

As we age we learn more and more about ourselves. In recent years I have learned that I have a very well-developed sense of guilt. I've half-jokingly said to Jenny that I have the market cornered on guilt. I'm not going to talk about why this might be the case, but because my guilt reflexes are so well-honed today's portion of the Lord's Prayer is very important to me:

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

Last week I said that sometimes we arrive at 'Give us our daily bread' too soon; but for someone like me, what is intriguing about 'forgive us our sins' is that Jesus takes so long to get to it. We're half through Jesus' prayer before sin is even mentioned. We've even been told to ask God for our daily needs, before we ask for forgiveness.

To me, this sounds out of order, because there are times when my prayer life is dominated by confession of sin; if there is one thing I get to faster than daily bread, it's confession.

It seems odd that Jesus places confession of sin so late in His prayer. Maybe our churches haven't helped this. Maybe our liturgy hasn't helped. We start our services confessing our sin – whereas if we followed the Lord's Prayer structure, maybe we wouldn't be in such a rush... we would celebrate the Father's love, we would seek God's goodness, and justice; we would pray for others needs, and only then would we confess our sin. This is food for thought regarding how we structure our services of worship.

As many of you know, I have spent some time over the last few years running, and the image of a running man is one of the most vivid in the New Testament.¹

These days people of all ages run. At this year's Masters Games, held in Whanganui, John Mulvaney, won the men's mile in the 75–79-year age group; he ran a mile in 8 minutes 29 seconds. At my fastest I didn't run that fast. The oldest running competitors to receive awards were Peter Hanson and Allan Martin who competed in the over 85 categories.²

¹ Tom Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 49

² <https://www.nzmg.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Athletics-Results-Track-2025.pdf>

By contrast, in Jesus' world, the elderly did not run. The more senior you were in a community, the less likely it would be that you would even walk fast. It showed a lack of dignity, of *gravitas*.³

So, when Jesus tells the story about a man running, it is designed to have the same effect on us as if we were to see the late Queen Elizabeth running. Could you imagine the Queen running? It would appear undignified. The Queen didn't run.

And when we learn *why* the man is running, the effect is meant to be even more shocking. He was running to greet someone who had brought disgrace on his family; a person who had virtually told the old man to drop dead, then taken his money and squandered it.

We call the story the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but it could equally be called the Parable of the Running Father. Yet, despite the shocking imagery in this parable, and what it symbolizes – most importantly that of the running father – I wonder if it has lost some of its power to shock us; partially because we know the story so well, but also because we have lost the importance of forgiveness.

We live in a world which has sought – in part, and certainly at the individual level – to remove any sense that we need forgiveness.

I acknowledge that in New Zealand we have had the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in State Care; an enquiry that shone light on some of our national sins. I admit that two of the outcomes of that enquiry was an admission that our institutions had failed thousands of people, and then a formal apology was given. But that apology was corporate, not personal.

On a personal level, we maybe, like to pretend we don't need to be forgiven. We either believe we're innocent, or, that our sins are not great enough to need forgiveness. If by chance we do feel guilty, there are counsellors aplenty who will tell us that our guilt is misplaced, a state of mind.

Instead of forgiveness, we've invented tolerance. But if the father in the story had merely *tolerated* his son's behaviour, he would not have been running down the road to meet him.

³ Wright, The Lord and His Prayer, 49

Genuine forgiveness is richer and higher and harder and more shocking than we usually think. And Jesus offers the genuine article and insists that we should accept no man-made substitutes.⁴

But once, again, we're faced with the question of what Jesus *meant* when he told his disciples to pray:

Forgive us our sins

As we forgive those who sin against us.

I've spoken many times about the political world in which Jesus lived. Israel was occupied by the Romans, and what they wanted more than anything was an end to the political, social, and economic oppression that occupation brought.

But they never believed that these were the deepest things at stake.⁵

Oppression and exile, according to Israel's prophets, was the result of Israel's sin,⁶ so, if Israel was set free from oppression, this would mean, quite simply, that God had forgiven them for their sins. This is what Israel truly sought. This was their hearts desire – to know that God had forgiven them.

We see this desire in the people when crowds went out to be baptised by John the Baptist. John was proclaiming “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”⁷ John wasn't just preaching relief from a guilty conscience; to be baptised was to prepare for the arrival of Israel's God. Jesus then tells a story in which this arrival looked like a man running down the road to greet his disgraced son.⁸

But Jesus didn't just tell stories about the coming of Israel's God, He showed them, in word and deed, that what John had promised was soon coming, had now arrived.

When a group of friends brought a paralysed man to Jesus that He might heal him, the first thing Jesus says, is “my son, your sins are forgiven.” This shocked some of the religious teachers – “That's blasphemy!”

⁴ Ibid., 51

⁵ Ibid., 51

⁶ See 2 Kings 17:7–23; Ezekiel 39:21–24; Jeremiah 25:3–7

⁷ Luke 3:3

⁸ Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 52

But the shock was not only that Jesus would dare to claim that He could forgive sin – but in so doing, Jesus was daring to say that God’s liberation from oppression – God’s forgiveness for the nation – had also begun.

Quite naturally, the religious teachers wonder “who does he think he is?” The obvious answer is that Jesus believed that He brought with Him God’s kingdom. Jesus’ act of forgiveness announced that something new was happening. Jesus forgave the man and then healed his paralysis; Jesus ate with tax-collectors and sinners. And when He was challenged about his ‘undignified’ behaviour Jesus tells a story about a father who threw his dignity into the rubbish bin and ran down the road to welcome his disgraced son.

To quote Tom Wright at length: “Healings, parties, stories and symbols all said: the forgiveness of sins is happening, right under your noses. This is the new Exodus, the real Return from Exile, the prophetic fulfilment, the great liberation. This is the disgraceful Advent of our astonishing God.”⁹

But, in being forgiven, the people were then expected to forgive others.

This is the first, and only, time the Lord’s Prayer places explicit demands on us; a phrase that commits the pray-er to actions that backup what has just been prayed. *‘Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.’* Prayer and life are locked together. What we ask God to do for us we must be prepared to do for others.

Please note, however, this *is not saying* that we forgive others in order to earn God’s forgiveness. It *is* another statement of our loyalty to Jesus and His kingdom. To be forgiven is to be a forgiving people.

To fail to forgive others means that we haven’t fully grasped what Jesus was doing and saying. It means we haven’t understood that God’s kingdom has come – for the arrival of God’s kingdom means God’s forgiveness has come. If we don’t live forgiveness, we deny the very basis of our own existence as followers of Jesus.

This means, therefore, that, on one level, to pray this prayer means that we are signing up to follow Jesus. Asking to be forgiven requires acknowledging that we

⁹ Ibid., 52-53

need forgiveness; and knowing our need for forgiveness, means we know our need for a Saviour.

But there is more; for this prayer isn't '*Forgive me my sins, as I forgive those who sin against me.*' The prayer isn't strictly individual, it's communal. It's a prayer we pray together; it's a prayer we pray on behalf of the world. It's an invitation to lift up our eyes and to see the world as a whole, "groaning in travail, longing for peace and justice."¹⁰ It is an invitation to see: to see politicians and powerbrokers, who've realised that the only options available to them are evil ones; to see the men of violence who've forgotten there was a different way to live; to see the broken prisoners, long locked away and forgotten by society; to see the abusers and the abused. It's to see all these, and then to collect them all up into the image of a young Jewish boy off in the far country feeding pigs. And then to pray, "Forgive us our sins." But then, as you pray this prayer, allow your heart also to see the next scene, that of the Father doing the unthinkable, the disgraceful thing, of running down the road to meet and embrace his muddled and muddy son.¹¹

To pray this prayer is to be forgiven, it is to forgive others; but it is also to pray that God would forgive the world.

I said at the beginning that I have the market cornered on guilt. There are three things we can do with guilt: we can imagine we have guilt when we really don't; we can deny guilt, and we can live with guilt. None of these are helpful, and each can create other problems.

In place of guilt, Jesus offers a true solution. Forgiveness. Only when we experience God's forgiveness can the bruises and wounds of our hurts be healed. Of course, this is not necessarily an easy nor short path. Nor, maybe, is it one that we can, or should, walk alone; but it is the place we can start.

And once we start to breathe in the clean air of God's forgiveness, there is a good chance we'll start to breathe it out too.

¹⁰ Ibid., 57

¹¹ Ibid., 57-58