

## Prayer and Forgiveness

Mark 11:25

Richard Tow 1-31-16

### Intro

I want to begin this morning by asking you a question you've probably never been asked. Do you need a prayer coach? A professional golfer knows there are times that he needs an objective voice to help him move to the next level. People at the top of almost any profession hire coaches to tell them what they can do to go to the next level in their game. I remember a conversation with a CEO in the church I pastored in Iowa. He told me how beneficial it was to hire someone to come in and coach him as an executive so that he could improve his leadership skills and take the company to a new level. Actors, Speakers, weight lifters, you name it, use coaches to point out weaknesses and ways to improve their effectiveness. Do you need a prayer coach?

We are in a series entitled "Praying Effectively." What lessons did Jesus teach about prayer that would help us be more effective in our prayer lives? A couple of weeks ago we examined one of those lessons in Mark 11. We focused on the importance of faith when we pray. In Mark 11:22 Jesus said to the disciples, "...*Have faith in God. 23 For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. 24 Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them....*"<sup>1</sup>

How many remember the context in which Jesus gave that instruction? The previous day Jesus and the disciples were walking from Bethany into Jerusalem. Bethany was about two miles east of Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> During their walk Jesus saw a lush, green fig tree in the distance. He was hungry and expected to find figs on the tree. But the tree was barren. Then Jesus said a prayer in the form of a command. He said to the tree, "*Let no one eat fruit from you ever again.*" Nothing visible happened at that moment. Jesus went into Jerusalem; drove the money changers out of the temple; and that evening went back to Bethany for the night. On their journey back into Jerusalem the next morning, Peter saw the tree in a withered condition. He is surprised at how quickly Jesus' prayer was answered. That's when Jesus gave His lesson on faith. Let's go back to Mark 11:24 "*Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.*" That's where our previous study on that text ended. But Jesus then gave an addition lesson about the necessity of forgiving others if we want our prayers answered.

Verse 25 "*And whenever you stand praying,<sup>3</sup> if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. 26 But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.*"

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotes are in the New King James Version unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> BETHANY (from Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Copyright (c)1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers)

<sup>3</sup> "Standing (often with uplifted hands) was the normal posture for prayer; kneeling was much rarer." Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993) p. 166. Luke 18:10-14; 1 Timothy 2:8.

That is our text this morning.

### **I. Notice the connection between answered prayer and forgiving others.**

It is an indirect connection. An unwillingness to forgive others is directly connected with an inability to receive forgiveness from God. To stand rightly before God in prayer, I must receive forgiveness on a daily basis for my own shortcomings. If that is blocked; then I cannot function effectively in prayer. The context is Jesus' instruction on being effective in prayer. In that context Jesus is therefore saying that we must forgive others if we want to get answers to prayer.

Just to make sure we see that connection, let's read Mark 11:24-26. *"Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them. And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. 26 But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."*

I have always been surprised at the emphasis Jesus puts on forgiving others.

In the Sermon on the Mount, He gave The Lord's Prayer. Five major themes in that prayer (Matt. 6:9-13):

- (1) *Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.*
- (2) *Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven.*
- (3) *Give us this day our daily bread.*
- (4) *And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.*
- (5) *And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one.*

The doxology follows. *"For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."*

Then Jesus put further emphasis on only one of those five phrases. He immediately followed in the next verse with this warning. *"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses"* (Matt. 6:14-15).

It's as if Jesus is saying, "Of everything I just said, be sure you understand the connection between living in God's forgiveness toward your sins and you forgiving others who sin against you. Here again, this instruction is given in the context of how to pray effectively.

Is there a chance that your prayers and my prayers are hindered because we have not fully forgiven offenders? This is something we must face daily when we pray *"And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors."* I wonder if I take that as serious as God does? I wonder if it is as high a priority in my life as it needs to be.

### **II. How do I know that I'm forgiving others in the way Jesus is talking about?**

Col 3:12-13 gives us an answer to that question. *"Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do."* Let that last phrase soak in, *"even as Christ forgave*

*you, so you also must do.*” The Greek could be translated “*in like manner you also must do.*”<sup>4</sup> We should look at the way Christ forgave us and imitate that in our attitude toward others. The Message uses this wording for that verse: “*Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you.*” Am I quick to forgive? Has it become my way of being? Has it become my consistent response to offense? And have I “*completely*” forgiven? This is the one I am currently wrestling with. The Lord’s forgiveness toward me is so complete that He has cast my sin *as far as the east is from the west.*<sup>5</sup> When He is talking with me, it is not on His mind. I tend to think I’m doing pretty good if I don’t feel animosity toward the other person; if I don’t say anything bad about the person to other people. But have I fully released that offense in my heart? Only the Holy Spirit knows for sure; but I am trusting Him to help me forgive others “in the same manner” as my Lord has forgiven me.

I have come to this conclusion in my own heart. If there is anything in me that secretly wishes the other person would fail, then I have not completely forgiven the offense. Love seeks the highest good for the other person. If I am not desiring the highest good for that person, I have probably not fully forgiven the offense. Now this is where sorting this out gets a little delicate. The highest good for the other person may include a revelation and realization of the harm done. The highest good for the other person may include a gracious work of repentance in the heart. What I have to be careful about is that I really, really want the best for him or her. I have to be careful that I’m not just wanting God to prove me right. He may vindicate me. He did that for Joseph. But that’s God’s business. My business is to guard my heart against all unforgiveness and ill will toward others.<sup>6</sup>

Do you remember the dirty thing that Lot did to Abraham? God spoke to Abraham and gave him a commission to leave Ur of Chaldees in Genesis 12. Abraham graciously let his nephew, Lot, come along. In the next chapter Abraham’s herdsmen and Lot’s herdsmen got into conflict. To resolve the conflict Abraham let Lot choose what part of the land he wanted. The right thing for Lot to do would have been to defer that choice to Abraham. But instead of gratitude ruling his heart, greed took over. He chose the well-watered plains of Sodom. It was wrong for him to do Abraham that way. But Abraham held nothing in his heart against him. That set Abraham up for an awesome victory. He rescued Lot when he was taken captive. He didn’t say, “Well Lot deserves what he got.” Instead he intervened for Lot as if Lot had never violated him. Later he interceded in behalf of Sodom<sup>7</sup> and in answer to that prayer angels led Lot and his family out of the city prior to its destruction. Abraham’s effectiveness in intercession for Sodom depended on his forgiveness toward Lot. Abraham had *completely* forgiven Lot.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus commanded us to bless our enemies. That attitude is a kingdom principle. It is the way God operates. It is the way Jesus operated on the cross when He prayed, “*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do.*”<sup>8</sup> If I am to have my prayers answered, I have to operate according to the principles of His kingdom. I can’t pray “*Thy kingdom come....*” And at the same time live contrary to the laws of His kingdom. God

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<sup>4</sup> NT:3779 (Biblesoft's New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary. Copyright (c) 1994, Biblesoft and International Bible Translators, Inc.)

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 103:12

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 4:23

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 18:20-23

<sup>8</sup> Luke 23:24

operates in mercy and forgiveness. If we are to represent Him with authority, we must operate in mercy and forgiveness.

### III. Messed up relationships, mess up our prayers.

1 Peter 3:5-7 *“For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, 6 as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror. 7 Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.”* Peter tells husbands and wives to keep their relationship right. And then he adds this profound statement: *“that your prayers may not be hindered.”*

I can't hold resentment in my heart toward my wife and be effective in prayer at the same time. What I'm trying to point out is this. Effectiveness in prayer is not just a matter of quantity. I could pray ten hours every day. But if I will not forgive others; if I hold bitterness in my heart toward someone, my prayers will be hindered. So maybe the solution to unanswered prayer in that situation is not to add on an additional hour of prayer each day. Maybe the solution is to forgive. Maybe the solution is to get my attitude right toward my wife.

Relationship is everything in the kingdom of God. Jesus said all the Law and Prophets hang on two simple commandments. *“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’* (Matt 22:37-39).

Am I responding to my offender the way I would want someone to respond to me, if I were in his shoes? Would I want them to ask God to grant me repentance where repentance is needed? Yes, because repentance may be the door to my blessing. Would I want them to harbor feelings against me and secretly hope for my failure? No, I would not want that. So if I am to love my neighbor as myself, I will not do that to my neighbor.

The Apostle John confronts people who say they love God; are perhaps very active in external service to God; yet in their hearts they are holding offense against someone. 1 John 4:20-21, *“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? 21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.”*

Cain's attitude toward his brother, Abel, was a big factor in the failure of his prayers. Cain made his offering to God; but it was rejected. Theologians differ as to why. But we do know something was wrong about Cain's attitude toward Abel because the Bible immediately tells us that Cain killed his brother. When Cain talked to God about unanswered prayer, he had the opportunity to get his heart right.<sup>9</sup> He did not do that. 1 John 3:11-12 says, *“For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, 12 not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother....”* We may not have murder in our hearts toward another person; but any level of unforgiveness blocks the flow of answered prayer. I simply cannot receive God's forgiveness and grace if my heart is hardened by resentment toward others.

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 4:1-16.

In Matt 5:23 Jesus said, *“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”* Again notice the priority Jesus places on right relationships. In essence He is saying, “There is no use you messing around the altar, if you don’t have your relationships right. It becomes vain, empty religion.

**IV. But how do I get my relationships right so that my prayers are effectual?** Let me give you five keys.

1. First, you cannot control what the other person does or chooses to do. He may be influenced by what you do. People tend to respond in like kind. So if I extend kindness to the other person, I am more likely to get a favorable, kind response than if I extend anger and hatred toward them. But in the final analysis, you have to focus on your own attitudes and actions rather than those of the other party. That other person may or may not respond in a godly manner. That’s his or her choice. My choice is to do right regardless of what the other person does.

2. I have to decide to forgive. I learned many years ago that forgiveness is a decision I can make regardless of what I feel. When I was in my early 20’s a major violation was propagated against me. Not that I was totally innocent in the matter. But I suffered a huge injustice. I could not turn loose of the desire for revenge even though I wanted to. One night the Lord helped me understand that it only took a decision in my heart to turn it loose; and God would help me with the emotional side. I made that decision that night. It was somewhat like the day I decided to receive Christ. Oh what a difference a decision can make. It took a long time for my emotions to catch up with the decision of the will that I made that night. Many times I had to remind my soul to let it go. Many years later I learned of horrible death that happened to the principle offender. I knew that the forgiveness was complete because my heart felt sadness for her.

Corrie ten Boom once told a story about not being able to forget a wrong that had been done to her. She had forgiven the person, but she kept rehashing the incident and so she couldn’t sleep. Finally she desperately cried out to God for help in matter. Corrie said the "...help came in the form of a kindly Lutheran pastor." After two sleepless weeks, she confessed her problem. He directed her attention to a bell in the church tower. He told her the bell is rung "by pulling on a rope. But...After you let go of the rope, the bell keeps on ringing. First ding, then dong. Slower and slower until there’s a final dong and it stops.” That is the way it works with forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we’ve been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we shouldn’t be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming back for a while. They’re just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down." We choose to turn loose of the rope; but the emotions may ding for awhile, losing momentum with each ding. And eventually the emotions follow the decision of the will. The dings stop altogether.<sup>10</sup>

If you’ve decided to forgive, then don’t let feelings change your mind.

3. Know the difference between forgiveness and trust. Many of my mediation clients are stuck in an unhealthy place in their relationship with one another. Most are high conflict divorced parents. When they come into my office they are anxiously waiting for the opportunity to tell

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<sup>10</sup> Gary McDonald “Forgiving the Unforgiveable” at [www.sermoncentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com).

all the bad things the other person has done to them. There is no trust on either side. They are just waiting for the next bad thing the other person is about to do. However, they have children in common; and that means they still have to relate to each other.

Moving that relationship forward has to begin with a willingness to forgive each other. And that is something they won't do until they understand the difference between forgiveness and trust. When Jesus tells us to forgive, He is not necessarily telling us to trust the other person. In Matthew 18 Jesus taught on forgiveness using financial debt to make His point. Let's say I go to Larry and asked to borrow \$ 5,000 for a business opportunity that I have come across. He loans me the money. But the venture does not go well. In fact, I cannot pay back the \$ 5,000. I go to Larry and tell him the situation and he says to me, "I forgive the debt; you no longer owe me the \$ 5,000." That's forgiveness: a simple decision that you don't have to pay me for the past. Three months later I find another business opportunity. I go to Larry and I tell him all about it and ask if I could borrow \$ 10,000 to start the business. Now we're in the area of trust. You don't owe me the \$ 5,000. But I cannot trust you with another \$ 10,000. I might be willing to loan \$ 500 and begin to build trust. But it would be irresponsible of me to trust you with another \$ 10,000 at this time.

4. Leave the issue of justice in God's hands.

Rom 12:19-21 *"Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. 20 Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*

You are, hereby, relieved of the need to make everything come out fair! Justice is God's department. He is the only one qualified to make it all come out right in the end.

If we don't turn loose of the need to make it turn out fair and just, we will have a hard time living in forgiveness toward others. It will often seem very unjust. But God says *"Vengeance is Mine, I will repay."* In the end, nobody gets away with anything. *"...God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap"* (Gal 6:7).

Joseph was mistreated by his brothers, but forgave them. Divine providence eventually turned things around for him. Joseph's faith in God's wisdom carried the day. Joseph knew that regardless of what people did or did not do, ultimately God could take care of him and bring His purposes to pass in his life.

I want us to come back to our text, this time in the Amplified version. Mark 11: 25, *"And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him and let it drop (leave it, let it go). In order that your Father Who is in heaven may also forgive you your [own] failings and shortcomings and let them drop."*

Is there anyone you need to forgive? It comes down to a decision of your will. Do you or do you not, here and now, forgive the offense? I want us to just wait before the Lord for a few moments and then I will lead a prayer in which we forgive others.