

Old Testament Lesson—Leviticus 25:35-43

If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God. If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property. For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold. You shall not rule over them with harshness, but shall fear your God.

New Testament Lesson—Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Last week, I came across a series of maxims online that really got me thinking. Now I know, the world of social media is kind of hit or miss these days. And seeking inspiration there can often feel like a waste of time.

But I was pleasantly surprised by what I found recently. In fact, I'd like to share it with you. The post is a list of pairings—both of which are Biblical (as in both are found in Scripture), but only one of them is in keeping with the Way of Jesus.

Don't worry. You'll see what I mean. Okay, here goes...

Genocide is biblical. So is loving your enemy. But only one is Christlike.

Slavery is biblical. So is liberation. But only one is Christlike.

Patriarchy is biblical. So is the countercultural elevation of women. Yes, only one is Christlike. Vengeance is biblical. And so is restoration that's rooted in grace. Of course, only one is biblical.

Segregation and division are biblical. Unity is too. But only the second is Christlike.

Though we treasure these words and books—though we believe them to hold authority, there are many reasons why we don't *worship* them. We don't *worship* the Bible. That would be a kind of idolatry. No, we worship the living God. We worship Christ Jesus, crucified and risen.

Friends, just because we encounter something in the Bible—a tradition, practice, or worldview—doesn't mean it's appropriate for followers of Jesus today—something we'd all do well to remember...especially on Reformation Sunday.

Today, we celebrate the truth that God continues to shape and reshape the Church—that God never leaves us as we are, but is always guiding us to be the most Christlike versions of ourselves. Even now, we are being reformed by our Creator's powerful love.

Sure, an "eye for an eye"—definitely biblical—was very helpful back in the day. It limited the amount of violence you could inflict on someone for hurting you. If someone takes out your eye, you have the right to take out theirs too. You don't, however, have the right to take both eyes.

If someone crushes your finger, then you can do the same to them. You may not, however, take their whole hand or their arm—no matter how angry you are or how justified you feel. It permitted sensible retaliation, so to speak.

And yet, that kind of tit for tat mentality will never be Christlike. Even though an "eye for an eye" was the conventional way of the world, Jesus was quite clear that no amount of vengeance on the part of those following him is acceptable. Violence cannot be the answer. Not now. Not ever. No, vengeance and retribution belong to God and God alone.

Or, to put it another way, Jesus says this a few chapters earlier in Matthew's gospel: "*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.*"

As you know, during this stewardship season, we've been studying the Lord's Prayer—looking closely at a piece of it each Sunday. That cherished prayer, of course, comes from the Sermon on the Mount—when Jesus systematically dismantles the religious norms of the day—challenging his disciples then and now that they must go further—even as far as an extra mile.

Doing the moral minimum, at best, only maintains the status quo. And we're called to do better, my friends, because we *can* do better. We're commanded to do better because we're equipped and empowered to do better—to be change agents and peacemakers.

The same Lord who calls us to ministry *believes* in us—believes in our ministries. Think about that. Jesus has *faith* in you...in me...in us.

As I've thought more about it these past few weeks, I've come to understand the Lord's Prayer as a kind of master class in moral and social transformation. Christ's words challenge us to put our faith into action—to be not just hearers of the Word, but doers of it.

These aren't just words and phrases in the way we usually think of a prayer. This one is special because it's *Jesus'* prayer. It's Christ's gift to us.

And being the extraordinary gift it is, the Lord's Prayer is really a clarion call to embrace a radical kind of hopefulness. It's a kind of reassurance that we can truly be imitators of Christ in

this world—that we can follow our countercultural Savior—our Savior who refused to settle for anything less than love.

Friends: I want us to really notice how countercultural the prayer of Christ is. As Pastor Dave helped show us last Sunday, to pray “thy will be done” is more than an expression of our faith, it’s also a kind of letting go—a relinquishing of our desires and, instead, proclaiming our total reliance on God’s grace.

Julian of Norwich puts it beautifully. She wrote, “Any time we look at our Maker with love, our importance in our own eyes diminishes, and we are filled with awe and humility and love for others.”

Not what I want; what You want—what God wants. Can you think of anything more radical—more countercultural—more faithful than that?

Looking further into Christ’s prayer, I think we find a real contender in the part we take up today: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

It’s my favorite section of the prayer not just because the language is almost uniquely Presbyterian: Debts, sins, or trespasses? Not my focus here, but feel free to talk to me about that later...

It’s my favorite, more importantly, because the act of debt forgiveness—whether we mean a financial debt or the debt of sin—this forgiveness seems to go against the very fundamentals of how a society’s supposed to work.

The forgiveness of debt just isn’t fair, is it? It’s a radical act. And yes, it’s thoroughly countercultural. No, it’s not fair. It’s not fair because it’s rooted in grace. Debt forgiveness, about all else, is an act of grace. It’s an act of love we don’t deserve and certainly didn’t earn.

We see this clearly in Jesus’ parable from Matthew’s gospel. Yes, the forgiveness of debt shatters the status quo on its own. But even more mind boggling is a king being moved with compassion by the plight of a slave. How utterly extraordinary!

“Unheard of” and “laughable” aren’t strong enough! This is non-sensical. This is ludicrous and ridiculous and, according to Jesus (here’s the kicker), this is exactly what the kingdom of God is like.

This is exactly what God’s *love* is like. This is the kind of beloved community God wills and hopes for—the kind of peaceable society we’re capable of building together if we really want it. That kind of world isn’t out of our reach, people!

The parable itself is layered with this transformative grace. You see: there is freedom in forgiveness. With the kind of radical grace we’re talking about comes liberation. Think about it. Many of us know how financial debt can feel like a cage we can’t escape from.

The same could be said about the grudges we on to—the anger we continue to stoke that only serves to exhaust us and hold us captive. The same could be said about the grace we stubbornly refuse to offer to others and ourselves.

Siblings in Christ, we can become enslaved by those grudges—held in bondage by withholding the forgiveness we’ve received in Jesus Christ—the forgiveness our Lord calls us to offer our friends, neighbors, and (yes) even our enemies.

Denying others the grace we’ve received doesn’t just tighten their chains, it shackles us, too. It becomes a stumbling block for us and our walk with Christ. Reveling in the joy of God’s forgiveness doesn’t mean as much, frankly, when we knowingly hold one another captive.

I’ll close with this. As I’ve said many times from this pulpit, though Jesus put forth a lot of radical ideas and showed us a countercultural way of living and breathing new life into a weary world, rarely did he make stuff up from whole cloth.

He doesn't invent new things, but casts a needed light on his own beloved Jewish traditions. You might say he was a reformer. After all, Jesus grew up with the ancient tradition of the jubilee. This was a Jewish law that aimed to make the world a more just and equitable place.

Every fifty years, Jesus and his ancestors were commanded to lavish forgiveness with a kind of reckless abandon. They were commanded to let go of their grudges and anger. And what's more, they were commanded to forgive all debts, including emancipating those who sold themselves into slavery as a last resort.

In short: They were commanded to pursue liberation and to proclaim freedom. And make no mistake about it, we're called to do likewise.

Forgiveness is one of the most powerful forces in Creation. For, in forgiveness, there is freedom. That is the truth—the truth that can and will set us free.

I believe that every time we forgive others their debts, we inch closer to the coming peaceable kingdom. We take a step toward Christ's beloved community. And we make God's jubilee not just some ancient fantasy, but a real, exciting possibility in the here and now.

May it be so. May we be agents of change, of grace, and of freedom.

Amen.