

Ps 32:1,5
Hy 1A
Ps 103:3,4
Hy 14:4
Ps 35:5; Hy 47:6
Luke 5:17-26; 6:27-37; 7:36-50
Lord's Day 51

Yarrow, March 27, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Ps 103:4 is one of the favourites of the *Book of Praise*. The reason is so understandable; this stanza speaks of the Lord's great compassion, His mercy for those who fear Him – and who doesn't want to hear of the Lord's compassion and mercy! The stanza even explains what the Lord's compassion looks like; He has "not punished us according to transgression. Instead, He removes "the sins of all those who revere Him ... as far as east from west extends." Glorious gospel of forgiveness of sins; we love it!

The child of God reflects what the Father is like. So: as the Father is compassionate to sinners, so the child of God is to be compassionate to sinners. As the Father forgives, so His child forgives... – as far as east from west extends. So true is this description of the disciples' behaviour that Jesus includes reference to it in the prayer He taught the Twelve to pray. God is compassionate indeed, and so John and James and Thaddeus and the rest may ask Him to forgive their sins, but since the Christian images God John and James and Thaddeus and the rest must also confess that they habitually forgive all who sin against them.

We understand: this fifth petition embodies a manner of living, a form of behaviour to folk as undeserving as we are of God's compassion.

It leaves us a bit uncomfortable. We're happy to ask God to forgive us our sins, that is, ask Him to deal with us in great compassion. But to confess that we forgive others, and deal with them in equal compassion, well, we find that somewhat awkward. For it's not quite the reality....

I summarise the sermon this afternoon with this theme:

THE DISCIPLES ARE TAUGHT TO ASK A COMPASSIONATE GOD FOR FORGIVENESS.

1. The Circumstances around this Petition
2. The Theology behind this Petition
3. The Answer to this Petition

1. The Circumstances around this Petition

The disciples Jesus had called to follow Him had seen much and heard much from their Rabbi. What they learned included also much material about the topic of the forgiveness of sins. I draw your attention to the following passages from the gospel of Luke.

Luke 5 records the story of the paralytic whom his friends had let down through the ceiling so as to place him at Jesus' feet. According to vs 20, Jesus saw their action as evidence of faith, and so said to the invalid on the mat, "Man, your sins are forgiven." The story then moves to the reaction of the

Pharisees and the teachers of the law, how they considered Jesus' words to be blasphemy – for only God can forgive sins. But the biggest question isn't *who* can forgive; it's rather *why* forgiveness is possible. And: what's the connection between forgiveness and the healing of the paralytic? For that matter: what's the connection between sin and his paralysis??

The world God created in the beginning did not know paralysis. Adam and Eve, indeed all creation, was "very good" (Genesis 1:31). Brokenness, including paralysis, entered the world as a result of the fall into sin. That's the straightforward message of Genesis 3:16ff; sickness, death, grief; marital tension and struggles with children; earthquakes, radiation, economic collapse and so much more are all the bitter fruits of the fall into sin. That's why the church confesses in Lord's Day 4 that God is terribly displeased with original as well as actual sins, and so punishes them with a just judgment both now and eternally. The paralytic the disciples met in Luke 5 lived on this side of Paradise lost. This man's deepest problem, then, was not his paralysis; his deepest problem was his depravity and his sinfulness. Had he received only healing of his paralysis, he'd still be under wrath and judgment of God, both for this life and for the life to come. That's to say: he'd get sick again, and would one day die too, and then he'd need to face the God against whom he had sinned both in the beginning as well as day by day. What he needed so badly, then, was the same thing everybody needs, and that is the forgiveness of his sins, reconciliation with God his Maker.

Jesus, now, sees that this paralytic (and his helpers) is confident that Jesus can help. So Jesus makes that glorious pronouncement, "Man, your sins are forgiven." The Pharisees are correct; only God can forgive sins. *That's exactly the point; in Jesus Christ God has come to earth to atone for sin and restore Paradise.* To make that clear Jesus adds to the pronouncement of forgiveness the deed of healing – and the paralytic walks home.

The disciples, we need to understand, heard and saw what happened here. They're part of the crowd that was "amazed" (as vs 26 has it), and "were filled with awe" because they'd "seen remarkable things today." Yet the "remarkable things" they saw did not include only that the paralytic walked, but included also the link with forgiveness of sins. They're "filled with awe" because they've seen something of the compassion of God in forgiving sin and so lifting the bitter fruit of sin.

Some time later the disciples heard a sermon from their Rabbi; it's recorded in Luke 6. Among other things, He gave this instruction: "I tell you who hear Me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also..." This instruction runs strongly against the grain; we'd much sooner punch the oppressor in the face. But Jesus is insistent: since the Most High is "kind to the ungrateful and wicked" the disciples are to "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (vss 35f). Result? They are not to judge, not to condemn, not to look down their nose at another. Instead, "forgive, and you will be forgiven" (vs 37). Jesus' point here is clear, but so very hard to accept: your behaviour and your attitude (He tells the disciples) has to reflect God's behaviour and attitude. God is compassionate and merciful to the ungrateful and wicked, *and so you* –Peter and John and Thaddeus and Bartholomew– *need to do the same.*

In the days that followed this instruction, the Lord Jesus Christ illustrated for His disciples what this instruction means in practice. Tension had mounted between Jesus and the Pharisees (cf 5:21; 6:7), to the point that we could understand that Jesus would prefer to avoid those judgmental and critical teachers of the law. But "one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him" (7:36), and Jesus accepted the invitation – even though He knew that Simon (that's the Pharisee who invited Him) would

have been happy to hang Jesus out to dry (cf vs 39). My point: Jesus chose to associate with those who lined up to be His enemies.

In the Pharisee's home a woman poured out alabaster jar of perfume on His feet and proceeded to wipe His feet with hair. Jesus knew well who this woman was (for He knew all things), and knew too that others questioned her reputation (cf vs 39, 47a). Point: Jesus deliberately associated with people others would avoid. That's to say: instead of judging this woman of known negative reputation and condemning her, He dealt with her in kindness, did not rebuff her, instead let her wipe His feet with her hair. In the words of 6:37: He forgave her, did not deal with her as she (according to public opinion) deserved.

Was it then surprising, congregation, that in this context the disciples heard Jesus speak with Simon about the forgiveness of sins? Jesus tells the parable about two debtors, both of whom had their debts forgiven. Who, Jesus asked Simon, would love the lender more? Jesus agrees with Simon's answer; the one who was forgiven more would love more (41ff). God, Jesus implies, has forgiven this woman much, and that's why she surpasses Simon himself in acts of kindness to others. So Jesus can tell her plainly, in the hearing of the guests, "Your sins are forgiven" (vs 48). Point: in words and in deeds Jesus displays the compassion of God to undeserving sinners.

I can tell you too of Jesus' actions in relation to the demon-possessed man of Luke 8. The man was a terror, one you avoided at all costs; imagine associating with a man who wore no clothes and lived in tombs (vs 27), who needed to be restrained by chains (vs 29). But Jesus doesn't reject this reject, nor does he avoid him. If the Father "is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (6:35), Jesus needs to do the same. So He ensures that He meets up with the demonic, uses His power to cast out this demon and restore this man to a place in society. This, and so much more, was part and parcel of what the disciples heard Jesus teach and saw Jesus do.

Then came the day when the disciples sought from Jesus instruction on how to pray (11:1). Given all they had seen and heard, Jesus' answer as caught in the 5th petition was not at all surprising. What they should pray? "Forgiven us our sins," Jesus instructed them to say to God Most High, "for we also forgive everyone who sins against us" (vs 4a). No, this petition is not surprising at all, for God's compassion to sinners was precisely what Jesus had been teaching, and that the disciples should be compassionate to sinners even as the Father was compassionate to them was *also* precisely what Jesus had been teaching. No, neither the *request* part of the 5th petition, nor the *statement* part of this petition is new.

And yet. Given how much God hates sin, and given the bitter curse that followed our fall into sin, is this instruction to pray for forgiveness not *too wonderful to be true*? That brings us to our second point,

2. The Theology behind this Petition

We need to begin here with the statement of God as found in Genesis 2:17. After He had created the man and put him in the Garden with permission to eat from any and every tree except the one yonder tree, the Lord added this promise, "When you eat of it you will surely die." The reference to death here is not simply a promise that Adam's heart would stop ticking (though that would indeed happen), but is instead to the fact that the eating from that tree would result in the bond of love between God and himself would be broken. God is the God of *life*, Adam can live as long as he is 'plugged in' to the God of life – and he'd die, be spiritually destitute, when he unplugs himself from God through disobedience. Being unplugged from God, being dead in sin, had a particular *look*; it *looks*, says

God in Genesis 3, like being cursed – and so experiencing work as toil, spending your life fighting weeds both literally and metaphorically, being sick and eventually petering out.... Death....

How, though, did God respond to the sin of our first parents? God did not, we need to note, issue a command of decreation so that Adam and Eve (and the rest of the world) disintegrated into a puff of nothingness. Nor did God kill them immediately or cast them directly into hell. Rather (and now I quote from how the church has echoed the glorious gospel of redemption in Article 17 of the *Belgic Confession*), “our gracious God in His marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him” and “He comforted him with the promise that He would give him His Son, born of woman, to bruise the head of the serpent and to make man blessed.” Truly, how glorious this God is, how deep in compassion!! After the birth of his son John (the Baptist), Zechariah describes God’s feelings like this; he speaks of “the tender mercy of our God” (as our translation has it), and the Greek has a word here that catches the notion of God being moved to pit of His stomach on account of the plight of His own. He has no pleasure in the death of anyone (Ezekiel 33:11), and so reached out in boundless mercy to save the very creature that had slapped the Creator in the face!

And this sort of behaviour on God’s part, brothers and sisters, was not a once-off thing. He took Abram from the land of the Chaldeans to be his child-by-covenant, a man through whom God would bless the nations of the earth. But what kind of man was Abram? Godly? Deserving? Better than average?? Joshua says of father Abram that in Ur of the Chaldeans Abram “worshipped other gods” (24:2). He was, in other words, an idolater. Yet God had compassion on this sinner, claimed him for himself, and gave him the gospel of redemption. How marvellous this God!

Again, Abram’s descendents in Egypt knew their God-by-covenant, had heard of His mighty work with father Abram, Isaac, Jacob and the twelve patriarchs. Yet in the course of their time in Egypt the Israelites gave themselves to idolatry, to the service of other gods. That’s what Ezekiel says; it was in Egypt that the people of Israel began their behaviour as prostitutes – neglecting God as their husband in favour of the gods of Egypt (cf Ezekiel 23:8, Exodus 32:4). Yet God did not deal with this people as they deserved, but delivered them from their bondage, brought them to Mt Sinai, and gave them the gospel of redemption. Specifically, He told His people to build a tabernacle where God Most High could live with His people, told them too to build an altar in front of the tabernacle where sacrifices could be slaughtered. We understand the point: sinners must die on account of sin, but God would accept an animal in place of the Israelite –why?– because one day His Son would come to pay for sin. Talk about compassion to the undeserving!! What a God this is! So, when Israel in the desert carried on with the idolatry they’d learned in Egypt and so made for themselves a golden calf, God did not destroy this people but revealed who He was; said He to Moses about Himself, “the LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exodus 34:6f). What a God; *He forgives, freely, generously.*

This is the approach of God to Israel over the years and centuries that followed, and that’s why David could confess what he wrote in Ps 103. Who is God? “The LORD is compassionate and gracious; slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will He harbour His anger forever; He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities...” (vss 8ff). Instead, He removes them as far as east from west extends (vs 12). Hezekiah confesses the same reality; “You have put all my sins behind Your back” (Isaiah 38:17). And God assures Israel through the prophet, “I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions, for My own sake, and remembers your sins no more” (Isaiah 43:25). See there, congregation, who God is!!

That is why Jesus –the one whom the Father sent to earth specifically to reconcile sinners to God, and so undo the curse of Genesis 3– that is why Jesus in His dealings with sinners walked in step with God’s practice in the Old Testament. He told the paralytic, sinner that he was, that his sins were forgiven. He didn’t avoid the demonic but had such compassion on him as to deliver him from his demons. He sat down to eat with folk who didn’t like Him, even distrusted Him, and readily embraced a woman with the reputation of being a prostitute. Why He did these things? He did these things because His Father was kind and compassionate to the unkind and ungrateful – and it was for Him to reflect the Father. And that’s why He tells the disciples to go and do the same. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.... Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:27f, 37). It was the will of the Lord Jesus that His disciples *be in step* with their Father in heaven.

That, congregation, is the theology behind this 5th petition. God’s very *identity as God* leaves place for forgiveness for sinners – O glorious gospel! *So of course* the disciples can *ask* God for forgiveness; *forgiveness is what He has promised*. And *of course* the disciples can *confess* that they forgive other sinners who hurt them, don’t deal with them as they deserve; *that’s how children of the Father invariably act*.

That brings us to our last point:

3. The Answer to this Petition

Given, brothers and sisters, that the disciples sought instruction how to pray, and given that Jesus answered their request, we may safely assume that the disciples in fact prayed the fifth petition. How, now, did God answer?

Like this, congregation. The penalty God imposed on sin was death, He’d said in Genesis 2:17. The gospel of forgiveness was *not* that the death penalty was waived, but that *another* would die in place of the sinner. The disciples ask God to forgive their sins, and God answers that petition by *sending His Own Son to the cross* to die for sinners! The crucifixion and death of Christ: see there, brothers and sisters, the answer of God to the prayer of the disciples! Did they wish their Master crucified and killed? No, certainly not! Did they understand at the time why He was arrested, scourged, crucified and killed? No, certainly not! But none of that takes away from the fact *in this manner* God was answering the prayers of His disciples. We today see how direct the link between prayer and answer was, but they didn’t see it at the time. Why, then, should we be surprised when we don’t see the link between our petitions and how God answers those petitions?!

We seek forgiveness of sins, and Yes, God does forgive. We want to conclude that God will therefore remove any burden from our lives, free us from the crushing effects of our fall into sin, even as the Saviour healed the paralytic. But He doesn’t, not yet. But that’s not to say that the troubles and brokenness we experience remains strictly curse; it doesn’t! We ask for forgiveness, Christ has died in our place so that there is forgiveness for our sins, and that’s to say that the Father in heaven does not – *does not!*– treat us as our sins deserve, and He does not –*does not!*– repay us according to our iniquities – as David confessed in Ps 103. And the sickness and the brokenness and the grief and the trials that remain –says the Lord– “work for good with those who love Him” (Romans 8:28). Though we may not understand how our circumstances work for good, *they do*; that’s the promise of the gospel of forgiveness of sins! God answers prayer, this petition too! Let no one burdened by the brokenness of life think it isn’t so!

There’s a second aspect about how God answers this petition that needs our attention. I mentioned already that God answered the disciples’ prayer for forgiveness by sending His Son to the

cross. But observe, congregation, what attitude marked Jesus' suffering and crucifixion. Though He was mighty to destroy those who hounded Him, He did not do so; though they insulted Him He did not revile them or curse them. Instead, He bent His head in prayer for His tormentors; "Father," He prayed, "forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Why did Jesus pray that?? Why didn't He ask the Father to curse them? This, congregation, is Jesus' obedience to His own instruction in Luke 6: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (vs 27f). More, Jesus obeys His own instruction because *this is the attitude He has seen from His Father in heaven*; recall God's deep compassion in seeking out lost sinners in Paradise, and recall God's words of mercy in Ps 103 about not treating sinners as they deserve. So the Son asks the Father to show mercy even to those who crucify His own Son. And the Father does! He did not pour out His judgment on this crowd that rejected His Son, but seven weeks later poured out His Holy Spirit instead – who worked in such a way that thousands of the very same people who cried out to crucify Jesus would come to faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins (cf Acts 2:38,41).

And how do these forgiven people end up acting?? Why, they hold no grudges, they do not treat others as others deserve, but they readily and eagerly outdo each other in treating another with the same generosity that God has poured on them. Stephen was martyred, stoned on account of the faith. Just before he died he uttered this public prayer concerning his tormentors, "Lord, do not hold this against them" (Acts 7:60). And when Paul the persecutor became a believer in Jesus Christ, the elders of Jerusalem (once persuaded he was genuine) embraced him eagerly. They forgave – it's the mark of the Christian, the fruit of the Spirit. Forgiven people show their gratitude for forgiveness of sins in the way they treat other people – *in spite of* what the other deserves.

What we have? Your God is a God of deep compassion for undeserving sinners, ourselves included. That is why you and I – God's people by covenant as we're allowed to be – are allowed, yes, commanded to pray this fifth petition, and then be fully persuaded that God indeed washes our sins away, does not deal with us as we deserve. It's a gospel you're allowed to *believe*! How wonderful, how glorious!

More, since that's how the Father is, we His children will act in the same way – even as Christ did. We'll even dare to say it to God: "forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us." That's the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, worked in every one who believes. Indeed, how wonderful, how glorious!