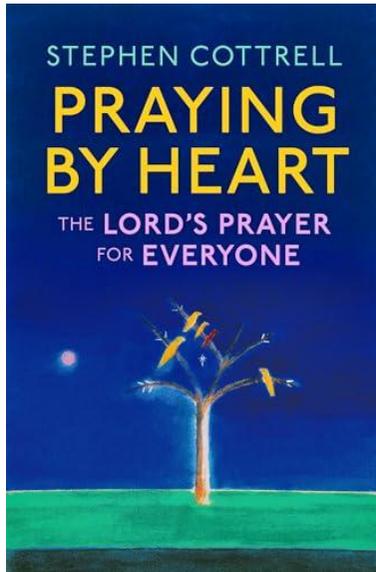


## Week Four – Summary I

### Part Three – ‘Three Humble Requests’ cont.



#### Forgive us our sins

- Especially in the season of Lent, we focus on patterns of behaviour and internal attitudes that can lead to us turning away from God's plan for us, and for our world.
- We are called to focus on *conversion*, that is making a 'U-turn' away from patterns of selfishness, greed and self-centredness, back towards God and love of one another. At the heart of Jesus' proclamation of the Reign (Kingdom) of God was this radical message: "The kingdom of God has come near. **Repent** and believe the good news!" (Mk 1.15)

NIVUK) The Greek word *metanoia* conveys this total transformation away from *sin* towards *grace*.

- If we are honest with ourselves, and we are in tune with our *conscience*, that in-built sat-nav or inner voice that tells us ‘*do good, shun evil*’, then as we daily reflect back over our lives (called *The Examen*), we will be conscious of those things we regret having done, thought or said, or those things we regret not doing or saying. Stephen Cottrell explains that this is all too often a shared human experience. What is happening is this: we soberly appraise ourselves and conclude that we have fallen short of our own standards. We are not the people we want to be, and not the people we aspire to be. We are less than we intend to be, and less than we want ourselves to be. St. Paul describes it thus:

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*‘I can anticipate the response that is coming: “I know that all God’s commands are spiritual, but I’m not. Isn’t this also your experience?” Yes. I’m full of myself—after all, I’ve spent a long time in sin’s prison. What I don’t understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can’t be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God’s command is necessary.’*      Romans 7.14-16      (The Message)

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- This is what is known as ***sin***, not a particularly popular concept today. We’re not talking about mistakes or failure. It is the realisation that we are not the people we want to be. We fall short of our own standards. ***We choose wilfully what is wrong. We neglect what is right.***

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*‘Sin is...the wilful choosing of what we know to be wrong and the wilful neglect of what we know to be right.’*

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- To understand the depth and importance of this petition in the Lord’s Prayer, we must start with this understanding of sin. We need to recover what sin means before we can find forgiveness.
- Sin is not just personal, in the sense that it’s exclusively about me and God. Sin is by its essence *social*, in the sense that my actions and words (or absence of choosing to act and to speak) affect others too. Therefore, sin acts on the horizontal and vertical plane. That is why in the Eucharist we have a space to *confess*, not only to God, but to one another, our sinfulness, and to acknowledge that our sin not only affects our relationship with God, but with one another. *The General Absolution* and the *Sign of Peace* emphasise that reconciliation operates not only between us and God, but us and each other. As

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*‘For what I see in Jesus is someone who is perfectly human, without regret or failure, tempted as I am in every way (because he is completely human as I am completely human), and yet able to rise above the negative forces that drag us down or push us sideways. And what I hear Jesus say and what I see in his life is something I want for my life. In him, there is an authenticity I can never quite attain, but will spend my life reaching for.’*

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Christians, we understand sin is not just about not meeting our own personal standards. Our Christian faith tells us that there are external standards as well. Standards beyond even those we set ourselves. These standards are contained in the Old Testament Law (summarised in the *Decalogue* or *10 Commandments*), the prophets, and ultimately in the actions and teachings of Jesus Christ.

- The way of life modelled by Jesus is far above the observation of rules, way beyond a moral code to follow. ***It is a way of love.*** It shows that we don't just fall short of our own standards. We fall short of God's standards, and however much we try, we will never be able to love like Jesus, and we will probably always end up putting ourselves first.
- We might beat ourselves up over our behaviour. But God doesn't. ***God offers forgiveness. This is why Jesus has come into the world. To show us how to be human and to restore us to relationship with God – and to forgive sins.***

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*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Jn 3.16 (NIVUK)*

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- This why we must pray, 'Forgive us our trespasses'. We reach out to God so that we might receive God's merciful love and endlessly restorative forgiveness. God won't force us to do this. God *calls* us to repent. But God won't *make* me repent.
- This is the mystery of ***free will***. Having been made in the image of God, we are made in the image of one

who is completely free, and therefore we have this wonderful, dangerous freedom ourselves. We are free to turn to God **and** free to turn away.

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*‘God is not playing tricks on us. We have this freedom for a reason. It is love.’*

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- We could live in a universe where everything worked like clockwork and all the creatures in it were pre-programmed to do only what is right. But if we have no choice, we have no possibility of love.
- We may be miserable about our sins, but we don’t need to be miserable sinners.

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*[we were] ‘washed once in the waters of baptism and we are washed daily when asking for forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer.’ St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 56.12*

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- God offers the great abundant blessing of forgiveness **freely and immediately**. Better still, not only does God forgive, God also forgets. God does not even

## The paradox of free will

‘In the universe we *do* have, God takes the great risk of creating a creature that is capable of love. And for that creature to exist, there must be the freedom *not* to love, to be selfish and hateful, even to end up never loving God and never saying sorry...free to choose *not* to know God, and to reject others...Jesus shows us what love looks like, offers the medicine of forgiveness, but leaves us to decide whether we will accept it or not. Which is the decision we make every time we say the Lord’s Prayer.’

remember our transgressions (cf. Isaiah 43.25; Hebrews 8.12). This is *grace, freely given but not earned or deserved. This is God's amazing grace, amazing love.*

- **God endlessly offers this forgiveness, but we need to turn to God to receive it. We need to respond with sorrow and penitence for what we have done wrong. We need to face up to accept the consequences in this life. We need to be ready to forgive others.**

### **Reflection:**

Do you have any experience of being forgiven or of forgiving others that has helped you understand the nature of forgiveness?

### **As we forgive those who sin against us**

- This petition of the Lord's Prayer often starts to make us feel very uncomfortable. As we reflect on this petition, we start to realise that ***the forgiveness we long for ourselves comes with a condition. We must forgive others too.***
- The New Testament is insistent about this, 'Forgive, and you will be forgiven', says Jesus (Lk 6.37). 'Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive,' says Paul (Col 3.13). 'How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' asks Peter. 'No,' says Jesus, 'seventy-seven times' (Mt 18.21-22). *The painful challenge of these words is that if we want the beautiful 'without conditions forgiveness' that God offers us in Jesus*

*Christ, we must take hold of the **one** condition outlined here, which is to offer the same to others.*

- We know this is far from easy. We harbour resentments, a need for revenge, feelings of injustice or being the victim, especially when we are called to forgive those who don't want to be forgiven, or worse still when the other fails to show any penitence, remorse or sense of responsibility. Are certain crimes unforgiveable? Genocide, rape, child abuse, murder?
- Forgiveness is not cheap – it costs, really costs. It cost God the life of Jesus on the cross. What we see in Jesus *is one who goes on forgiving, even forgiving those who betray him, abuse him and nail him to the cross.*

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*'Perhaps, for us, it therefore means being **ready** to forgive and not letting hatred or a desire for revenge take hold in our hearts, because in the end we will be the ones who suffer. Our souls will be in danger.'*

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- Sometimes as Stephen Cherry points out, *'there is a grace in not forgiving' – or in not forgiving yet – 'but in retaining a non-hateful, non-vengeful indignation, and acting on a righteous and responsible desire to name the wrong and call to account those who have abused their power. This is the grace of honesty and patience. Sometimes the grace of forgiving will have to wait until truth and justice have had their day.'*
- Another way to look at this difficult problem is to imitate how Jesus confronted sin. **He loved the sinner but hated the sin.** Jesus showed empathy with the weakness of the sinner, looking at

culpability, extenuating circumstances, the human frailty of our human nature. Remember the old-age adage: **‘there by the grace of God go I.’**

- We need to ask for the grace to forgive. Saying the Lord’s Prayer each day is a spiritual exercise – to remind ourselves that **all of us sin and are in constant need of forgiveness, from God and others.**

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*‘All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.’ Rom 3.23*

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- Someone must have the bravery to break the cycle of vengeance, hatred, violence and recrimination. Jesus did this on the cross. Can we cooperate with this sacrifice of forgiveness? We need God’s grace to transform our hearts to be like that of Jesus.

*‘Has my faith been tested? Lord, yes. My name’s Gee, not Jesus! It’s been hard, so hard, but I have to follow what the Lord teaches. It is easy to say those things, but when it is you who must do them, it is hard.’ Gee Walker*

## The example of the Walker family

Gee: I can’t hate. I brought up my children in this church to love. I teach them to love, to respect themselves, and respect others. We’re a huggy family and they go out and portray that same image. We’re a forgiving family and it extended to outside, so it wasn’t hard to forgive because we don’t just preach it, we practise it.

Dominique: Seventy times seven we must forgive, that’s what we were taught, that’s what the Bible said, that’s what we have to do. It’s an everyday thing. It is hard, it is so hard, but you get through it. It eases the bitterness and the anger if you can wake up in the morning and think ‘forgive, forgive, forgive’.