

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us

The first part of this phrase is relatively easy to get our heads round, we ask God's forgiveness week by week as part of our services and the priest pronounces absolution – a declaration of God's forgiveness. Both our psalm and our gospel reading talked about God's power to forgive our sin, so this is perhaps a reminder to us in a prayer we say regularly that God is able and willing to forgive our sins when we ask him to.

Before we look at the second part, a quick aside about the wording, the earliest versions of the Lord's prayer – one of which we will use this evening - talk about our debts or failings, by the time of John Wycliffe in the 1380s the English version asked God to "forgive our debts that is our sins as we forgive our debtors the men that have sinned against us" - bit of our mouthful but perhaps an attempt to make clear that this is not simply financial debt but a more general term for sins, *trespasses* came in with the first English translation of the bible and the book of Common Prayer at the time of Henry VIII in the 1500s, and in recent years we have moved to using sins but whatever term you use, it's about the things that we do which are **wrong**, the decisions we make that are against God's laws.

The second part is trickier, it almost seems to imply that God forgiving us is dependent on us forgiving those who sin against us – but surely that can't be right! Let's explore a little more about forgiveness, Frederich Buechner says:

*To forgive somebody is to say one way or another, "You have done something unspeakable, and by all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantees that I will be able to forget what you've done, and though we may both carry the scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us. I still want you for my friend."*

*To accept forgiveness means to admit that you've done something unspeakable that needs to be forgiven, and thus both parties must swallow the same thing: their pride.*

*This seems to explain what Jesus means when he says to God, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". Jesus is not saying that God's forgiveness is conditional upon our forgiving others. In the first place, forgiveness that's conditional isn't really forgiveness at all, just Fair Warning; and in the second place, our unforgiveness is among those things which we need to have God forgive us most. What Jesus apparently is saying is that the pride which keeps us from forgiving is the same pride which keeps us from accepting forgiveness, and will God please help us do something about it.*

*When somebody you've wronged forgives you, you're spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience.*

*When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you're spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride.*

*For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other's presence.*

I found that passage really helpful, the idea that when we ask God to forgive us we are asking to be forgiven for the pride that stops us seeking and giving forgiveness, and the impact that that has, let me read the last part of the quote again...

*When somebody you've wronged forgives you, you're spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience.*

*When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you're spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride.*

*For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other's presence.*

These are things we should bear in mind, when we get angry with someone – whether its because they have done something irritating - and I am sure all of those who have been in lockdown with a family member have plenty of examples of that - or something much more serious and there have been some actions by political leaders here and in the US that have probably made us all angry in recent weeks – then the thing to do is to forgive, get rid of the bitterness and then we can decide whether to take action with a clear head.

So let's be quick to ask forgiveness not just from God, but from one another, and even quicker to forgive.