

## Sin as Debt

Matthew 6:9-15

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

February 21, 2021

Before we get into the sermon, let me make a comment about the Lord's Prayer. You noticed, I am sure, that something was missing from my reading of the prayer, namely, the dramatic last line: "*For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever,*" which is based loosely on I Chronicles 29:11: "*Thine is the greatness, the power, the glory, and the majesty . . . thine is the kingdom.*" I didn't skip it; it isn't there in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

You may remember that in one of my first sermons last September I said that if you are in the market for a Bible, buy one with footnotes, and if you have a Bible with footnotes, read them. If you have a Bible with footnotes, they will tell you that though some ancient manuscripts contain this well-loved verse, some of the oldest and best manuscripts of the New Testament do not. So, recent translations leave it out. The result is while the translation of the Lord's Prayer in the NRSV is historically accurate, it doesn't sing very well.

Two other quick comments. First, Catholic Bibles have never included that verse. Protestants are finally coming around to saying, "Maybe you were right." Second, there is a very early Christian writing, the Didache, dated around 100 CE, which places it within a decade of the Revelation and the Gospel according to John, that includes that final verse in the Lord's Prayer. So, it is an ancient tradition, just not one that made into the final editions of the book of Matthew. Unfortunately.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the 1960s movie, "A Thousand Clowns," Jason Robarts – those of you who are of a "certain age" will remember him from the three Oscars he won – plays Murray Burns, a delightfully flakey and idealistic writer for a local afternoon kids' show in New York, a job from which he had just been fired.

Murray lives in an ill-kept apartment with his 12-year-old nephew, for whom he is responsible. When a social worker discovers their squalid living conditions, she threatens to take the nephew away if Murray doesn't get his act together, which includes going to his former employer and apologizing in order to get his job back.

Murray later relates to the social worker what happened on his way to apologize. He was walking down 51<sup>st</sup> practicing his apology, saying, "I'm sorry," over and over when he accidentally said it out loud. "And this fella coming by – a complete stranger – said, "That's OK, mac."

Murray suspected that he may have stumbled on to something interesting about human nature. So, he said, "I just stood there on the corner of 51<sup>st</sup> and Lex saying, 'I'm sorry,' to everybody who came by." To his amazement, he said, "Seventy-five per cent of them forgave me!" His conclusion: "Something had happened to all of them for which they thought somebody should apologize."

He added, "I could run up on the roof right now and yell, 'I'm sorry,' and half a million people would yell back, "That's OK. Just see you don't do it again."

What Murray Burns had stumbled on to is the universal experience of the way sin damages relationships and the need to repair those relationships through forgiveness.

Every one of us has had something happen for which we believe someone should apologize. And each of us is the one that someone else believes should do the apologizing. We are both sinner and sinned against, called to forgive and in need of being forgiven.

\*\*\*\*\*

It is no surprise that Jesus addressed the issue of forgiveness on several occasions.

He dealt with the nature of forgiveness when his disciples asked, "How often must I forgive? Seven times?" "No," he said, "seventy times seven." In other words, "If you're into counting, you aren't forgiving anyway, so pick a number -- 7, 490, 2."

He dealt with the relationship between forgiving others and being forgiven by others as well as the relationship between forgiving others and being forgiven by God, which we will consider next Sunday.

Then, of course, there is that powerful scene on Golgotha in which Jesus asked God to forgive his executioners, because they did not understand the full significance of what they were doing.

Today I want us to consider sin as debt.

Let me say at the outset that there are things in the Christian tradition that I don't know how to explain. Lots of things actually. One of those things is how it happened that Christians of many if not most traditions decided to say, when they repeat the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass us," when neither the Gospel of Matthew nor the Gospel of Luke says that.

Matthew does use "trespass" in the verses that follow the Lord's Prayer. But in the Prayer itself, the petition is, "*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*"

I should note that this seems to have been Jesus' favorite way of thinking about sin. We don't have time to deal with passages such as Matthew 18:27 and Luke 7:41 other than to note them and encourage you to read them for yourself.

By replacing debt with trespass in the Lord's Prayer, we lose a unique insight into the nature of sin and forgiveness, human nature and the working of human relationships.

How does thinking about sin as debt help us think about sin and forgiveness?

Let us suppose that I have said something or done something that hurt you deeply – perhaps I betrayed a confidence or said something about you that was untrue and hurtful. In a moment of true remorse, I said to you, "I am so sorry for what I did. I feel really, really bad about that. Please forgive me."

At that moment, I, the sinner, am at your mercy. The relationship is broken. And it's my fault. I know it. I not only feel guilty, I am guilty. I have done the only thing I can do – I have apologized. Figuratively speaking, I am in debt to you.

You have two options: you can forgive me or, if there is a devilish, vengeful bone in your body, you might think, "I got him." I am defenseless. You are free to exact your pound of flesh or to play the martyr or extend my misery by dangling your forgiveness in front of me or, and this is especially delicious, making me eternally grateful for your having forgiven me. "I am not going to hold your sin over your head," you say. "I am going hold my forgiveness over your head. I'm not going to let you forget it. I still gotcha."

This partly explains why forgiving someone who has hurt us badly is so difficult. When we forgive, we release the one who has hurt us. We set them free. They are no

longer in our debt. The debt has been forgiven. When we refuse to forgive, we maintain control. Being in control of another person's happiness is powerfully seductive, especially if that someone has hurt us badly.

One of the most thoughtful and gifted preachers I have heard is Angela Bucholdz, rabbi at Central Synagogue in New York City. In her Yom Kippur sermon about forgiveness, she recalled a Jewish tradition that says that if you have hurt someone, it is your responsibility to go to that person and make things right. If they won't forgive you, you are obligated to go back and apologize again. If they still won't forgive you, you must apologize a third time. But this time, if they won't forgive, you are free – you are no longer in debt to them – and they are now the sinner.

In the tradition to which she referred, to refuse to forgive, to hold someone in perpetual indebtedness to you, is itself a sin.

Jesus, as well as the early church that we see reflected in the New Testament, took sin seriously; they saw the damage it does at every level of human interaction. That is why they took forgiveness seriously.

If you begin with the assumption that, "*For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God,*" is not just scripture – it's a cold, hard fact of life – you understand that forgiveness is essential to meaningful human existence. We sin against one another, we disappoint one another, we abandon one another, we cheat on, lie on, hurt one another. If sin is universal – and that may be the only verifiable Christian doctrine – forgiveness must match its universality or meaningful human existence becomes impossible.

In their book, The Book of Forgiving, Bishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Mpho, say, "I don't just forgive a particular act. I become a forgiving person," in contrast to what they call a grievance person. I have known people who could rightly be called grievance people. Their lives consist of an endless string of grievances, complaints. They lead with denials of responsibility and end with accusations and blame.

No healthy relationship – no friendship, no intimate relationship – is possible when life is viewed through the lens of grievance.

But, the Tutus say, "When I have a forgiving mindset, I start to see the world not through grievance but through gratitude." Gratitude because forgiveness makes healing possible and beginning again and second chances and third and fourth and seventy times seven chances.

For that we – sinners and sinned against – should indeed be grateful.