

Sermon for Mid-Week Lenten Rotation

Sermon Text: Colossians 3:12-13 and Matthew 6:12-14

Sermon Title: "Forgive as God Forgave You"

The theme of our Lenten rotation/series this year has to do with reconciliation; our reconciliation with God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His shed blood on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, and/but also our being reconciled to one another. So, you will hear (or have already heard) messages on "Remembering Whose You Are", "Repenting Before God", "Receiving God's Forgiveness", "Confessing to the Other" and "Restoring With Gentleness". The pastors in the rotation are using the six chief parts of the Catechism to review the Scripture's teaching on reconciliation. My part tonight is from the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer; entitled "Forgive as God Forgave You".

In the third chapter of his letter to the Colossian churches, the Apostle Paul writes of the sanctified Christian life; how we are to live now that we have "died to sin" (in our baptism) (Colossians 3:3a). We have been given the gift of Christ's perfect righteousness through faith; through no merit of our own; therefore, we are to "put off the old self with its practices". (Colossians 3:9b) We are to fight against things like sexual immorality, covetousness, anger, slander, obscene talk and other evil desires in our lives. In light of what Christ has done for us, we are also as much as is possible, not just avoid sin, but to do good to others; to "put on the new self"; (Colossians 3:10) things like "compassion, humility, meekness, and patience"; (Colossians 3:12) and (of course) forgiveness.

As believers in Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul says we are to "bear with one another, and if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven you; so, you must also forgive". (Colossians 3:13) Jesus taught His disciples (and so we have been taught) in the Lord's Prayer; "forgive us our trespasses as we have forgiven those who have trespassed against us". (Matthew 6:12) To which Jesus adds His immediate commentary, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses". (Matthew 6:14)

These words of Jesus are not saying that we somehow earn or merit God's forgiveness because we have forgiven others. God's forgiveness is always and only on the basis of Jesus' finished work of redemption on the cross. Jesus died and rose from the dead for the forgiveness of our sins "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8) and enemies of God; "while you were dead in your trespasses and sins". (Ephesians 2:1)

So, Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, "We pray in this petition that our Heavenly Father would not look upon our sins or deny our prayers because of them. (For) We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them; but we ask that He would give them to us by His grace, for we daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment. So too, we will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us". (Explanation of fifth petition, Luther's Small Catechism)

I am sure that often times we do not even think when we pray these words of Jesus, but we need to. The true church has always tried to put this petition into practice; of preaching to, praying for, and

forgiving their enemies. In the book of Acts, Stephen is an obvious example of this. He was stoned to death for his proclamation of the Jesus, and as He was bleeding and dying, his final words (were not words of revenge or justice) they were words of forgiveness; “Lord do not hold this sin against them”. (Acts 7:60a) In doing this, Stephen was simply following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, who prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”. (Luke 23:34a)

Notice the reminder that all of us; both you and me; daily sin much. This is part of what we confess when we pray this petition; “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us”. (1st John 1:8) “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. (Romans 3:23) We should remind ourselves of that fact every time we are tempted to hold a grudge or withhold forgiveness from others; for in our own need for God’s forgiveness, we are no different from anyone else. In our relationships, especially in the church, it is difficult, if not impossible to live in peace without forgiving each other.

We are not worthy of any of the daily blessings God bestows upon us in His church; especially the forgiveness of sins. This knowledge should humble us as we strive to forgive those who have sinned against us; knowing that we will never in this life reach the point where we do not need His forgiveness; so Luther wrote “unless God constantly forgives us, we are eternally lost”. (Luther’s Large catechism, page 452, Kolb/Wengert) God wants us to be certain that our own sins have been forgiven for Jesus’ sake. Confidence and joy in our faith “can spring from nothing else than the certain knowledge of the forgiveness of sins”. (Large Catechism)

Since we have been freely forgiven by Jesus’ atoning death on the cross, He commands us to forgive others in the same way. Elsewhere Jesus instructs the disciples to forgive the brother who sins against them up to “seventy times seven”; (Matthew 18:22b) in other words, there is to be no limit to how often we forgive others. Jesus also tells a parable about an unforgiving servant who has been forgiven a great debt and then refuses to forgive a fellow servant a much smaller debt. Jesus said “you should have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you”. (Matthew 18:33)

When we refuse to even try to forgive others, we are in fact rejecting God’s forgiveness for ourselves. Again, Luther in the Large Catechism wrote “Just as God forgives all through (His) grace ... so we must also always forgive our neighbor who does us harm ... if you do not (refuse to) forgive, do not think that God forgives you, but if you forgive, you have comfort and assurance that you are forgiven in heaven”. (Large Catechism, page 453, par. 95) A person who holds on tightly to unforgiveness, either does not understand how much they have been forgiven, or (perhaps) they are flirting with unbelief.

On the other hand, if we want to forgive others, but are struggling with our feelings towards those who have sinned against us; I encourage you to continue praying that God would give you the strength to forgive as you have been forgiven. Keep in mind too, that even though we will never be able to forgive with perfect motives, assurance of our own forgiveness comes because of Jesus’ atoning death on the cross. He died and rose again so that we could be forgiven and receive the gift of eternal life. Having His gracious and perfect promises, “we love (and forgive) because He first loved (and forgave) us”. (1st John 4:9)

AS Jesus Christ continually (daily) bears with us and forgives us all of our sins, so we also need to forgive each other in every way; always looking to the cross of Christ and seeing there the power of our Lord's forgiving love; both for us and for those who have sinned against us. This is our prayer as we go through this Lenten season. ("Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the one against whom the Lord counts no iniquity". (Psalm 32:1-2a)) Amen.