

pilgrum

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**THE LORD'S PRAYER**  
A COURSE FOR THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY

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SESSION FOUR:  
FORGIVE US OUR SINS AS WE FORGIVE THOSE  
WHO SIN AGAINST US

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The aim of this session is to explore the central place of forgiveness in the Christian life: both receiving God's forgiveness and extending forgiveness to others.

# Opening Prayers

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O God, make speed to save us.  
**O LORD, make haste to help us.**

Wash me through and through from my wickedness  
**and cleanse me from my sin.**

PSALM 51:2

Oh, how good and pleasant it is,  
**when brethren live together in unity!**

It is like fine oil upon the head  
**that runs down upon the beard,**

Upon the beard of Aaron,  
**and runs down upon the collar of his robe.**

It is like the dew of Hermon  
**that falls upon the hills of Zion.**

For the LORD has ordained the blessing:  
**life for evermore.**

PSALM 133

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

MATTHEW 18:21-22

Heavenly Father,  
forgive the sins which tear us apart;  
give us the courage to overcome our fears  
and to seek that unity which is your gift and will  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

BASED ON EPHESIANS 3:16-19

## Conversation

Share with the group a memory of leaving home.

## Reflecting on Scripture

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### Reading

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup>A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ <sup>20</sup>So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup>But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup>Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called

one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup>Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

LUKE 15:11-31

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### Explanatory note

Within Judaism, feeding pigs—which were considered to be profoundly unclean—would probably have been the most demeaning occupation possible.

Fathers in Ancient Near Eastern culture maintained their dignity at all costs, it would almost have been unheard of for a Father to run in public; that he does so here shows the depth of his love for his son.

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- Read the passage through once.
- Keep a few moments' silence.
- Read the passage a second time with different voices.
- Invite everyone to say aloud a word or phrase that strikes them.
- Read the passage a third time.
- Share together what this word or phrase might mean and what questions it raises.

## Receiving forgiveness

There are two elements to this part of the prayer, and the second builds on the first. The first is a simple prayer for forgiveness—one that we are called to make as often as we say the prayer. The second connects the forgiveness we can receive from God to the forgiveness we extend to others.

What are we asking forgiveness for? This is the line of the Lord's Prayer where the traditional and the contemporary language versions on p. 12 are most different.

The traditional version has the word "trespasses": "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

*What are we asking forgiveness for?*

A trespasser is someone who crosses a line to walk where they should not walk. The word in English carries something of the meaning of the words in the original but not everything. It communicates that what we are asking forgiveness for is our wrong actions: the times we really have done things wrong. But the Bible makes clear that we need to go deeper. We often need to seek God's forgiveness for our thoughts and words as well (see Matthew 5:21-30).

So is "sins" any better? It's not a word in common use any more except in religious contexts. It translates the word found in Luke's version of the prayer which carries the meaning of missing the mark or falling short in our behavior. It's a deeper and more comprehensive term than trespass.

Some English translations attempt a more literal translation of the term used twice in Matthew's version of the prayer and once in Luke: "Forgive us our debts." The same meaning is caught brilliantly in the parable of the two sons, which follows Jesus' saying about forgiving another person seventy-seven times (Matthew 18:23-35). "Debts" carry the idea that something is lacking and something is owing in our

relationship with God or our relationship with others. The parable also helps us get into proportion our own debt to God with the debts others owe to us.

*“Sins” carries the meaning of missing the mark or falling short in our behavior.*

Whatever term you prefer, the deeper notion here is that our sins can be forgiven. We should not think of God forgiving us as an easy matter (any more than it’s easy for us to forgive other people). For God to open up the way of forgiveness to us meant sending

his Son to die on the cross for our sins.

The Lord’s Prayer at this point would be meaningless without the Lord who gives us the prayer and who gave his own life so that we can be reconciled to God. The parable of the two lost sons and their father would be meaningless without the Son who told it, and whose sacrifice makes reconciliation possible.

The parable of the two sons makes clear the need for two kinds of reconciliation in our relationship with God. The younger brother represents the journey of the person who comes back to God after years of rebellion, wandering away and going his own way. The elder brother represents us all as we continue in the Christian life. There are moments in all of our journeys where we realize that, even though we are part of the family, we need to seek the Father’s forgiveness.

### **In short**

The simple power of the fourth phrase of the Lord’s Prayer is the knowledge that we can be forgiven for what we have thought, said, and done. We all need forgiveness and reconciliation both with God and with each other, and in the Lord’s Prayer we pray for this forgiveness each time we say it.

## For discussion

- Is your own faith story more like the younger brother in the story or the elder brother?
- Which word in the prayer is most helpful to you: trespasses, sins, or debts?
- Do you find it easy or more difficult to accept that you are forgiven?

## Forgiving others

A wise person once said that the parts of the Bible he found most difficult are not the parts that are hard to understand but the parts that are as clear as day.

The second half of this line of the Lord's Prayer could not be easier to understand. We are called to forgive others when they sin (or trespass) against us. Our willingness to forgive others is related to God's forgiveness of us. God's grace to us and our obligation to others go hand in hand.

*God longs for us to live not in isolation but in community.*

There is a mercy here though it can seem a severe one. God in his mercy longs for us to live not in isolation but in community with others. That community is expressed in friendships, in families, in marriage for those called to be married, in the family of God's people, the Church, and in our wider society.

Any community is a community of imperfect people. Therefore any community we are part of will be spoiled by unkind words, hurtful actions, slander and gossip, or wrong attitudes.

Without forgiveness there can be no lasting community.



### **In short**

There is a strong link between our forgiveness of other people and God's forgiveness of us. We cannot expect God to forgive us while we are unwilling to forgive others. Forgiveness is a vital ingredient in every community—without it the community falls apart.

### **For discussion**

- The elder brother in the story finds it very difficult to welcome and receive the younger brother when he comes home. Is that in any way part of your experience in the life of the Church?
- How do you think that there can be more forgiveness in families, among friends, and in the Christian community?

## Concluding Prayers

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As our Savior taught us, so we pray: **Our Father...** (see p. 12)

**Most merciful God,  
we confess that we have sinned against you  
in thought, word, and deed,  
by what we have done,  
and by what we have left undone.  
We have not loved you with our whole heart;  
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.  
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.  
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,  
have mercy on us and forgive us;  
that we may delight in your will,  
and walk in your ways,  
to the glory of your Name.  
Amen.**

# Sending Out

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During this coming week reflect on this line of the Lord's Prayer and what it means.

You may want to reflect especially on whether it would be helpful to make a special prayer of confession to God either in private or with a priest as you prepare for baptism and confirmation.

You may also want to reflect on whether there are particular people or situations in your life where God is calling you to extend forgiveness to others.

These readings may help you in your reflections:

Forgive me, O Lord; O Lord, forgive my sins, the sins of my youth, and my present sins, the sin that my parents thrust upon me, original sin, and the sins that I cast upon my children, in an ill example; actual sins, sins which are manifest to all the world, and sins which I have so labored to hide from the world, and that now they are hid from mine own conscience, and mine own memory. Forgive me my crying sins, and my whispering sins, the sins of uncharitable hate, and sins of unchaste love, sins against thee and thee, against thy power, O Almighty Father, against thy wisdom, O glorious Son, against thy goodness, O blessed Spirit of God.

JOHN DONNE (1571–1631)

Sorrow for sin is necessary, but it should not involve endless self-preoccupation. You should dwell also on the glad remembrance of the loving kindness of God.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1090–1153)

Our courteous Lord does not want his servants to despair even if they fall frequently and grievously. Our falling does not stop his loving us.

JULIAN OF NORWICH (1373–1417)