

Mean What You Say When You Pray

Simply let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No.”—Matthew 5:37

It may seem surprising to some that people who are not Christians can learn to forgive. I believe that there are degrees of forgiveness. A person who is not a Christian could demonstrate what may be called “limited forgiveness” and feel all the better for it. If a person is sufficiently motivated, he or she may achieve a great deal of inner satisfaction by overcoming bitterness. Mahatma Gandhi appealed to a sense of valor and heroism when he said, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” On the other hand, President John F. Kennedy said, “Forgive your enemies, but never forget their names.” That is hardly total forgiveness!

The Bible urges us to forgive—totally.

I suppose that the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors”—or, as put another way, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”—has made liars out of more people than any other line in human history. But don’t blame Jesus for that. We should mean what we say if we choose to pray the Lord’s Prayer. And Jesus did not say we had a choice; He said, “This, then, is how you should pray.”

Jesus regarded this as the most important petition in His prayer. “Forgive us our debts” is obviously a plea for forgiveness from God. But then comes the following line (or possibly the big lie): “as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

Just after the prayer is finished, Jesus goes on to say, “If you forgive men when they sin against you ... ” Jesus intended

the meaning of sin when He said the word debt. It means “what is owed to God,” and because you owe Him pure obedience, falling short of that means you are indebted to Him.

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