

## Please Forgive Me

Nehemiah 9:16-21 Psalm 130:1-4 Matthew 6:9-15

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We have now entered the second week of the Season of Lent. Lent is a time of prayer, penitence, and almsgiving. Today we shall look at penitence. Penitence is a holy sorrow and the asking for forgiveness for sin and fundamentally changing our behavior.

Unfortunately, none of us is exempt from the possibility of sin. John reminds us that “if we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:9) Since the beginning of creation humankind has sinned either through commission or by omission. It isn’t that we have to *do* something to commit sin in the eyes of God.

When we hold within our beings and cherish those feelings of

- anger or
- superiority or
- disdain for another person, we have sinned.

Or when we

- know what is God’s Word to us and we refuse to follow it, or,
- as the biblical writers would say, we become “*stiffnecked*” against God’s direction for us we have sinned.

The Apostle Paul summed it up perfectly when he wrote: “It happens so regularly (to me) that it is predictable. The moment that I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in doing God’s commands, but its pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it they take charge. I’ve tried everything and nothing helps. I’m at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn’t that the real question?” (Romans 7:15f; *The Message*)

The Scriptures are filled with prayers for forgiveness. A part of the prayer of the people in Israel was read this morning. In your reading time this week I encourage you to read all of the peoples’ prayer in Chapter 9.

A bit of context about why they would be praying such a prayer: Nehemiah lived in captivity with the Hebrews in Babylon. He had become the trusted cupbearer of the king of Babylon. He poured and served the drinks at the royal table. It was a position of high trust. Nehemiah was doing quite well in Babylon. He had made a good life for himself and apparently no longer mourned the loss of his home country, Israel, and its capitol, Jerusalem.

And then, a voice of conscience arrived from Israel in the person of his brother Hanani. He reported to Nehemiah about the suffering of his homeland. It was a wound that staggered his soul. He began praying and fasting. He was so distraught that the king noticed his sadness and, short story, returned Nehemiah to Israel under the king’s protection, and sent with him the supplies for building a wall around Jerusalem to protect the city.

When the wall was built, the people gathered in the city square and Ezra, the Priest, brought the scrolls of the Law into the square and stood at a wooden podium and began to read the Word of the God. It had been a long time since the people had heard the Word of God. The people stood in the square all morning and listened to the Word being read. Scribes who were familiar with the Word moved among the crowd and explained what Ezra was reading. It was a holy day of feasting before the Lord. They built booths to commemorate the forty years spent in the wilderness.

And then, following this time of commemoration the people came back into a solemn assembly and stood and confessed their sins. Their prayer begins with words of adoration and acknowledgment that God is the only true God. It then moves on to praise God for God's work in history, including God's faithfulness of Abraham and Moses and the liberation of the Hebrews from Egypt. Then the people begin to pray for forgiveness for *their* sin, *their* disobedience, against God while all the time God was faithfully caring for them. Their prayer concluded with a recommitment to follow God.

That form of prayer became a pattern of praying. The 106th Psalm of David follows the same format of prayer and praise to a faithful God.

Jesus grew up understanding that every observant Jew prayed three times a day:

- in the morning at sunrise,
- in the afternoon at 3 o'clock at the time of the sacrifice in the Temple, and
- in the evening at nightfall.

Jesus was known for his much praying. He often went, not to the Temple to pray, but to a quiet place of solitude where he could be alone with his heavenly Father. Don't we wish we could have heard some of those conversations? I think that perhaps Jesus was talking with his Father about his mission on earth and asking for help to make the people understand why He had come. I think that perhaps Jesus was venting his frustration about the refusal of even the religious leaders to acknowledge who He was. I think that perhaps Jesus was praying for wisdom in the choosing of his disciples, even though that choice included the one who would eventually betray Him. I think that perhaps Jesus was asking for continued strength to persevere in doing what lay ahead of Him. Whatever Jesus prayed, those prayers were intimate conversations between Son and Father.

But there were other prayers offered by Jesus. There were the prayers that Jesus prayed in the presence of his disciples and others. When Jesus prayed, the disciples heard a new form of praying. The prayers of Jesus had power. The prayers of Jesus were personal. And so, the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Jesus, teach *us* to pray."

I can imagine the disciples thinking, "Our prayers have ritual. Our prayers have form. Our prayers are the same over and over." Lord, teach us to pray."

This morning at the close of the Pastoral Prayer we, as a congregation, said The Lord's Prayer. When the Scripture was read, it included The Lord's Prayer. It is a model for praying. It begins with addressing God as our God, a holy God, the only God. God's Name is to be honored and exalted. The second half of the prayer is unlike the first half. The request for daily bread is a call for them to reflect upon God's faithfulness to provide the daily manna that their ancestors experienced in the wilderness. For us, that request for daily bread would call us to remember the faithfulness of God to meet the needs in our lives.

And then, Jesus gets to the act of forgiveness. We are to pray “And forgive us our debts, our sins, as we forgive our debtors, those who have sinned against us.”

Under Jewish Law, if a person has wronged another, they are indebted to them. That debt can only be forgiven if the person who has committed the wrong begins a process known as *teshuvah*. That process of forgiveness and reconciliation involves:

- having remorse for the wrong committed and repenting, turning in a different direction from the previous action or thought, and beginning a journey toward reconciliation,
- offering an apology to the person who has been wronged,
- making reparation for the wrong when necessary, and
- doing penance, which means fundamentally changing one’s behavior.

As Christians, we understand that when we sin against, or create a debt against, another person or group or situation, we also sin or create a debt that needs to be forgiven by God.

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

Under Jewish Law, when the person who is wronged refuses to forgive the one who has wronged them, it is that person who becomes the sinner.

“Forgive us our debts, our sins, in the same way that we are also forgiving people.” We may think that this is a hard saying of Jesus. It is, but we are reminded of how Jesus offered forgiveness as He washed the feet of Judas at that last meal with His disciples. Only Jesus can make that kind of forgiveness possible in our lives. As followers of Jesus, we live under grace, but we continue to be human.

Let me ask all of us a question. When we voice The Lord’s Prayer each Sunday morning, are we praying that prayer or simply repeating that prayer? Some of us have been in the church so long that we don’t think much about the topic of sin except in the lives of others, so when we get to that part of the prayer where we ask for forgiveness, often we can’t seem to think of anything for which we need to be forgiven. The words seem to just roll off our tongue without much thought.

Permit me to “meddle” some in our thinking about how we find it possible to yield ourselves to sin.

There are those *personal* temptations to which we sometimes yield:

- saying things in anger that ought not to be said,
- talking to others about things that can bring harm or discredit to another person,
- moving our tongue before our brain is engaged.

There are those *social* and *cultural* sins into which we enter, sins like:

- prejudice (sometimes on purpose, sometimes with almost unawareness) against others of God’s creation because God created them with different skin tones, different cultures, different languages,
- our tendency to blame the victim for their situation without having any awareness of how their situation came to be,
- withholding the resources that we do not need if we can help someone in need,
- manipulating political and social systems so that “people like us” will have power and others will be subservient in society

- forgetting that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, and forgetting that every person is our neighbor.

Paul asked that key question: “Is there no one who can do anything for me?” The Apostle John gave the answer to the question that Paul, and all of us, ask. He writes, “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9 NASV)

As we continue our journey through the Season of Lent, may the Holy Spirit make us always aware of any thought or behavior that would be a sin against one another and against God. And being human as all of us are, throughout this journey, and beyond, may we become the forgiving people who Jesus was trying to teach all of his followers to become.

Amen.