

Creative Punishment

Rosemary Hayne, a 39-year old Ohio woman, was convicted of assault after she was caught on camera launching a burrito bowl at an unsuspecting Chipotle employee when she wasn't happy with her order. At her sentencing, Judge Timothy Gilligan sentenced her to 180 days in jail, with an option for a reduced sentence if she worked at least 20 hours a week for two months in a fast-food restaurant. These examples of non-traditional punishments, regardless of how good or bad the ideas are, are trying to change people.

I. What is Our Debt?

This week, we're looking at the phrase,

“And Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” - Matthew 6:12

portion of the Lord's prayer. Specifically, looking at how forgiveness makes us look like our Father.

Debts, the Greek word, *opheilema*, literally refers to financial debts. Like forgive us our student loans. It's a metaphor for sin, that Jesus uses here and later in Chapter 18; specifically, to help us wrap our minds around how forgiveness works in the kingdom.

Barry Jones in *Dwell: Life with God for the World* summarizes the Biblical concept of sin:

When sin enters the story, shalom is vandalized. God's glorious intention for his good creation is subverted. The wholeness and harmony we were created to enjoy with God, with each other, with creation and with ourselves is fundamentally violated.

II. Forgive Us: Beyond Fig Leaves

We get this potent image when Adam and Eve first realize they've done something wrong:

“Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.”

(Genesis 3:7, NIV)

This story provides a rich metaphor for our own panicked response to sin. We sew fig leaves; we find shallow, insufficient responses to sin; and in the end, nobody's happy with it, and the sin is still there.

Let's talk about three major ways that we might metaphorically clothe ourselves with fig leaves.

Common Fig Leaf Response 1: Externalizing

One common 'fig leaf response' is externalizing: letting the sin we see over there distract us from the sin in here. For some of us, the knee-jerk response is to look outside - to get mad about the external wrongs and external injustice. Jesus has some harsh words for those of us who leap to demonizing the 'other' as our go-to sin response:

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.” - Matthew 7:3-5

We need to start with ourselves – not, “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” but, “Love the sinner, hate your own sin.” Jesus is calling us to look in the mirror. In Matthew 5, we get these six 'antitheses' – sections of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, “you have heard it said...but I say to you...” - check them out.

Do we have contempt for others in our spiritual family? Plank. Do we look at others as objects to be used? Are we entertaining unfaithfulness to our spouses in our hearts? Plank. Our pearl clutching is more often than not a dangerous distraction from what God is wanting to do in our own lives today.

Common Fig Leaf Response 2: Performing

Another common fig leaf response is performing - turning morality into a mere public spectacle. Jesus addresses moral performance when he says:

“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by Them.” - Matthew 6:1a

Moral grandstanding provides this sort of temporary balm for us – other people see us as 'good people,' and all is right. The morality of Bible verses memorized but not lived.

Jesus is calling us to dig deeper. He's calling us to the sort of change that doesn't get a bumper sticker or congratulatory button. He's calling us beyond fig leaves, into the fullness of the life of God.

A Note on Scrupulosity

Some people suffer from a psychological condition called Scrupulosity, or Religious OCD, which is an unhealthy obsession with religious matters. Whether it's an unhealthy fixation with hell, sin inventory and management, guilt and penance, or moral purity, when these things come to dominate our spiritual walk, it can be harmful.

Jesus says, *"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."* - John 10:10b

For some of us, if we are consistently finding ourselves in places of obsessing over some of these things, it may be a good idea to talk to a mental health professional.

Beyond Fig Leaves: Our Great Debts Are Forgiven

When it comes to sin, we need a solution beyond what we can slap together.

In the book of Leviticus, we get perhaps the most thorough old-testament document on what 'dealing with sin' looks like. Throughout Leviticus, animal sacrifice - in all its mess, horror, foul odors, is the consistent method. Check out this link for a deeper dive:
<https://bibleproject.com/articles/animal-sacrifice-really/>

The sacrificial system is sort of like using water when you've got an emergency coolant leak. It might get you from point A to B, but you need to take that baby into a shop. Jesus wades into the mess; takes the power and consequence of sin on Himself, becoming the sacrifice that eclipses all others, allowing us to be fully forgiven and reconciled to our Father.

As the Apostle Paul puts it,

"God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross." - Colossians 2:13b-14

Now, instead of hiding, or fixing, or externalizing, or performing, we bring our sin to our Father in prayer, "forgive us our debts." We become debt-free, and now we're free to go beyond mere sin management and **become the sort of people who look like our Father.**

The Antitheses:

What do we ask for forgiveness for? We could start by talking about the Sermon on the Mount, the passages that come before and after this prayer we're praying:

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister, will be subject to judgment.” - Matthew 5:21-22

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” - Matthew 5:27-28

The forgiveness available in Jesus enables us to re-engage these hard sayings. We are approaching these sayings as clay, allowing them to carve out the Kingdom of God in our lives. We have been reconciled to the Father, and now we are being shaped into something.

We pray a prayer that makes us take inventory with our Father. What does my life, my heart, my behaviour look like? Whose kingdom am I building? Who am I becoming? Father, I bring my life, warts and all in front of you; forgive me and shape me.

*“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s **ambassadors**, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

God’s plan for dealing with sin isn’t just to forgive us. It’s to invite us into the heart of the Gospel – not just reconciling us to God but transforming us into ambassadors; and, that’s why this part of the prayer isn’t complete with just “forgive us our debts.”

III. As We Forgive: Looking Like Our Father

It’s, “forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.” It’s looking at those who have wronged us, even those who have deeply wronged us, and saying, “you owe me nothing.” The very next verses after the Lord’s prayer hammer down the connection between the two phrases:

“For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” - Matthew 6:14-15

What Jesus is effectively doing is cutting off our escape valve. I think it's why we read "debts" instead of "trespasses or transgressions." "Debts" helps us to think about how forgiveness works in the Kingdom of God. And when we read the book of Matthew a few times, it makes us think about a parable that shows up later in Matthew 18:22-35.

Forgiveness, as Jesus defined it, MUST be extended. We don't get permission to separate the two. Not ever. And why? Because our forgiveness isn't an end in itself. It's not the beginning or conclusion of this prayer, or the sermon on the mount, or Jesus' ministry. It's the backbone of the Kingdom economy. Tit for tat spirituality – an attitude that grabs others by the neck and makes them pay – it's like shopping at superstore with Russian Rubles. Your money's no good here. You're living in a different economy.

Forgiveness is tough

A big chunk of the Sermon on the Mount deals with forgiveness, loving enemies, and interpersonal relationships. This tells us two things: forgiving others is important, and forgiving others isn't easy. As we talked about earlier, the sacrificial system, with all its blood, guts, and odor, is the Bible's first illustration of what dealing with sin looks like.

We might have to wrestle, but Jesus doesn't let us put forgiveness on the shelf. It's front and center. In this prayer, it's brought into our prayer lives. Pastor Ben talked about how this prayer functions for him. How when he's gets to the "as we forgive our debtors" bit in his prayer time, he pauses. It functions as an opportunity to do inventory on his relationships and ask, "Have I forgiven my debtors?"

If not, why not? We have an opportunity to talk to God about it, to be honest, to bring our clenched fists to Him and say, "Help me let this go."

Matthew 5 and Forgiveness

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. **He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**" - Matthew 5:43-48*

How can the image of God be restored in us if we don't follow Jesus in praying, "forgive them, they don't know what they're doing"? Jesus, our greatest representation of the Father, spends His last moments praying for the very people who are torturing Him. Through the power of the Spirit, we can become people who do the same.

IV. Prayer Practice: Examen

This prayer is drawing us into a way of living beyond what Dallas Willard calls “Sin management.” It’s drawing us into transformation.

How often do we pray this? Every day. As Pastor Ricky talked about last week, the previous line of the prayer covers the next 24 hours. It stands to reason that we pray, “forgive us...as we forgive” just as frequently. It’s a regular check-in - not just a one-off for the big nasty sin.

That being said, sometimes we need to know that we can, without any fancy formality, come before God and just say, “I screwed up. Please forgive me.”

But we also need to recognize that God is calling us into the deep end of this forgiveness economy. He’s calling us to be an instrument of peace – of Shalom – in this world. One practice that you may want to try is just doing an Examen – a way of praying that makes us pause at the end of our day, reflect on where we’re at and how God may want to transform us.

A Forgiveness Examen

1. Spend a few moments recognizing that our Father is present.
2. Reflect on the last 24 hours with gratitude.
3. Ask: Where might I need to ask the Father for forgiveness?
4. Ask: Who do I need to forgive today?
5. Ask: How is God calling me to be an instrument of His peace in the next 24 hours?

Practices like this, when they become regular parts of our lives, make us ask the best sorts of questions.

Are we living in the Kingdom economy? Are we stubbornly holding on to our little crowns, our little deeds, our little debtors? Are we becoming someone who looks like our Father? This is what living in the Kingdom of God is all about. Not just that we have been forgiven, but that we have been given this ministry of reconciliation.

Life Group Questions:

Open up:

What are some creative punishments that you might have heard of? Growing up, did your family have any weird, creative discipline practices? If so, what were they? Do you think it had a positive effect on you?

Dig in:

What sort of images pop into your head when you hear the word 'sin'? Does sin feel like a serious concept to you? Why or why not?

In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus acknowledges that relationships can be complicated. How is forgiveness different from reconciliation?

Read Matthew 18:23-35. What would our lives look like if we took Jesus words seriously? What are some challenges?

What are some ways that we might try to give a superficial solution?

Prayer:

Spend some time in prayer, asking for God to forgive our debts, help us to forgive others. Read the prayer below, attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, and ask God to transform us into people who look like our Father.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy;

O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.