

The Prayer for the Increase of Faith

Scripture Reading: Luke 17:1-6 and Acts 3:11-26.

Singing: 394:1-3 – 187:1-4 – 446:1-2 – 83:1-3

Congregation and friends,

What may be the two most difficult things to do in relationship to God and man?

I suggest that the first one may be for children of God to *actually believe they **are forgiven** from all their personal sins.*

For once you begin to see the vile evil of your sins against a good God, you will never forgive yourself!

How difficult then to believe that God really has forgiven you!

It is even harder to believe what Micah reveals about God in Micah 7:18-19.

First, he extols in verse 18 that God pardons sin:

Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity!

and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage?

Indeed, no false god ever is like that. Forgiveness is a totally foreign thing in any other religion.

But then he adds in verse 19 something even more astounding.

*He retaineth not His anger forever, **because He delighteth in mercy!***

God's mindset is keen to forgive because He delights in it.

This must be one of the Scriptures that made the Puritans teach that God's judgments are His strange work while forgiving sinners is His joy.

In verse 20, he adds more precious detail,

He will turn again, He will subdue our iniquities:

and Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.

Casting all our sins into the depths of the sea means He will cast them out of His sight.

In Psalm 103 this is expressed: "*As far as the east is from the west,*

so far hath He removed our transgressions from us."

That means He will never again bring them up and deal with us according to our sins.

Of course, God never *forgets* sin, for how can omniscience forget to know something?

But it means that He will not recall it, He will not dwell on it. He will not carry a grudge.

He will not hold on to the memory of what we did and deal with us accordingly.

Instead, He will deal with those He forgives as if they never had done wrong.

Isn't that amazing?

For sure, only our God is like this.

Now, as I said earlier, to believe *to be forgiven like that* is certainly one of hardest things!

Undoubtedly this was the struggle of those convicted under Peter's preaching.

Peter had confronted them with the sin of crucifying Jesus.

They had murdered the Prince of Life knowing full well He was innocent.

And yet, now God comes to them with a message that truly defies all explanation.

Hear how God the Father speaks to them who took His holy Child Jesus and tortured Him to death.

In Acts 3:26, God the Father speaks:

“Unto you first, God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.”

Would that be the first message you would send to anyone who murdered your child?

How hard to believe that God also sends us this message, I am ready to pardon you, even after your sin against the blessed Lord Jesus!

The second hardest thing to do may be to forgive a person who has sinned against you.

Maybe someone has hurt you or deeply offended you.

Even then we find it hard to be ready to forgive and to forgive with all our heart.

And not just once, but to do it multiple times, as Jesus commands His followers in Luke 17:4:

And if he [your brother] trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, ‘I repent;’ thou shalt forgive him.

Peter having heard the ‘seven times’ wanted to check out if seven was the limit.

Jesus’ answer in Matthew 18:22 expounds the ‘seven times’ with,

“I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.”

To **do** these two, namely, to believe in God’s forgiveness **and** to exercise forgiveness to other people, requires something more than good intentions or human strength.

It requires enormous quantity of love—and yet that is not what the disciples asked.

Their request is our text for today, found in Luke 17:5: And the apostles said unto the Lord, ‘*Increase our faith*’ (Luke 17:5).

Let us consider this *Prayer for the Increase of Faith* and observe two main points,

1. The occasion of this prayer

2. The content of this prayer

First then, the occasion of this prayer. This is found in the previous four verses.

Jesus began His instruction with stating a universal fact in verse 1,

“It is impossible but that offenses will come.”

It is unavoidable that even among His own disciples, sins will be done.

There will be occasions where we grieve, hurt or offend each other.

The Lord recognizes that even His holiest children in this world remain imperfect saints.

He knows any church family on this earth is a hospital of sinners instead of a museum of saints.

Yet note the serious warning He adds,

“But woe unto him, through whom they come!

*It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck,
And he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.”*

That is serious and strong language!

Woe if any of us cause young believers, for those are the little ones, to stray into sin.

Woe if our actions lead anyone astray into reactions of sin or into paths of evil.

Assuming that offenses have been done to you by a fellow brother,
the Captain of salvation follows on with His will on how to deal with this.

“Take heed to yourselves” is spoken to the *offended* and not to the *offender*.

You, who are sinned against, are to act against the sinner.

In this case, the sinner is a brother, for the Lord proceeds,

“If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him ...”

Without specifying the trespass, the Lord commands us to confront the brother or sister who has sinned against us.

This confrontation is to be a *rebuke*.

A rebuke is an encouraging admonishment to right a wrong and must be spoken in love, according to Ephesians 4:15, *“speak the truth in love.”*

According to Leviticus 19:17, rebuking a brother is actually an act of love, as it is written,

*“Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart:
thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour,
And not suffer sin upon him.”*

If sin remains upon him or her, the offender will experience God’s judgment.

Therefore, if we do everything possible to convert the sinner from his way, we are loving him supremely.

This supreme love is not only in that we rebuke him about the sin done,
but especially when we do this with the mindset and readiness of forgiveness.

That is exactly how God approached those who literally crucified the Lord Jesus.

He rebuked them clearly for their sins.

And yet, along with that stern rebuke, He revealed His readiness to forgive them.

Such a loving approach with the Gospel has more power to convict than merely telling them of their wrong.

The Puritans were used to saying that the Law convicts, but the Gospel melts and converts.

The next step for the offended person is depending on the reaction of the offender.

Jesus said, *“and if he repents, forgive him.”*

What is meant with repenting?

Genuine repentance includes the naming and shaming of sin.

It includes the humbling of ourselves before the offended and taking ownership of the wrong we did without excuses and without blame-shifting.

Let it be said in specific words what we have done wrong and that we now see how bad this was as we realize the harm done.

For example, children, just saying “Sorry!” to your brother or sister is not really repentance.

Repentance is when you humble yourself before them and saying,

“Brother or sister, I now see that the way I talked to you when I said ... was so wrong, so hurtful, and so sinful.

I was wrong— I was mean or unkind—in saying that. And I am sorry. Will you please forgive me?”

Why is that so hard to do?

It is because we are proud people. We hate humbling ourselves.

That feels like a defeat even though in truth, it is a victory.

For if you master your own spirit, you are stronger than he that conquers a whole city by himself.

In all this avoid being like Adam and Eve. When God confronted them, they went into blame shifting mode.

Do not minimize or explain the wrong done.

Do not hide behind excuses or make an attempt to shove some of the blame on the one you sinned against.

If you do this, you are partial in your repentance. You are not genuinely sorry about your sins.

In repentance you are not responsible for the sins of others.

You own, you name and shame your own.

And you lay yourself down at the mercy of the one you sinned against.

An upright repenting sinner knows he has lost his rights because he is guilty.

Learn from David when he repented of his sins with adultery with Bathsheba.

Bathsheba was not without guilt, for what woman would wash herself in sight of the palace window?

Yet David took all the blame for his sin on himself, *“Against thee, thee only have I sinned and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightiest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.”* (Ps. 51:4)

A second reason why we may hesitate to approach someone for forgiveness is because we fear rejection.

Though this fear may have some ground when we deal with people, it is entirely groundless with regard to God.

For God is ready to pardon and plenteous in forgiveness. He even delights in showing mercy.

But note clearly what the Saviour instructs you about exercising forgiveness.

“And if he repents ... forgive him.”

Did you hear that?

We are to forgive him or her **if** or **when** they repent.

Friends, forgiveness is not possible when there is no repentance expressed.

God does not forgive any sins that are not repented of even though He labors to convince us that He will when we repent and return to Him.

Unrepented and unconfessed sins stand marked against us in God's holy mind.

Let that urge us all to seek to know our sins so we may confess them and find forgiveness while He is near to pardon.

Follow David in Psalm 19:12-13. He feared the unconfessed sin between him and the Lord. He wrote,

"Who can understand his errors?

Cleanse thou me from secret faults.

Secret faults are faults we may not even see ourselves.

Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins;

Let them not have dominion over me.

Presumptuous sins are sins we do consciously while resisting our conscience.

Then shall I be upright,

And shall be innocent from the great transgression.

Paul also exercised himself daily to have a conscience void of offense before God and toward man.

In other words, he lived with a tender conscience because he was conscious of the evil of every sin.

So, the Lord continues, *"And if he repents ... **forgive him.**"*

To forgive means to put away the sins as far as the east is from the west.

To forgive is like casting the wrong done against us into the depth of the ocean where it sinks beyond reach.

That picture is meant to say: You do not dwell anymore no more on this wrong.

To forgive, congregation, is hard. It is not in our natures to be forgiving!

But to forgive a repentant sinner is especially a herculean effort for those who have been deeply wounded by the sins of others. Not all sin is the same.

To be lied against or to have someone slander your name is sin.

But to be abused, violated, shamed, or emotionally mutilated are sins that leave a person deeply damaged or scarred, often in some degree, life-long.

In those cases when sin has had serious impact, let us never think or speak lightly about forgiving.

For such wounded hearts, extra special grace is needed to truly forgive.

Let us think a little more about forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not putting away the sin while holding a grudge against the person whom we forgave.

True forgiveness is when you will no more dwell on the sin and no longer let your actions be dictated by revengeful or bitter feelings toward the offender.

Such forgiveness does not always mean complete restoration of a relationship.

For if the offender does not repent or will not acknowledge the wrong do against you, no reconciliation and healing can be experienced.

Lastly, in true forgiveness, we promise never to drag the forgiven sin into the future.

Once forgiven, we need to bury it and leave it buried.

And then comes the hardest part of the Lord's instructions:

*"And he trespass against thee seven times in a day,
and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, 'I repent:'
thou shalt forgive him."*

Perhaps the disciples looked at each other with a big question mark in their eyes?

"Really, Lord, is this truly what Thou does require us to do?

Who is sufficient to forgive like that and to do it again and again?

How can we be so loving and genuine and generous to do this time and again?"

It would have been understandable if they would have asked their Master,

"Lord, increase our love. Pour more and more love in our hearts so we be able to do this as Thou just commanded."

Yet instead they asked, "Lord, increase our faith."

How is that to be explained? How is an increase of faith connected to this command to love and to forgive each other seven times or as Jesus expanded it in Matthew 18:22 with, "Until seventy times seven?"

Let us consider the content of this petition and how this is related to Jesus' instructions, after singing from Psalter 446:1-2.

"Lord, increase our faith."

What did the disciples mean with this petition and how is this now related to Jesus' divine instruction?

It is possible that Jesus' scenario seems unrealistic among us as humans.

To have someone sin consciously and purposely against you seven times a day and to go through this process of confrontation, repentance, and forgiveness seven times a day, goes quite far in our thinking.

But is it unrealistic in our walk, talk, thoughts, and actions toward God?

Is it really impossible to sin against God seven times a day, or even seventy times seven a day?

No, it is not impossible at all!

Let us examine ourselves for a moment against the first table of God's love.

He commands us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Not only when we sit in church, but also when we do business, talk to our neighbours, and are on our phones.

Do you love the Lord more than your own comfort?

Is His Name dearer to you than your own family name?

Are you willing to leave your father or mother if the choice is between Him and them?

Is suffering financial loss or having your business ruined a sacrifice you are willing to make for His Name?
Do you love Him like Jesus loved His Father? *'Father, I delight to do Thy Will'*, even if it is costly?
If we continue like this, can you see it is really not farfetched to think that we sin against Him seven times a day?

And if we pull in the second table of the Law, then the case is made even stronger.

Do you love your straying brother so much that you sacrifice your comforts and time to seek him out?

Will you excuse yourself from the duty to seek them because they are hostile?

Are you loving even your own flesh and blood, your brothers and sisters, as Jesus loved His enemies?

Do you *entreat* those who have offended, disdained, or pained you in love and with a readiness to forgive?

Is there any such spirit in you like there was in Stephen when they stoned him to death,

"Lord, lay not this sin to their charge?"

Are you willing to deny your rights and turn the other cheek when offended or go the extra mile to show the love of Christ instead?

Do you sense how true it is: *we easily sin seventy times seven daily against God!*

Our life-existence is sinful and fails entirely to live up to the glory of God.

Besides these active sins of doing wrong in thought, word, and deed, what about the sins of omission?

Those are the sins of what we neglect to do or to be in the sight of God and towards our fellow man!

Each day living as an unconverted, unrepentant, and unbelieving sinner is 24 hours of sin!

How often have you neglected the days of grace that are given you?

How often have you resisted the strivings of the Spirit with your soul to repent?

Seventy times seven times a day is not an exaggeration at all when we think about our sins against our Maker.

Loving or preferring the darkness of our own lost lives above the light of a life devoted to God is nothing less than the Jews who spit on Jesus' face or the multitude who called to crucify Him!

We shudder to think of doing such things to the Person of Christ, and yet can be so easy going about a heart that does not heed His law and Gospel.

But, friends, according to the Lord those sins are categorized in a worse category than the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Is this reality dawning on you? Are you feeling pricked like the multitude on Pentecost?

Am I hearing you say, "Oh, no, what must I do then? How can I undo my wrongs? How can this be cancelled?"

Peter's answer was straightforward to them and to us.

"You cannot undo your sins of killing the Prince of Life. No sin can be undone by us.

Even an ocean of tears will not wash away a single stain upon us.

Mountains of good works will not pay for a single offence against the infinite God.

We face a Divine-sized debt which all the gold and silver of an infinite number of worlds cannot pay.

How alarming is this reality!

Let it penetrate us: we have offended and dishonoured the Majesty of heaven.

Not once, not twice, not three times, nor four times.

We have done so innumerable times and each time it is written in the registry of heaven under your name.

As we sang together, "If Thou would mark iniquity, who can stand?"

God does mark your iniquity and He cannot ignore the demands of His holy justice.

It is truly a blessed day when God's Spirit penetrates your conscience and brings you to cry out, "What must I do to be saved from the righteous and holy wrath of the Majesty I offended?"

Hear His answer: *He is willing to forgive you all your sins!*

Hear His voice in Acts 3:19, "*Repent ye therefore, and be converted; that your sins may be blotted out...*"

And again, in verse 29, "*Unto you first God, having raised up His Son Jesus Christ, sent Him to bless you, in turning every one of you from his iniquities.*"

Doubt not that you will be welcomed and embraced as the younger son in Luke 15 was when he returned to his father!

Doubt not there is forgiveness even though you acted like the older son, who rejected the gracious entreaty of his father.

For though Jesus did not finish the parable in Luke 15, leaving the story of the older son's answer to his father's entreaty unanswered, history did finish it.

History wrote the concluding verse something like this, "And the older son took up his staff and beat his father to death." That is exactly what the Jerusalem sinners did with Jesus Christ: *they crucified Him!*

And still, after Pentecost, the **first** message Peter is commanded to preach is "*Unto you first God, having raised up His Son Jesus (Whom you killed) sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.*"

Do you hear what God is saying to you?

He is ready to pardon you. God offers you all instant and absolute forgiveness if you will repent and return to Him.

He delights in showing mercy, and He has been long in looking for you to return to Him already!

For long before you became aware of your sins, He has been waiting with compassion for you to return as you stumbled and pained yourself in a life of sinful foolishness.

Do I hear you gasp, "Forgiveness? Really? For me, after all I have done. Can this be true?"

Can God be serious after all these years of neglecting Him and even abusing His goodness by using it just for myself?

Can I trust this to be true when I have so dishonoured Him by my blame-shifting and hiding behind my inability as a pious cover to continue my sin-loving lifestyle?

Oh, how can I dare to hope this would be true for me?

I hardly dare to even mention the sins I have committed to myself, how much less to name and shame them before God.

Can it be true that there is forgiveness for me?

I can hear one object, "Not only the blood of Christ is on my hands, but the blood of my own child: I have had an abortion. Is there forgiveness for even such a sinner as I am?"

The blood of Jesus Christ His Son, cleanseth us from all sins.

Another says, "Oh, can I believe this after all the years of deceit in hiding my sins of abuse, sins of cheating, and the violating of my purity and marriage with porn? Is it really true that God is willing to put away these sins from His sight that are day and night before me even though I try to suppress them and forget them?"

Yet, there is forgiveness for you. John declared it, "*The blood of Jesus Christ His Son, cleanseth us from all sins.*" (1 John 1:8)

Though we will never understand it, God reveals that His heart rejoices in forgiving sinners and He was willing to do this at the utmost cost: *the death of His only begotten Son.*

Oh, friends, here all words fail. What tongue shall utter all His praise?

How can God be like that? is not the question we need to answer.

For it is unanswerable by us.

He calls us to believe it and to be assured of it.

Do not measure Him by your own heart, no matter how generous you may be in your willingness to forgive. Trust God's own revelation in His Word and deeds.

He spared not His Son but was pleased to bruise Him to make forgiveness possible.

Upon encouraging wicked rebels to surrender and to return to Him, God makes this amazing revelation in Isaiah 55:8-9, "*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.*"

These often-quoted words do not refer to His providence, but rather to God's amazing readiness and delight in pardoning sinners.

The best commentary on these words is Jesus' own parable in Luke 15.

Notice when the younger son returned to his father, he did not ask for forgiveness.

He was not even planning to do so for he had always heard that after such sins as he committed, the door would always be closed.

He would be considered dead. Forgiveness was not offered to rebellious sinners.

But he found out that he did not know his father's graciousness and readiness to pardon him nonetheless. I may assure you, that even if you have fallen as deep as the younger son did, or if you are guilty of the even deeper fall of the older brother, if you return to God, you will find forgiveness.

Can you understand better why the disciples responded as they did, "Lord, increase our faith."

It was dawning on their minds, "If God requires us to forgive each other seven times a day, then it because He is willing to do this."

In earlier teachings they had repeatedly heard that they were to be like God.

In Matthew 5 they heard, "*Be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.*" And that was stated in the context of loving one another.

In Luke 6:36 they heard, "*Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful.*"

Later in Ephesians 4:32, Paul was inspired to write, "*Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.*"

So, it is totally right to add to "*Forgive each other seventy times seven*" the truths of "as your Father in heaven forgiveth you."

Friends, battle the doubts and misgivings Satan and your own heart that keep you away from Jesus' feet to seek forgiveness with the revelation God gives of Himself.

Be as Bunyan suggested in a sermon, "*Be gone, Satan, Jesus calls me! Be gone unbelief, for Jesus calls me!*"

Learn from McChesney who wrote, "*Each time I feel sin to be sin, I must hasten to the mercy seat of my Saviour. Yet I feel all kinds of objections rise in my heart to do this. It just does not feel right to go from the swine trough to the mercy seat. Yet I recognize all these objections as coming from the bosom of hell itself to keep from returning to my Lord.*"

Therefore, let the apostles' petition be ours, "Lord, increase our faith."

Do not be hindered by thinking that you are not humbled enough, that you have not wept for real, that you were more occupied with the results of sin than sin itself.

It is all true and it never will be any different.

But your thinking has a fatal flaw. You make yourself and your spiritual condition the starting point or the basis of your hope for forgiveness.

Such thinking is a dishonour to the glory of Jesus and His Father.

From the dawn of history it is revealed that it is not of him or her that wills, or that runs, or that cries, or that repents, or that confesses

but of God Who runneth in mercy, seeking, calling, inviting and assuring that He is ready to reconcile.

And that He has made it possible through the costly sacrifice of His beloved and only Son.

Jesus answered His disciples' request with the words, *If ye have faith as a mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it shall obey you.*"

In other words, faith in His forgiveness may be as small as a tiny mustard seed.

Yet even such small faith in the magnificence of our personal forgiveness by God, will empower us to show love to our neighbours in forgiving them.

Such forgiveness is like pulling out a tree, root and all, and sinking it away in the depths of the sea.

The love needed to do this is only present when we by faith experience God's daily and instant forgiveness.

Faith, as it lives and receives out of Christ, is like the mother source of all other Christian virtues.

Only faith in my daily forgiveness for repeated and heinous sins will enable me to forgive a failing brother or sister or a hostile enemy.

Only when we abide in Him, and in His lovingkindness, can we master the revengeful and offended spirit against those who sinned against us.

In closing, let's be clear on God's direction and assurance in 1 John 1:9,

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

God is able to forgive because of the blood of Jesus Christ.

God is ready to forgive because of the glory of His gracious character.

But forgiveness is not received if we omit to come before Him in repentance and confession.

Many think that time will erase the wrong.

Or that ignoring sin done will make others forget what we did wrong.

Nothing is farther from the truth.

Any sin undealt with through confession and forgiveness festers like rotteness in the bones.

We must get on our knees before God; name and shame our sins as David finally did in Psalm 32:5,

"I acknowledge my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and Thou forgavest me the iniquity of my sin. Selah."

Follow David. Let the voice of your conscience not be stifled.

Don't reason against it but listen to the voice of God speaking or, like in David's case, roaring within.

Oh, you will find Him more willing to forgive than you are willing to confess.

He is true to His Word and faithful to His promise to forgive you.

It is His delight to glorify Himself in forgiving the humbled, needy and surrendering sinners.

And not once or twice, but continually as you fail Him daily.

Do you not feel like joining Micah in his exclamation,

"Who is like unto Thee, who pardoneth iniquity; who retaineth not His anger forever because He delighteth in mercy."

Hallelujah, praise Jehovah, for His mercy endureth for ever.

Amen.