

SERMON: MATTHEW 6:9-13 and LUKE 11:2-4
FORGIVENESS IN CHRIST -- THE HEART OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Our Father Who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy Will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen. (COMMON WORDING OF THE LORD'S PRAYER.)

“What’s next?” How many times have you asked that question? Whether it’s enjoying a meal, or sitting at a meeting? Whether it is listening to a concert, or catching up on emails? Whether it’s taking a long drive? Or bumping your head, after the tire wrench fell on your toe, after the tire went flat? “What’s next?” That’s a question that haunted Martin Luther of Germany 500 years ago. [Not Martin Luther King Jr. of the U.S from 60 years ago.] Martin Luther of Germany was looking at the question of What’s Next? in the biggest possible way—not simply what’s my next duty as professor at the University of Wittenberg, Germany, where he became a Doctor of Theology. He was seriously troubled by, as for much of his life had already been seriously troubled by, the What’s Next question “What if I die? Then what? What’s next?” His fear was for God’s wrath and hell. “Is that what will happen next?”

That’s the question that lies before us all. What’s next? If you’re young, you likely think of death as far away. If you’re not young, likely you think of death on a much shorter basis. But either way, death is coming. It is next. Like a man chasing you, who at first is far off, but he keeps gaining. He will eventually catch up to you no matter how good a runner you are. At times he jumps out by surprise and almost nabs you, but then you get a good lead on him again. Sometimes you forget all about him. Sometimes you can almost hear him treading behind you. When he catches you, then what? What happens next?

Your own conscience tells you, when that day comes, God will make you pay. You can shut down or shout down your conscience by repeatedly ignoring it, flooding it with lies such as, “There is no God, there is no judgment, punishment can’t be all that bad, I’ve done enough good to outweigh the bad.” That last thought is the point Martin Luther was desperately trying to reach, “I’ve done enough good to outweigh the bad.” And that’s what had been taught him by the Church of the day, the Roman church, the Roman Catholic church. It didn’t work. Even though he became a monk to gain more merit before God. Luther’s conscience gave him no rest. It was right in tune with the Bible’s statements, *Who can understand his errors? (Psalm 19:12). Whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all (James 2:10). “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them! (Galatians 3:10).* Surely Martin Luther felt, “I’m not even aware of everything I do wrong; and if one sin makes me guilty of all; then I’m cursed by God for certain. What a mess! What a predicament! I fear for what’s next!” Whenever you think your good outweighs your bad, beware! It’s a lie. I remember one time when I was about to be late for a pastors’ meeting. I excused myself by thinking, “Well, I was early last time.” It doesn’t work with God. P-E-R-F-E-C-T, or else His wrath and condemnation.

During the struggles of his soul, Martin Luther learned something new, to him, from the Bible as he prepared for his classes at the University of Wittenberg. For Scripture says, *Christ has redeemed us* [paid the price to free us] *from the curse of the law having become a curse for us, for it is written “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”(Galatians 3:13).* On the cross, on the tree, Jesus, true God and true man, took all punishment for the sins of the world. Martin Luther’s and yours! *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified* [pronounced Not Guilty] *freely by His grace* [it’s a gift] *through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24)!* In Jesus, who died for the sins of the world and rose from the grave in victory, Martin Luther found the assurance that his sins and failures were forgiven. By faith in Jesus. Load removed! What’s next was no longer fearful, but joyous! “*Whoever believes in Him* [trusts in Him] *shall not perish but have everlasting life!*” (John 3:16). Everlasting life! No longer was “What’s next?” a dreaded thought for Martin Luther, but a joy!

The same is true for you. Forgiveness with God is something you need. It is not something you can buy such as indulgence papers or anything at church. A right standing before God cannot be merited through a high-performance life of super-kindness, respect, and fairness to others. Why not? Because you still have a heart of sin—and you know it. Security with God is found only in His forgiveness in Christ. Trust Jesus. That was the message of the Reformation 500 years ago, and that is still the Bible’s message today. We proclaim it, we treasure it. Forgiveness in Jesus is the heart of the Christian faith.

Which fits right into our study of the Lord's Prayer, as we look at each petition/request one at a time. 1st Petition: We ask that God's good name be hallowed (kept holy) and honored, by all that we say, teach, and do. 2nd Petition: We ask that His kingdom of salvation in Christ come to us and others now through the Word and that it grow in our hearts leading us to eternal life in heaven. 3rd Petition: We ask that His will, not ours, be done, even when we don't understand. His will is best--He wants us and steers us to heaven. 4th Petition: We humbly ask that He give us food and provisions for the body each day, keeping us from greed or from worry. 5th Petition: Nevertheless we still sin daily and ask that He forgive us our trespasses, as we then forgive the trespasses of those who sin against us.

"Trespasses" is a word for "sins." It uses the picture of someone crossing the forbidden line into an area where they do not belong. How many times have you trespassed, crossed, God's line? 100?? Keep counting! Other words for sin are "transgression" and "iniquity." In the Lord's Prayer the word is "debts"; we are accustomed to "trespasses." A debt is something that is owed, something which one is bound to pay. You must pay the penalty for your sins against God. The penalty is death. "*The wages of sin is death*" (Romans 6:23). Physical death and then separation from God forever in the pangs of hell. What are you going to do about it? "What is next?"

We pray, "Father, forgive us our trespasses and debts." The Bible word for forgive means "to send away, to set free," even "to divorce." Father, please, please take my debts off the books. I can't pay, and I can't survive Your wrath. But You have promised that for the sake of your holy Son, Jesus, the God-man, who was already punished for me, that for His sake, You would mercifully clear my record and pronounce me "Not Guilty." And He does!

Such a pardon is not logical. Why does He do it? Why would He pay the cost for us? "*God is love*" (1 John 4:8). God loves you. Christ has come "*to seek and to save, that which was lost*" (Luke 19:10). It's a gift. It's not a bargain such as "God, please forgive me, then I'll . . ." It's not a deal. It's a gift you desperately need. You cannot afford it. Such a gift and pardon fills the heart with awe and wonder, not about self, but about the Lord. Feeling good about His forgiveness is totally different from feeling good about something you accomplished, as in "My work and labor finally paid off!" Not for this one. It's God's gift of love to you who are in a miserable state of affairs. What a joy! Your "What's next?" is resurrection from the grave and eternal life and happiness in heaven!

God's gift of forgiveness in Jesus leads us to say openly, ". . . as we forgive those who trespass against us." It is very much our goal too, to forgive those who sin against us. Do you remember Jesus' parable of the Unforgiving Servant? A servant owed his master an extremely large sum of money, which the master forgave. That same servant found a fellow-servant who owed him a small amount of money. The first servant would not forgive the debt of the second! The master was angry and threw him into prison. ---- How can you who have been forgiven so much, not forgive someone who sins against you? Do not hold a grudge. Do not long to get even. It's hard to say, I'm sorry, because of pride; but it's just as hard to say, I forgive you. When you forgive someone their sin against you, you lose your edge. You can no longer say, "Remember that sin? You still owe me!" and then proceed to hold it over them.

Forgiveness is not easy for the sinful nature. Forgiveness takes power. Power comes from God's forgiveness to YOU. When the Children of Israel sinned against God at the border of the Promised Land, Moses prayed, *Let the power of my Lord be great . . . Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy* (Numbers 14:17-19). Forgiveness involves power, putting self aside and letting love lead the way. Peter asked Jesus, *Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?* Jesus said to him, *"I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven* (Matthew 18:21-22). Without counting, forgive those who sin against you. Forgive from the heart.

It's easy to attach strings to forgiveness, "I'll forgive you, if you don't do it again." Forgiveness thus becomes a deal—you do / I do. God forgives your debt without strings—for Jesus' sake. Forgive your wife, your husband, your son, your daughter, your mother, your father, your brother, your sister, your in-laws, your neighbors, etc. The devil wants to stir up strife and a feud. Don't fall into his camp by withholding forgiveness. Jesus says, *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.* Once you know the forgiveness that God has for you in Jesus, to turn around and withhold forgiveness from another, is to despise His forgiveness of you. *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you* (Ephesians 4:32).

So, for the Christian showered with forgiveness, "What's next? What's after this life?" Through forgiveness in Jesus, as Martin Luther joyously learned and staunchly defended, Heaven! Forgiveness--it's the heart of our faith!

Luther wrote in the Small Catechism: Forgive us our trespasses 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 prayers; for we are worthy of none of the things for which we ask, neither have we deserved them. But we ask that He would grant them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and, surely, deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will forgive from the heart and gladly do good to those who sin against us.

Amen! So be it!

Pastor Kanzenbach---