

“Intercession - Praying for *all* the Others”

February 23, 2025 — Selby United Church – Scripture James 5:13-16

By Rebecca Stacey

Ephesians 4:32 says, 'Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.' **Just as God forgives us through Christ, we are called to forgive others, not out of obligation, but as an overflow of the grace we've received.**

Jesus prayed throughout His ministry. On the night of His betrayal, He prayed not only for Himself but also for His disciples and *all* future believers. This prayer happened during the Last Supper, just before His arrest. Imagine Jesus, surrounded by His disciples in the quiet, sacred space of the Upper Room.

Hear Jesus' prayer to our Heavenly Father: ²⁰ "I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:20-23).

Jesus shifted the focus from the present to eternity, praying not just for His disciples but for all who will come to faith through their witness. **This prayer includes me and you.**

In our scripture reading this morning, James reminds us of the power and purpose of prayer: 'Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise... Pray for each other so that **you** may be

healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.' (James 5:13-16)

While intercession focuses on praying for others and forgiveness involves releasing personal hurts, the two often meet, becoming a place where we see others through God's eyes. Praying for those who trespass against us moves us beyond resentment and into God's reconciling love. It transforms us into participants in His work of healing and renewal, allowing us to reflect His grace to others and experience His peace in our hearts.

Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is to love God and love your neighbour as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39). Loving your neighbour as yourself. It sounds simple, but we know it's not always easy. Loving means forgiving—and forgiveness doesn't come naturally to us. On our own, we struggle to let go of hurt and extend grace. But through prayer, we open ourselves to God's healing and strength. As James instructs us, "Pray for others so that **you** may be healed." When we pray, God equips us with the ability to forgive, to love as Jesus taught us, and to share His grace with our neighbours.

When love, forgiveness, and prayer become central to our lives, they transform us. **Through prayer, we receive what we cannot create on our own: the strength to forgive and the power to love. And when we forgive, we make Jesus' grace visible to the world—a grace that begins in Him, works through us, and flows outward to others. Amen.**

Prayers of intercession are prayers where we stand in the gap on behalf of others, asking God to intervene, bless, or guide them. It's an act of love that goes beyond personal needs, showing compassion and concern for the well-being of others. Coming to God with this type of prayer allows us to align our hearts with His will for others. It's selfless and it's beautiful.

Friends, if you're influencing another generation right now, I encourage you to pray with them, and for them. In our busy lives, be sure to let them know you're praying for them. Let them know that **when** you spend time talking with God, one of your favourite things to ask for is God's blessing on them. They might not understand or appreciate this gift until many years from now, but it's our prayer that they will.

Ok, praying for others! So far, so good. We can handle praying for our loved ones. We can follow through on prayer promises for friends and family members. With a bit of intention, we can offer prayers of intercession for the needs, healing, and salvation of others.

But what about the other others? The ones that we have trouble forgiving, let alone praying for. What about them?

As I prepared for this week, I wrestled with the breadth of today's message. Prayers of intercession deserve our full focus, but I also felt a persistent nudge to explore prayers for forgiveness. The two are deeply connected. Trying to squeeze

them into one message has been daunting. I needed another week!

Here we go, diving into *forgiveness, and specifically asking for the grace and strength to forgive, because, well, we can't do it on our own.*

In Week 1, we explored Jesus' teaching of the Lord's Prayer. Jesus ended that teaching with a profound lesson on forgiveness—one I intentionally left out because I knew we'd return to it today.

Jesus' teachings were radical and caught people's attention often because they produced tension. I believe His closing remarks on the teaching of prayer left many uncomfortable. He concluded his teaching of the Lord's Prayer with a call for **forgiveness**.

⁹ "This, then, is how you should pray:

"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.'

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (*Matthew 6:9-15*).

Some translations of this teaching also include the doxology, *"For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever,"* although this ending is not found in all the manuscripts.

It's a strong message, "Forgive others." Period. Perhaps, this instruction left His audience feeling so uncomfortable that some scholars argue that this is why the *"for yours is the kingdom the power and the glory forever and ever, Amen"* was added. It almost allows us to slide past the forgiving part and end on a high note. Glory and power! We like those words!

Let's look at the forgiveness part, "As we also forgive those that trespass against us." This flows nicely and has a reciprocal ring to it. But the word "also", stands out, meaning we have also forgiven others (past tense).

Because we wouldn't dare ask for forgiveness while harbouring anger and resentment. Would we?

God knows our hearts. He knows if we've forgiven others. He knows if there is bitterness, jealousy, or resentment. AND He has said that we can't expect forgiveness if we are unwilling to forgive others.

This is a tough one, especially when we've been wronged. When unspeakable, awful wounds have been inflicted. I don't know your story or your hurt, but if you're human like me (and I know you are), you likely share my human response. I don't naturally want to pray for those who have hurt me or my loved ones. They were wrong, and they're not even sorry! But I certainly

want forgiveness for my sins, when I pray and ask for it. After all, Jesus has promised forgiveness, and I believe in Jesus. That means I'm forgiven, right?

¹⁴For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Is this the *fine* print? Or the **bold** print? Does it matter? Jesus said it. He said it again and again. The lesson shouldn't have come as a surprise, because in the previous chapter, Jesus laid the groundwork for this prayer lesson.

He said, *"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift"* (Matthew 5:23-24).

Jesus emphasizes the importance of entering prayer – prepared – with your heart ready. Remember, He is teaching a crowd following the Old Testament covenant ritual. Offering a sacrifice at the Temple was a big deal and would have occurred maybe three times annually.

Jesus is saying that the prayer prerequisite of forgiveness is so important, that even if you've travelled for days, stood in line at the temple for hours, and are moments away from your turn at the altar, you should leave your gift, and go first to reconcile.

And to be sure we don't find a loophole, just so we can't utter, "Fine, I forgive them, Father," so that we can present our offering with a clear conscience; Jesus says that if you *"remember that your brother or sister has something against you,"* that there is still work to be done! You need to ensure that peace attempts are made. And don't delay, because it's a long way home to your brother or sister.

For some of us, that journey might begin with asking God to help ready our hearts for forgiveness, because our human condition makes it impossible to get there on our own.

But the message is clear: unresolved conflict or strained relationships affect our connection with God until we seek to mend them. Jesus emphasizes that reconciliation attempts should be prioritized—before sacrifice or worship. Genuine repentance and connection with God require us to address broken relationships.

[Pause] This is heavy. Allow me to lighten the mood. My daughter found herself in the principal's office one day. Long story short, a child took a swing at her for defending another child. Admirable, right? The principal called me about the situation. She said that the "bully" was acting out of character and was quick to apologize. At that moment, my daughter replied, "That's ok." The principal interrupted my daughter's grace-filled moment, by proclaiming that it was NOT ok. She wanted me to know that she didn't condone the behaviour!

I found myself reassuring the principal. She was right, the offence wasn't ok, but my daughter's response was. In our house, when someone says, "I'm sorry," we try to respond immediately with, "I forgive you." We don't want to carry grudges or seek retaliation. We want to forgive, reconcile and move on. My daughter was trying to do the same at school. However, I did clarify with her that we say, "I forgive you," not "it's ok." Whatever the "it" was, is NOT ok. We shouldn't hurt one another, but we will choose to forgive as we have been forgiven.

If only every hurt could be resolved so easily as a childish, playground quarrel. Sadly, that's not usually the case. Forgiveness is hard, and anyone who knows your story would understand why those who hurt you don't deserve forgiveness. The wounds linger, and the thought of letting go—even when we want to—can feel overwhelming and impossible, and it is, on our own.

Thankfully, Jesus intercedes for us, He doesn't leave us to navigate forgiveness on our own. Forgiveness requires grace, courage, and the strength that only God can provide. From the cross—a place of unimaginable betrayal, humiliation, and disgrace—Jesus prayed for humanity, asking for forgiveness even for those who hurt Him most. His prayer was the ultimate act of intercession, showing that **forgiveness is more than an act of obedience! It's a reflection of God's grace and love for the world because we can't do it on our own.**