

ASH WEDNESDAY Meditation
Forgiveness: Finding Peace through Letting Go

Text: Matthew 6:1-15

Preached: 2/18/15

Matthew 6:1-15

⁶“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ²“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁷“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread. ¹²And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. ¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Lent has traditionally been a season where we go back to the basics of our faith. We focus in on the essentials. Jesus clearly taught, especially in his instruction about prayer, that *Forgiveness* is essential to our lives.

We will explore this understanding for these next 40 days. Without forgiveness, we are burdened by our own sins, little sins that pile up over the hours and the days, more significant sins that hurt others and ourselves and giant sins that may alter our lives. Even if these go undiscovered – they weigh us down, they clog our spiritual arteries, they threaten our well being.

The small pebbles on our table represent small sins, like HARSH WORDS, AN IRRITATING GLANCE, SPEEDING, LITTLE WHITE LIES. The don't seem to have much weight on their own, they are easily forgettable, except that over time, as handfuls and handfuls of these little sins accumulate, our load can become surprisingly heavy.

The medium-sized rocks represent transgressions that are a bit more serious, like the lie that was not so little, dishonest gain, cheating on a test, betraying a confidant, wounding a loved one. It doesn't take very many of these to accumulate and your bearing some real weight.

Then there are the big rocks, the ones as big as bread loaf – the biggest weighing maybe 15 or 20 pounds. These represent quite serious sins – the kind that, at work, for example would merit your dismissal if discovered. Some might be criminal acts, worthy of jail time. Maybe they represent a fundamental violation of trust that can ruin a family or end a friendship.

Some of us carry a heavy burden – lugging these sins around like boulders in a backpack. Part of the human condition is that we are sinners. We hurt each other and others are bound to hurt us.

If we are to live successfully, if we are ever to understand the peace of Christ, if we are to know freedom and joy there are six words that must be a regular part of our vocabulary:

I AM SORRY and I FORGIVE YOU

If we cannot learn the ability to say I AM SORRY, life will be much more difficult for us than it needs to be.

If we cannot bring ourselves to say I FORGIVE YOU, life will be filled with bitterness and pain.

We must train ourselves to use these six words in our daily interactions, in our reflection and our planning. They are vital to a healthy, faithful person, and a healthy, faithful church. We cannot understand God until we wrap our heads around this concept and accept it -- that God forgives us, wants to take the burden of our sin, has already done so through Jesus Christ.

There are many dimensions to forgiveness, and each situation where forgiveness is required certainly is unique. The Sundays of Lent we will explore common relationships in which we either must seek forgiveness or extend it to another.

We'll look at our relationship with God, our relationship with spouse or romantic interest, our family relationships with parents and siblings and then our relationships with others in our lives, neighbors, friends, those at work or in the community.

Today we acknowledge that we are burdened...that in some ways we have lived dishonest lives with God and with others. Today is the day when we claim our need for forgiveness, when we humbly accept the sign of ashes before God, understanding that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

May this be the start of a season where we return to the essentials of our faith – when we embrace forgiveness in all its dimensions – and so discover again the reconciliation and healing offered to us in Christ.