

Lord Teach Us How to Pray

In the first part of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to focus on who God is, on the truth that God is ***"Our Father,"*** yes, and so I can truly call him ***"my Father"*** as well. Thus Jesus also reveals who we are. We are sons and daughters of his Father. **Ours is a family relationship.** God chooses us to be family and the chosen people of his Kingdom. Jesus teaches us to ponder and appreciate this great gift of who we are. We are born again, born of God as revealed in John 1:12-14 and recipients of his generosity. To emphasize this, Jesus will later say, ***"Fear not little flock, for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom"*** (Luke 12:32). We must always strive to be aware that we pray with Christ Jesus within that great gift of God of himself to us. It is from the awareness of who we are in the Father's heart, that we more meaningfully continue to pray that his will be done on earth, in our lives, as it is done in heaven. To the degree that we grow in knowing and loving the Father to whom we pray, the more cherishingly do we appreciate the gifts he desires to give us. Within the context of our relationship as child to Father, Jesus continues to teach us to come with our needs, our petitions. He then teaches us to trust ourselves to the Father's providential care and ask him for our daily sustenance, ***"our daily bread."*** Then we are to ask the Father, ***"Forgive us our trespasses."***

The theme of my first Lenten talk dwelled on the Father's great gift to us in his Son Jesus Christ who shed his Blood for us for our salvation by the forgiveness of our sins. I emphasized how the great gifts of his forgiveness and healing were revealed throughout the entire Sacred Scripture to focus our attention on God's desire for us. **Too often we forget God's desire for us, and we focus on our desire for God.** When we feel the burden of our sins, we are prompted to seek a priest confessor, examine our conscience, confess our sins, receive absolution of the priest and do our penance. This is essential and praiseworthy and very fruitful, for we do receive the Father's forgiveness. But without realizing it, we may experience Confession as simply being lifted from the burdens of our sins--to be quit of our guilt, so we can go about living our lives until we feel the need to go to Confession again. Our focus is on what we desire and what we have received. Good as this is, it limits the fullness of the beauty of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Father's desire for us.

But if we view this Sacrament as ***"telling the truth on ourselves before God"*** we see it in a fuller light. The ongoing examination of conscience needs to be appreciated as opening our hearts to the Lord, as an ongoing a lifelong discovery of self-discovery of "who we are before God in the depth of our being". As King David expressed in his poignant Psalm 51 which he prayed as he begged God to forgive his adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband Uriah to cover up his guilt. ***"Indeed, you love truth in the heart, in the secret of the heart teach me wisdom. Create in me a clean heart. Put a steadfast spirit within me."*** My frequent Confessions should also deepen my desire to appreciate more fully who the Giver is

and the great gift of forgiveness as an expression of his love drawing my heart more closely to his heart throughout my entire life. **Seen in this light, over time I will receive more deeply the Father's love by receiving his gift of forgiveness in the way in which he desires to give this great gift to me-- as his child, as Jesus reveals him in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The Father runs to embrace his prodigal son who just returned from the pigpen, now repentant and broken of heart because the pain he caused his Father.**

Yes, Jesus taught us, "*Forgive us our trespasses.*" But that is not the entire petition. Jesus includes, "*As we forgive those who trespass against us.*" Both aspects of Jesus' petition are essential and cannot be separated. He inextricably binds them together as he continues to teach us elsewhere of experiencing fully the Father's forgiveness of our sins. **To ask for forgiveness for our sins and to forgive those who have sinned against us are two sides of the same coin.** But for the sake of clarifying more deeply this entire petition, I will dwell principally on asking for forgiveness in this talk, and then I will address the necessity of forgiving those who have sinned against us in the next talk.

Father, Forgive Us Our Trespasses

In order to ask forgiveness for our sins, we must have some awareness of how we have sinned. And that task may not be as easy as we first realize. To aid us we may refer to an "Examination of Conscience," a printed list of sins against the Ten Commandments or sins listed under the Seven Capital Sins. All these are helpful. But as we grow in our intimacy with the Lord, he invites us to strive to become more aware of our hearts from which these sins arise. As Jesus reveals, "*What comes out of a man is what makes him unclean. For from within, out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, pride, arrogance and folly*" (Mark 7:20-23). Growing in true knowledge of our hearts is a challenge. **It has been said that the longest journey in life is from our head to our heart.** It is a lifelong journey. And many hesitate to embark upon it, and some who begin turn back because they perceive it to be too difficult. Such people make the journey over relying on their own efforts in a spirit of unhealthy self-reliance, more Stoic than Christian. They spend time "working on this or that bad behavior" with the attitude of perfectionism. They neglect to persistently cry out to God for his mercy and live within God's loving relationship, as Jesus teaches us in the "Our Father." Eventually life teaches the reality which the Lord clearly reveals in Scripture, "*The human heart is more tortuous, deceitful, devious, twisted, than all else. It is beyond remedy; who can understand it? I, the Lord, alone probe the mind and test the heart*" (Jer 17:9). When God does probe and test our hearts, he does so to forgive and to heal us, not to shame or condemn. And when this occurs in our lives, as painful as it may be, if we receive it as he desires to give this testing, it is a new turning point in our lives that leads to growth in freedom and peace.

Jesus Reveals the Blindness of Our Hearts by the Light of His Truth and Power of His Mercy

In the Gospels Jesus repeatedly reveals the duplicity of the human heart, as described in Jeremiah, In the Parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee praying in the Temple, the Pharisee, to all appearances, is living a virtuous life. We know this because he tells God all that he does in a spirit of perfectionism to fulfil the Law of God. Whereas the Tax Collector throws himself upon God's mercy with a humble and contrite heart. ***“He beat his breast saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’”*** Jesus concludes, ***“This man went down to his house justified before God rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted”*** (Luke 18:14). It is not simply the words “I’m sorry” of the Tax Collector that moves God. It is the compunction of his heart and his sorrow and his trust in God's mercy. The Father sees his heart and is moved to grant him forgiveness and healing.

In the episode of the sinful woman who washes Jesus feet, we see the same dichotomy of the human heart in Simon, the Pharisee, who invited Jesus to dinner. As the woman is shedding tears for her many sins and courageously and humbly bathes Jesus feet with her tears and dries them with her hair, Simon only sees what is external. He is not aware of her heart, because his exterior virtuous actions blind him from knowing his own heart. Jesus reveals that when he says to Simon, ***“I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little”*** (Luke 7:47). It is obvious from the context of the entire story that Simon does have many sins. But he does not acknowledge them because he does not know the state of his own sinful heart. He has not made that long journey from his head to his own heart. Jesus tries to reveal that to him by telling Simon how inhospitable he has been to Jesus ever since he entered his house. But because Simon thinks he is sinless, he has no reason to be grateful for God's forgiveness. Sadly, he loves little and murmuring in his heart, Simon rashly judges and condemns not only the woman but Jesus as well.

Many such parables of Jesus and many confrontations with his enemies reveal the difficulty all of us humans have in acknowledging and admitting our sins and seeing our hearts as the Father and Jesus sees them. This truth is more dramatically displayed at the Last Supper. The Apostles who sat around the table with Jesus before he died were his closest friends, disciples whom Jesus chose, whom he forgave many times, taught, and loved. They too loved him and followed him for three years. But even they had to be painfully awakened to the reality of how blinded they were in knowing their own hearts. After Jesus gave them the gift of his Body and Blood, his final gift of his love and mercy, ***“A dispute also arose among them which was to be regarded as the greatest. And Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called***

benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one of one who serves. For which is greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:24-27). This spirit of competition occurred three times before during Jesus’ public ministry. The Apostles wrangled over who among them is the greatest, and each time Jesus addressed this spirit of pride among them, but it surfaced yet again. In John’s Gospel, we learn that Jesus then got down on his knees and washed the feet of his Apostles to teach them that they must serve each other as he is serving them. The Apostles’ self-centeredness and Jesus humility reveal to us the reality of our own self-serving attitudes.

This is a wake-up call for me to realize how self-centered I can be in the face of Jesus pouring out his life for me at the Last Supper. At each mass I hear his words, ***“This is my Body given for you. This is the Cup of my Blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.”*** Hopefully, the repetition of his words will not become a routine habit, but deepen my awareness and appreciation of the gift of himself to me in my life. His Blood is the Blood of Forgiveness of my sins.

In Mark’s Gospel, immediately after the Last Supper in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus confronted the bravado of Peter who still had a lot to learn about the blindness of his own heart. ***“Jesus said to them, ‘You will all fall away; for it is written, I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered. But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.’ Peter said to him, ‘Even though they all fall away, I will not’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Truly I say to you this very night before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.’ But Peter said vehemently, ‘If I must die with you, I will not deny you.’ And they all said the same”*** (Mark 14:27-31). And within an hour or so, they will abandon him. In all the other Gospels, the cock crows one time. But in Mark’s Gospel we learn it crows two times. In the courtyard of the High Priest as Peter is in the act of protesting that he did not know Jesus, ***“Immediately the cock crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had ‘said to him, ‘Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.’ And Peter broke down and wept”*** (Mark 14:12). This “breaking down” exposes Peter’s heart. His tears are bitter in sorrow and a cleansing of his heart. Painful as it is, it is a moment of truth, and as Jesus said, ***“The truth will set you free”*** (John 8:31). Peter is freer at this moment than when he boasted earlier of his willingness to die with Jesus.

In fleeing the courtyard, Peter experienced the stark and almost brutal awareness of just how blinded he was by his persistent bravado and pride. As Jesus faced the painful death on the Cross, Peter faced, by the power of Jesus’ love for him, the bittersweet transforming love and mercy of the Father. The death of his bravado was the beginning of a new birth to act with the courage of God, still to come after Christ’s Resurrection. ***“Amazing grace how sweet***

the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost and now am found, was blind and now I see.”

As Jesus was dying on the Cross, he prayed, ***“Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing”*** (Lk 23:24). Nevertheless, they are not sinless. The persistence of resisting the grace of God over a lifetime carries the weight of their sins. Jesus clearly teaches that earlier in his ministry after he heals the man born blind. As the Pharisees continued to claim that this miracle is not of God and continued to accuse Jesus of not being sent by God, ***“Jesus said, ‘For judgment I have come into the world, so that the blind may see and those who see will become blind. Some of the Pharisees asked, ‘What? Are we blind too?’ Jesus said, ‘If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim that you can see, your guilt remains”*** (John 9:39-41). Again, this reveals the sad truth that resistance to grow in relationship with God can persist over a lifetime and harden one’s heart to the truth of facing oneself and of accepting God’s mercy. It also reveals that the journey from the head to the heart is a lifelong journey with and in Christ, a journey that leads to a life of freedom and peace as a sons and daughters of the Father.

“By His Wounds We Are Healed”

Three days later in the Upper Room on Easter evening, Peter experienced the great gift of the Father’s forgiveness when the Risen Lord entered, the doors being closed, and said to Peter and to all, ***“Peace be with you.”*** Christ’s peace is his overwhelming gift of pure and undeserved forgiveness. Jesus then showed them his hands and his side, recalling the words of Isaiah, ***“By his wounds we are healed.”*** Then, ***“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. And when he had said this he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”*** (John 20: 21-23). With these words, Jesus shares with his Apostles the power to forgive sins. He gives to his Family, the Church, the great Sacrament of Reconciliation. How important it is to see the context in which this great Sacrament is given to us. In that Upper Room, the Apostles’ sins were forgiven. They also experienced a healing of their blindness, a clearer knowledge of their hearts and a transforming power of humility that dealt a death blow to their pride, their self-centeredness and their spirit of competition. It is in that same spirit that we should approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation throughout our entire life. Forgiveness of sins, healing of the wounds that caused them and growth in our relationship with the Father as his sons and daughters are the gifts the Father gives us in this great Sacrament of Reconciliation. By Jesus Christ’s wounds we are forgiven and healed.