgive our sins? I mean, didn't the LORD announce from the cross before his death: "It is finished" – that is to say, all sin has been paid for in full? Didn't he personally apply this forgiveness to us at our baptism, when he awakened faith in our hearts? Don't we, as Christians, live in a constant state of grace – that is to say, a constant state of forgiveness – through faith in His Word? If all these things are true (and the Bible says that they are) why do we, Christians, ask God to forgive our sins when he already has?

Let us let the Holy Spirit answer that question for us this morning, under the theme: **We pray for pardon** 1) to be reminded of our need for forgiveness, 2) to be reassured of the LORD's mercy, and 3) to show others the same love God has graciously shown us.

Part One: We pray for pardon to be reminded of our need for forgiveness.

Luther, in his large Catechism, says this about our prayer for God's forgiveness:

It is not as though He [the LORD] did not forgive sin without and even before our prayer. (He has given us the Gospel, in which is pure forgiveness before we prayed or ever thought about it.) But the purpose of this prayer is that we may recognize and receive such forgiveness.

You see, here's the problem: all of us have a sinful, self-righteous nature that likes to think it's good enough for God. Just like the Pharisee in the temple, who compared his righteousness to a tax collector's, we are always tempted to compare ourselves to others.ⁱ "Look at me, Lord: I am not like those other people. I don't shoot up schools and churches. I don't deal or do drugs. I'm not gay. I don't sleep around. I go to Church as often as I can. I help a lot of people."

All too often we try to stand on our own righteousness. "Sure, I might be sinful," we think to ourselves, "but my sins are minor compared to those of others" – not understanding that every sin is equally bad before the LORD. "In fact," the Scriptures say, "whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one point has become guilty of breaking all of it."ⁱⁱⁱ Yes, even our righteous acts, the Bible says, are like filthy rags in God's sight.ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, it doesn't matter how "good" we

are in the eyes of the world, we are utterly sinful before the Lord – deserving of nothing but death and damnation^{iv}.

This, then, is one of the many reasons Jesus encourages us to pray *forgive us our sins*: so that we are reminded that we are indeed sinful and in desperate need of God’s forgiving grace. By praying the petition we learn not to compare our righteousness to others, but to understand that we are all in the same boat. No person is more righteous than the other. All people are equally needy of God’s mercy - hence our prayer for the LORD to forgive *us our* sins – not, “forgive *me my* sins.”

And why does the LORD want us to realize our utter sinfulness? Because, if we don’t, we will take our eyes off of Jesus and start relying on our own goodness for salvation. This is nothing less than falling away from faith – causing us to forfeit our salvation! May the LORD keep this from ever happening to us! Hence we need to realize our sins, confess our unworthiness, and trust in the LORD’s unfailing mercy.

Part Two: We pray for pardon to be reassured of the LORD’s mercy

Forgive us our sins: whenever we pray this petition, we not only confess our utter need for his mercy, we also confess our trust that the LORD is indeed merciful. And the forgiveness for which we pray is not merely for the moment – only for sins we have committed since the last time we prayed. No, as one of my college professors^v once put it:

We seek forgiveness for the totality of our sins. We do not ever want to be treated as our sins deserve and experience God’s anger. We want him always to justify us. . .

But hasn’t the LORD already redeemed us from our sins through his death on the cross? Hasn’t he personally applied the benefits of this redemption to us by awakening faith in our hearts through the preaching of His Gospel? In other words, don’t believers already stand forgiven, free and justified before the LORD? If so, then why do we continue to ask God to forgive us? Listen again to the wise words of my former college professor:

Forgiveness is not a physical object, like an admission ticket on which is printed *Admit the Bearer of This Ticket to Heaven*. If it were, you could put your ticket in your pocket and safely forget about it until you needed to present it at the door. Instead, possessing God’s forgiveness means that we have entered an intensely personal relationship with God. It is very much like marriage. The wife who possesses her husband’s love does not get tired of hearing him say, “I love you,” especially when she has done something to disappoint him. In the same way the Christian soul treasures the forgiving love with which God began to woo her and delights in hearing God say again, “I forgive you,” especially in view of the way she keeps disappointing him. It may seem paradoxical to pray for forgiveness—after all, who but a believer in the gospel can really pray, and how can a believer in the gospel not possess forgiveness through faith? But the Christian knows this petition is not about collecting superfluous tickets [to heaven]. It is all about hanging on to and deepening the most important relationship imaginable. That is how Jesus sees it. He does not prescribe the Fifth Petition as an occasional remedy to be used only when consciences are burning

with fear and shame. He includes it in a daily prayer. And he does not think of it as psychological self-help (“Get it off your chest and you will feel better”). He tells us to *pray* for forgiveness, and he knows that our Father will hear that prayer and respond. . . And God does this for us. He stirs up our memory of some gospel passage or paraphrase, or he sends a fellow Christian to say what we need to hear, or he lets us hear a sermon or hymn that makes an impact on us, or he admits us to his table for the Sacrament. Thus he forgives us and draws us closer to himself.

This, then, is the main reason we ask the LORD to *forgive us our sins*: we want him to reassure us of his merciful love. Why? Because the more we are assured of his forgiving love, the more we will turn to him in repentance – seeking his help to overcome any guilt we may feel in our hearts. You see, we don’t pray this petition merely wishing that God might forgive our sins. No, we pray this petition in full confidence that the LORD will indeed forgive our sins – regardless of how badly we have messed up! And what gives us the confidence that God continues to love and forgive us – even though we find ourselves sinning time after time? The LORD’s promise to forgive us in Christ which is so certain that he **commands** us to pray for his pardon, that we might know we’ll receive it.

You see, the LORD knows how the devil works: He doesn’t just tempt us into sin. No, he spends a lot of his time trying to separate us from Christ by trying to convince us that our sins are too horrible, that God won’t forgive us unless we do some great act – proving our repentance. For this very reason the LORD commands us to keep the petition “*forgive us our sins*” on our lips and in our hearts – that we might always trust in the LORD’s love and find forgiveness in his amazing mercy. And the more we grow in our realization of how mercifully disposed the LORD is to us in Christ, the more willing we become to live to his glory – avoiding sin and showing others the same love God has shown us.

Part Three: We pray for pardon to show others the same love God has graciously shown us.

Forgive us our sins, as we also forgive everyone who sins against us - I have to admit: as a kid I felt very uncomfortable praying this petition. Don’t get me wrong: I knew my sins and desperately wanted reassurance of the Lord’s forgiveness. What made me uncomfortable was asking God to forgive me the same way I forgave others. I know my own heart – how it dwells on past hurts and is unwilling to completely forgive them. I certainly didn’t want the LORD to forgive me merely in the same superficial way I had often forgiven others!

But is that what we are asking here? Is God putting a condition on our forgiveness – saying that he will only forgive us after we forgive others? No, definitely not. As mentioned before, the LORD forgives our sins even before we think about asking him! What we are asking in this petition, rather, is that the LORD’s mercy move us to forgive others as we ourselves have been forgiven – thereby revealing ourselves as Gods’ true children.

But if we refuse to forgive others, we show that the love of God is not in us, as St. John writes: *If anyone says, “I love God,” but hates his brother, he is a liar. For how can anyone who does not*

love his brother, whom he has seen, love God, whom he has not seen? This then is the command we have from him: The one who loves God should also love his brother.^{vi}

All of this is well illustrated and explained in our Gospel lesson for this morning.^{vii} Notice that the king graciously forgave the wicked servant for his mercy's sake. The servant lived in the peace of this forgiveness – until he repeatedly refused to forgive the person who owed him money. In the same way, God forgives our sin even before we have the chance to forgive others. In fact, His great forgiveness naturally moves us to forgive others. A person's refusal to forgive another, therefore, reveals a problem in his relationship with God. Such a person doesn't treasure the LORD's mercy. Such a person forfeits his privilege to God's forgiveness; "*For,*" Jesus says, "*with whatever standard you judge, you will be judged, and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you.*"^{viii} Therefore, "*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. . . Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.*"

Brothers and sisters in Christ: forgiving others as Christ has forgiven us is certainly something we all need to work on. If our salvation hung on our ability to forgive others, who of us could be saved? Thankfully our Savior suffered and died for this sin too. As we turn to Jesus in repentance and faith, He even forgives our failure to forgive others. More than this, the Gospel awakens in us a desire to forgive others as Christ forgave us. How so? Because, by means of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit truly changes our hearts – harmonizing it with the LORD's. Like the LORD we take no pleasure in the death of anyone – wanting all to repent and live. This, in turn, moves us to both forgive and pray for the forgiveness of those who hurt us just as Jesus did from his cross, when he said: "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*"^{ix}

Forgive us our sins, as we also forgive everyone who sins against us. Why, exactly does God command us to pray this petition? SAs we have learned, it's to be reminded of our need for his forgiveness, reassured of the LORD's great mercy, and moved to show others the same love God has graciously shown us – all to the glory of his name. Amen

ⁱ Cf. Luke 18:11ff

ⁱⁱ James 2:10 (EHV)

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Isaiah 64:6

^{iv} Cf. Romans 6:23

^v Joel Fredrich (cf. Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly v.107)

^{vi} 1 John 4:20-21 (EHV)

^{vii} Cf. Matthew 18:21-35

^{viii} Matthew 7:2 (EHV)

^{ix} Luke 23:34 (EHV)