

Forgive Us Our Trespases
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And forgive us our trespases, as we forgive those who trespass against us. *What does this mean?* We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look upon our sins, nor on their account deny our prayer; for we are worthy of none of the things for which we pray, neither have we deserved them; but that He would grant them all to us by grace; for we daily sin much and indeed deserve nothing but punishment. So will we also heartily forgive, and readily do good to, those who sin against us.

The Lord's Prayer is the perfect prayer. We call it the Lord's Prayer, not because the Lord Jesus prayed it, but because the Lord Jesus taught us to pray it. Jesus could not have prayed the Lord's Prayer. He could not have prayed for the forgiveness of his sins because he committed no sin that needed to be forgiven. We do not do what Jesus does. We do what Jesus says. We pray the Lord's Prayer because he told us to do so.

We pray the Lord's Prayer at our baptism. Only children of God may pray to God and call him Father. In baptism, God forgives us all our sin and make us his children. He fills us with the Holy Spirit. He gives us the right to pray. Were our sins not forgiven, we could not pray to God. We are worthy of none of the things for which we pray. We have not deserved them. We daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment from God. God has given us the forgiveness of sins. He has given us the right to pray for the forgiveness of sins in confidence that he will forgive us all our sins of thought, word, and deed.

The Lord's Prayer is the perfect prayer. The first three petitions address our Father in heaven as he comes to us. He comes to us from heaven in Holy Baptism and puts his name upon us. We pray that his name be hallowed among us. He comes to us from heaven and reigns over us by his grace. We pray that his kingdom come to us. He comes to us from heaven and reveals his good and gracious will. We pray that his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The Fourth Petition is the only petition that asks him for temporal blessings. The God who has come to us from heaven preserves our lives here on earth by giving us everything that pertains to the needs and wants of our bodies in this world. The last three petitions ask the God who has come from heaven to earth for what we need to go from earth to heaven. We need the

forgiveness of sins, we need God to guard and keep us from the temptations and seductions of the devil, the world, and our flesh, and we need God to deliver us from all evil of body and soul that we may die a blessed death and be taken to heaven to be with him.

We Lutherans use theological terms to express the biblical teaching faithfully. A term familiar to us all is the term “means of grace.” It refers to the means by which and through which God gives us his grace, forgives us our sins, justifies us, and gives us the Holy Spirit so that we may trust in him and receive these gifts of salvation. We refer to God’s word and sacraments as his means of grace. We do not include prayer as a means of grace. God gives and we receive. The means of grace give. Heaven comes to earth. Prayer is directed from earth to heaven. “Let my prayers rise before you as incense.” Prayer issues from faith. The means of grace elicit faith. Eliciting faith is God’s work alone. We speak of divine monergism and by that we mean that God acts alone, without our help or cooperation, in establishing, preserving, and strengthening faith in our hearts. But when we deny that prayer is a means of grace we are not saying that prayer can be disjoined from the means of grace. There is an interplay between God’s word, faith, and prayer that, in our experience, mixes them all up together. We can distinguish between God’s word and ours, but we dare not separate them. We are God’s children. We talk as he as he has taught us and when he is talking, we stop talking and listen to him.

The Psalms are a wonderful example of how God’s word and prayer are joined together. They were written for the church to sing. But they are the words of God. David’s last words begin with the claim of divine inspiration for the psalms. David says:

Thus says David the son of Jesse;
Thus says the man raised up on high,
The anointed of the God of Jacob,
And the sweet psalmist of Israel:
“The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me,
And His word was on my tongue.” (2 Samuel 23:1-2)

They are God’s words. They are not our words. But they become ours. Thus, prayer becomes a sign that signifies our union with Christ. This is brought out with particular clarity in the praying of the messianic psalms. Psalms such as Psalm 22 in which Christ speaks from the cross of being forsaken by God or Psalm 16 in which Christ speaks of his resurrection from the dead are clearly rectilinear messianic prophecy. Jesus was forsaken; we are not. Jesus

rose from the dead; we have not yet risen. The suffering of Jesus is unique and vicarious. His resurrection is the firstfruits of those who sleep in his name. But we pray these psalms. By the miracle of our mystical union with Christ through faith, we are joined to Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. His words are put into our mouths and his prayer becomes our prayer. Yet it remains his own words about himself and his work of salvation for us. Thus, as his words are prayed by us our prayer becomes a means of grace.

God provides the words. The gift of inspiration ceased with the death of the apostles. Still, good Christian hymnody, of which the Lutheran choral is the preeminent example, retains this bond between the gospel and prayer. Our hymns teach the gospel. When we sing them we sing the gospel. God speaks his words and we live in those words. We abide in them, remain in them, and as God's word lives in us we live lives of prayer. To pray without ceasing is to live by God's words, trusting in what God says, for true faith is always faith in what God says. True prayer is saying the words that come from God's word.

God says things that run counter to our experience. This is a cross. To take up the cross is to believe that what we do not see, feel, or experience with our senses is nevertheless God's honest gospel truth. The pain of bearing the cross is the pain of dying to what we see, feel, and experience as if it doesn't really define us or our circumstances. Our flesh prefers its own perspective to God's. We are comfortable with our own feelings. We are familiar with our own experiences. Faith trusts in what contradicts these comfortable and familiar realities of our lives. This is why faith always entails dying and rising. Faith is living from our baptism.

Baptism is for the forgiveness of sins. From God to us, baptism is the blood of Jesus washing us clean and presenting us to our God without spot or blame. Baptism justifies us because it is joined to the blood by which we are justified. Forgiveness flows out of the wounds of Jesus. Since we daily sin much we need forgiveness as a constant gift, covering us with God's grace, rendering us righteous before God. Justification is not a process if by process we mean something that grows into something else or something greater. There is nothing greater or higher or holier in our lives than our justification by Christ's blood. But justification is an ongoing reality that defines our lives. It defines us, but it contradicts our experiences. The Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer is thus always a prayer that God give us what we cannot see or feel. It is a plea for faith.

Increase my faith, dear Savior
For Satan seeks by night and day

To rob me of this treasure
And take my hope of bliss away.
But Lord, with thee beside me
I shall be undismayed.
And let by thy good Spirit,
I shall be unafraid.
In life and death, Lord keep me,
A firmer faith bestow.
Then I shall bid defiance
To every evil foe.

Prayer is our talking. The means of grace are God's talking. Our talking must be distinguished from God's talking, but it cannot be separated from it. To separate prayer from God's word is to ruin it by turning it inward. "God, I thank you that I am not like other men." The Pharisee didn't learn that prayer by listening to God, and he did not go to his home justified, either. To pray the Fifth Petition apart from hearing God's word is to cut forgiveness away from its source and thus to render it uncertain. Prayer then becomes a constant source of frustration and pain. Prayer entails struggles, to be sure. But the struggle of prayer that severs itself from God's promises is useless struggle. It is the source of every error, the ground of uncertainty, and the road to fanaticism and despair. The Lord's Prayer is a liturgical prayer. Even when prayed alone, it is praying with and for the Church. This means that it is joined organically to the means of grace. Should this organic bond be broken, prayer dissipates into vain babblings, no matter how eloquently spoken.

When we pray the Fifth Petition we lay claim to a status. God establishes that status. But we sin against it. We deny what we are as children of God whenever we think, say, or do what God's word forbids and condemns. The gospel teaches us that we are saints. The law teaches us that we are sinners. The Lord Jesus acknowledges the sinner-saint paradox when he teaches us to pray this petition. That we should continue to pray this prayer means that there is and will remain within us a contradiction between what God says we are and what we do. In defining us as saints, God says what we are. But God knows that we will sin. We are righteous by means of the forgiveness of sins. But we must keep on praying because we keep on sinning. Sin is a constant foe. Sin is our direst enemy. The devil attacks God's word, the world mocks God's word, and our flesh denies God's word. So we sin. We sin much. We sin every day.

Luther is not speaking hypothetically when he says that we daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment. We do. And we do. That we are justified can be known only through faith. This faith is engendered only by God's word and sacraments. We daily experience the very opposite of what we believe. This is the cross. We may not remove the cross that our Lord Jesus lays on us. We bear it precisely because we are Christians. Our cross is resolved by Christ's cross. The contradiction between what we feel and see on the one hand and what God promises on the other is resolved where Jesus Christ is crucified for us for the forgiveness of our sins. The gospel and the sacraments are means of grace precisely because they are bound to where Jesus sheds his blood for us. St. Paul refers to the gospel of justification as the message of the cross. Our baptism is a baptism into Christ's death. The Lord's Supper is Christ's body and blood, given and shed for us for the remission of sins. Forgiveness and Jesus cannot be separated. Christ's cross makes our cross bearable.

Our cross is not the suffering we endure from others. Everyone endures suffering from others, but only Christians bear the cross. The cross entails spiritual pain. The source of this pain is not the sin of others. It is our own sin. Now this may seem to be counterintuitive in light of the command of Jesus that we forgive those who sin against us. Of seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer there is but one that includes a promise on our part. Seven requests and one promise. And the only promise we make is to forgive the sins of those who do us wrong. Since Jesus paid the debt we owed to God on account of our sins against him, we will forgive the debts that others owe to us on account of their sins against us. Does not our promise to forgive suggest that the sins of our neighbor are indeed a cross for us to bear?

Not at all. Just the opposite is true. The problem we Christians have with forgiveness and the neighbor is not with the sins the neighbor has done against us. It is with our own bitter, hate-filled, cold, unforgiving hearts. Christ's parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35) makes this clear. What were fifty denarii to a fellow who had just been forgiven a debt of ten thousand talents? A drop in the bucket! But it was the principle of the thing! Unbelief is not entirely unprincipled, after all. The Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer brings into bold relief the lifelong inner struggle of faith against unbelief. God justifies us! He washes away our sins with the blood of the Lamb. He reckons to us the obedience of Jesus as our righteousness. He forgives us all our sins, removing them from us as far as the east is from the west. He baptizes us, absolves us, preaches his gospel to us, and gives us to eat and to drink of the very body and blood by which our sins were washed away and righteousness was reckoned to us. God forgives us. Then, when we

pray for forgiveness, he insists that we add, “As we forgive those who sin against us.” Faith regards this command as a comforting sign. Unbelief regards this command as an impossible condition. The struggle within our hearts is not with the sins of others out there. It is with the sin inside our hearts that wishes evil toward those who do us evil.

In the Large Catechism, Luther speaks of the condition that we forgive those who sin against us as a comforting sign that God provides for the strengthening of our faith. He writes:

Meanwhile, a necessary but comforting clause is added, “as we forgive our debtors.” God has promised us assurance that everything is forgiven and pardoned, yet on the condition that we also forgive our neighbor. Inasmuch as we sin greatly against God everyday and yet he forgives it all through grace, we must always forgive our neighbor who does us harm, violence, and injustice, bears malice toward us, etc. If you do not forgive, do not think that God forgives you. But if you forgive, you have the comfort and assurance that you are forgiven in heaven. Not on account of your forgiving, for God does it altogether freely, out of pure grace, because he has promised it, as the Gospel teaches. But he has set up this condition for our strengthening and assurance as a sign along with the promise which is in agreement with this petition, Luke 6:37, “forgive, and you will be forgiven.” Therefore Christ repeats it immediately after the Lord’s Prayer in Matt. 6:14, saying “if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you,” etc.

The old man hates. The new man loves. The Lord’s Prayer is prayed by the Christian. Only a Christian can pray it. A Christian becomes a Christian by being justified through faith alone. When God justifies us he declares fellowship with us. The forgiveness we receive places us into a communion of saints in which there is nothing but sheer forgiveness. Forgiveness defines our relationship with God and with one another. The forgiveness God grants us in justification is the forgiveness we grant to those who sin against us. The Fifth Petition teaches us more than that since God did something we must do it as well. It teaches us that the forgiveness of sins is indivisible. It is indivisible in regard to the receiving and the giving. What we receive is what we give and what we give is what we first receive. It is indivisible in regard to who is forgiven. God’s forgiveness is as universal as his love and he loves all sinners. Our forgiveness is for all those who do us wrong.

It is indivisible in regard to what is forgiven. All sins are forgiven. It is possible in a human court to pardon some offenses and leave others unpardoned. We do not know God's forgiveness in this way. When God forgives sins he forgives sinners. We know this. We know this from God's word that reasons with us in this manner:

Though your sins are like scarlet,
They shall be as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,
They shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:18)

The symbolic meaning of the color white makes it clear that God does not forgive in part. When we wash our robes in the blood of the Lamb they do not become a very pale shade of grey. They become white. Just so, the Psalmist prays, "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." (Psalm 51:7b) This is why we confess all sins. The Psalmist says, "Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults." (Psalm 19:12) So we confess in the old general confession, "I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee." Civil justice makes distinctions between crimes and criminals. Such distinctions are necessary when judging according to the evidence we apprehend by our senses.

When God forgives sins he forgives sinners and he does not forgive piecemeal. The biblical identification of forgiveness with justification makes this clear. St. Paul substantiates his doctrine of justification from the Psalms by citing David's words about the forgiveness of sins:

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
Whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity,
And in whose spirit there is no deceit. (Psalm 32:1-2)

This blessedness, according to St. Paul, is "the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works." (Romans 4:6) To forgive entails covering the sin, not imputing the guilt, and reckoning righteousness.

The indivisibility of forgiveness and the identification of forgiveness with justification shed light on the single promise we make in this perfect prayer that Jesus taught us to pray. The Fifth Petition is the meeting place between the spiritual benefits we receive and the spiritual gifts we bestow.

Immediately following the Lord's Prayer in Matthew's Gospel, we read:

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14-15)

Jesus teaches the same doctrine in the words recorded in St. Luke's Gospel, where we read:

Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you. (Luke 6:37-38)

Here we must beware of the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* logical fallacy. Because this follows that does not mean that that caused this. When Jesus says, "If you forgive, your heavenly Father will also forgive you," and when he says, "But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father forgive you," and when he says "For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you" he is not saying that we merit forgiveness from God by forgiving those who sin against us. He is not saying that our forgiveness of others causes God to forgive us. He is rather saying that the forgiveness that we, in our need, receive from God freely by his grace in Christ is the forgiveness that we give to those in need. The very act of forgiving those indebted to us is a confession of faith in the validity of God's forgiveness, for forgiveness is indivisible. The forgiveness by which God forgives us our sins is the forgiveness by which he forgives those who sin against us. By forgiving those who sin against us we confirm by a holy sign the truth of the gospel in which we trust. Forgiveness is by its very nature all-encompassing. Since God forgives all sins of all sinners, we forgive all sins of everyone who does us wrong. Forgiveness is indivisible. And this, as Luther reminds us, is a great comfort.

Forgiving those who do you wrong when they are not sorry they have done you wrong and when they continue to do you wrong is a confession of our confidence in the objective validity of the gospel. We call it objective justification. God, for the sake of the obedience and suffering of Jesus, has justified this whole world of sinners. St. Paul writes:

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them. (2 Corinthians 5:19)

[Jesus our Lord] was delivered up because of our offences, and raised because of our justification. (Romans 4:25)

Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:18-19)

John the Baptist proclaimed and the Church confesses: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." To refuse to forgive people until they have suitably apologized and repented is to deny that the blood and righteousness of Jesus avails for all sinners everywhere. We cannot confess that Jesus has taken away the sin of the world and then withhold forgiveness from those who do us wrong until they have confessed their sins to us.

Our confession of the objective and universal nature of the gospel is accompanied by forgiving our debtors, regardless of whether they respond in love or hatred. When Jesus, in St. Matthew's Gospel, teaches us to promise to forgive our debtors, he is restating what he had just said:

I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. . . love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. (St. Matthew 5:39, 44-45)

Clearly, nobody receives forgiveness apart from faith. This pertains to receiving forgiveness from God and to receiving forgiveness from a Christian. Receiving is always and only through faith. But even as the preacher isn't responsible for eliciting faith in his hearers but rather in preaching the gospel faithfully, the Christian who prays the Fifth Petition is not responsible for anyone receiving his forgiveness, but rather in granting it for Christ's sake.

It must be for Christ's sake or it cannot be forgiven. If all of our merit is excluded from the divine verdict of justification reckoned to us, then all merit of our neighbor must be excluded in our forgiving him. The strength and source of the forgiveness we receive from God is precisely the same as that of

the forgiveness we give. It is for the sake of the merits and mediation of Christ alone.

My family has property on the Canadian side of Gunflint Lake about 48 miles northwest of Grand Marais, Minnesota by car and then another couple of miles east by northeast by boat. When I was a child I spent most of my summers on the Canadian side of Gunflint Lake. We would bury our garbage in those days, digging a hole, and then when it began to fill up, covering it up with dirt, and digging another. We also had bears. We always had bears. They could smell the garbage a mile away. Often in the evening after dinner we would hear them banging around in the garbage. Finally – I think it was sometime in the late sixties – we decided the time had come to stop burying our garbage. Nowadays, except for what we can burn, recycle, or put in a compost, we put all our garbage in plastic bags, keep the bags in firmly closed plastic garbage cans, and then take them across the lake to Minnesota, put them in the trunk of the car, and drive to the dump about four miles away. We no longer have bears bothering us. We have no bears because we have no garbage. Our little spot of heaven on earth is removed from the garbage as far as the east is from the west. No garbage, no bears. It's as simple as that.

When God forgives us our sins he removes our sins from us as far as the east is from the west. It cannot be dug up. The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, removes it completely. Only the blood of Jesus can remove the garbage. If the forgiveness we offer to those who do us wrong is not the same forgiveness we have received from God, the bears are sure to smell it out and dig it up, displaying it before us in all its ugliness. Only when God forgives and we know it can we truly forgive.

Forgiving is forgetting. We say, "I can forgive, but I won't forget." But the one entails the other. That's the nature of forgiveness. For example, when God says through Jeremiah the prophet, "I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more," (Jeremiah 31:34) he is joining the one to the other. It is true that God can do what we cannot do. But if we argue that we cannot forget we might as well argue that we cannot forgive. The one is no more divine than the other. The promise to forgive does not require us to develop a mental capacity not to remember things that have happened. The promise to forgive is the promise to do what God has done. He does not impute our sins to us. He imputes righteousness instead. He reckons us to be righteous for Christ's sake. This is what we promise to do for those who sin against us every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. God permits us to stand before him by not marking our iniquities. We permit those who sin against us to stand. We do not identify their sins. We send them away from us.

We do this. We pray for our forgiveness and we promise forgiveness to those who need it from us. While sin is always personal and individual and the absolution that is spoken personally and individually provides very specific and particular comfort, it is also true that the forgiveness of sins for which we pray and that we, in turn, promise to give as freely as we have received, is corporately received. The body of Christ prays for the forgiveness of sins as Christ's body for it is the forgiveness of sins that established her as Christ's body in the first place. "I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins," we confess. Listen to how St. Luke describes what followed Holy Baptism for the infant church:

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. (Acts 2:41-42)

The apostolic teaching belongs to the apostolic fellowship, the Sacrament of the altar, and the prayers, chief among which is the Lord's Prayer. When we pray for forgiveness we pray that we retain our identity as the Church.

If forgiveness is indivisible – if the forgiveness we offer each other is the same forgiveness that we receive in Holy Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the oral Gospel – then the forgiveness we give has the same power as the forgiveness we receive. That is to say, it is, in effect, an absolution from God himself.

Martin Luther, in the Smalcald Articles, refers to the "mutual conversation and consolation of brethren" (SA III IV) as a form of the gospel. The "brethren" he mentions need not be called and ordained ministers. They include any and all fellow Christians to whom we offer the comfort of the gospel. Forgiveness is what the gospel, in whatever form it takes, bestows. Forgiveness is forgiveness. To speak of the absolution of the pastor as offering a different kind of forgiveness than what a layman can give to a brother or sister in Christ is to make forgiveness a divisible commodity that has more quality here than there. This is impossible to defend. If we wish to distinguish between what the pastor does and what the laity do, let us make the distinction in the area of office, that is, what one is called by God to do, not in the area of the gospel itself. The pastor is called to forgive the sins of the penitent whether or not those sins are committed against him. That's his job. The individual Christian is called by God to forgive the sins of those who sin against him. That's his job. These jobs differ, but the forgiveness doesn't.

This forgiveness has the power to change people from heathens into Christians, whether it is preached by the preacher or spoken by the wife, husband, employee, employer, or whoever might have the opportunity to speak it. This is what St. Paul alludes to when he says,

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband . . . For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 7:14a, 16)

About forty five years ago I first read the book, Tortured for Christ, by Richard Wurmbrand, a Lutheran pastor from Romania who was imprisoned and tortured by the Communists for years before being ransomed by a group of Norwegians. Wurmbrand later established the organization “Jesus to the Communist World.” One of the most memorable parts of that book was Wurmbrand’s description of the conversion of a cruel, hardened, godless guard who, after repeatedly beating the Christians for his amusement, saw them respond to his cruelty with love. They forgave him his trespasses as God had forgiven them. The forgiveness of sins penetrated into that man’s soul and saved it. It was from God. It was the same forgiveness that God provides us in the gospel preached from the pulpit.

A man and a woman find themselves in a difficult marriage. Their love has long ago turned into mere tolerance. Their pastor and their friends talk to them about forgiveness, but they think that too much has happened for too long. “Oh,” they say, “God can forgive. But I’m not God.”

I would ask such a Christian a simple question. Have you ever known God to forgive anyone apart from speaking to him? And if it is so that God forgives us through words he speaks, does he speak out of thin air? Or does he not speak through the mouths of men? Not just the preacher who preaches, but the hearers who hear and then repeat to those in need the words they have heard so that the forgiveness of sins they have received from God might define the lives they live with others. Forgiveness is never an impotent gesture. It is the power of God almighty.

The forgiveness that Christians offer those who do them wrong distinguishes the Christian religion from all others. Religions in which God provides no blood atonement for sins have no way to get rid of their own sins, to say nothing about the sins of others. They tend to have long memories when it comes to the sins of others against them. When considering Judaism and

Islam we see that the sins of their enemies often serve as their means of self-identification. We Christians find our identities in our baptism where God placed his name upon us and robed us in the pure white robes of Christ's righteousness. Forgiveness of our sins is the greatest gift we have received from God. Forgiveness of sins is the greatest gift we can give to another. Only those who have received it from God can truly give it. And since we have, we will.

Amen

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