

# Forgiveness–The Mercy of God

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



*“Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd” by Julia Bridget Hayes*

## Prayer of Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds  
By the power of your Holy Spirit,  
That as the Scriptures are read  
And your Word is proclaimed,  
We may hear with joy  
What you say to us today. Amen.

## Introduction

*Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

This short prayer, that has a few slight variations, is known as the Jesus Prayer. And it plays a central role in Eastern Orthodox spirituality and prayer.

Since the sabbatical, I've spent a lot of time praying the *Jesus Prayer*.

*"Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me."*

I love it because it's simple, it's profound, and quite portable. Pray it when you get up, pray it in the car, wherever, whenever.

The great Orthodox teachers over the centuries are our guides:

- Pray it with your head going into your heart.
- Have an awareness of Christ's presence with you.
- You're communing with Christ.
- Invoke Christ's name for mercy—for forgiveness, for help, for grace, for healing.

This cry for mercy to God is heard over and over in the Scriptures.

I had an insight while praying this prayer. And I was able to talk it through with my spiritual director at my eight-day prayer retreat in Louisiana. The Jesus Prayer was helping me see how much I need mercy and forgiveness from Jesus. And as I had a deeper sense of God's mercy, I felt God's mercy welling up in me, and I began praying for mercy on my family and friends. On Immanuel—all of you and on the world. But it didn't stop there.

I felt an overwhelming sense of mercy for those I struggle with. And I just started praying for mercy and blessing and well-being for those I share sorrowful experiences with over the years, where things just didn't work out. And there was a warmth I felt and a healing was taking place. I prayed for God's best over them and their families. And praying for their best freed my heart. It lightened my load.

This of course is a process, a lifestyle, that we have to keep practicing:

Praying for, blessing, doing good, sharing with, loving, all people—those that are easy, and those that are not so easy. Sometimes we do this well, other times we fail—but we keep seeking to put on the heart of Christ—receiving and extending forgiveness.

Thomas Merton described God's love this way:

*"Mercy within mercy within mercy."*

When I was an enemy of God, God showed mercy to me. God does this to everyone. I'm free to be merciful to others because God is merciful to them.

This is good for us. It not only ennoble others, but ourselves. It's a joy to not only experience mercy, but to extend it to all.

*Our Scripture reading from the book of Luke follows...*

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## Scripture: Luke 6:27-35 (NRSVue)

<sup>27</sup> "But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you. <sup>29</sup> If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. <sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again. <sup>31</sup> Do to others as you would have them do to you.

<sup>32</sup> "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup> If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive payment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. <sup>35</sup> Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## SERMON – Forgiveness–The Mercy of God

Loving enemies is one of *the defining* characteristics of Jesus's teaching.

It's radical. Daunting. Almost seems crazy.

But Jesus makes it possible for us. He lives in us and loves in us and loves through us. It's a miracle. I've experienced it—it's real.

We're given Christ's eyes to see others not as enemies. We can see Christ in others. We can love with Christ's love. Tit for tat living is derailed.

We all have people we struggle with.  
It could be a family member.  
A sibling, a parent, a child.  
Someone you work with.  
A stranger who wronged you.  
A member of the other political party.  
A person from another race.  
Someone living here that isn't a citizen.  
You could be struggling with God.  
You could be struggling with me right now.

So we have this calling, to put Christ's heart on. To find the image of God in the other—to not stop looking for the good in them until you find it. No matter how hard it is.

Jesus' presence heals and transforms us from the US vs THEM mentality. Christ's presence changes how we view our enemies. We see them differently, see ourselves differently. Prayer helps us see others in Christ's light. We see our part in things more. Christ may help us see we need to ask for forgiveness.

Instead of seeing "them" as enemies, we see them in new ways: as thinking differently from us, maybe as hurting or wounded people dearly loved by God. When we see that God loves them, we can love them.

Did you happen notice how Jesus starts off our passage?

*"I say to you who are **listening**..."*

Jesus is speaking and asking us right now: *are you listening?*

Let's be listeners of the Lord. And in the Bible, listening isn't complete until it's acted upon. So let's pay attention Immanuel—especially when it's a tough saying like this one.

The kernels of what Jesus is saying are found in the Hebrew Scriptures, and then...he intensifies them, big time. And these words of Christ are his defining message. It's what sets Jesus apart from all others before and after him. It is a call to love, or as Pastor John Cheek described it for us this summer, a call to "extravagant love."



The Greek word for this extravagant love is "*Agape*." Jesus has the audacity to say, "*Agape*" your enemies. Love them with God's kind of love. "*Agape*" your adversaries, "*Agape*" those who are antagonistic towards you. *Agape* those we just don't feel like "*Agape-ing*."

**"Agape love"** is active love that desires the well-being of the other.

A love that prays for and works toward another's highest good.

We have freely received it from God, and we are to freely extend it to others.

*Agape* love not only wishes nothing evil will happen to those we struggle with, but we also pray for God's best for them. *Agape* is a decision, an intention, of not only the heart, but the will.

Now of course, we need to apply Jesus' words with wisdom. It isn't loving to let someone harm or abuse others. Part of love is being clear and providing loving boundaries. But notice, this isn't an "option" or "suggestion" Jesus gives us. He is saying this is what we do. We love. We *Agape*.

“They will know we are Christians by **our love.**” It’s a command. And very practical.

- Love. Pray. Do good. Give. Share. Bless.
- Act not in kind, but act in kindness.
- Return violence with *non*-violence.
- If you know what slavery is, don’t enslave others.
- If you know what civil rights are, don’t deprive others of them.
- Live by the Golden Rule.
- Ask how others would like to be treated.
- Seek understanding. Be thoughtful. Extend mercy.

Live like Jesus. Let Jesus live through you. Put on *the heart of Jesus.*

It was 1948 in South Africa when a new government policy became formalized—it was called **Apartheid**, which means “separateness.” Racial segregation became the defining principle of the entire state. White power was enshrined by the Dutch Reformed Church.

**Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu** called it for what it was: *“totally unchristian, evil, and heresy.”*

**Nelson Mandela** was one of the revolutionaries who resisted *Apartheid* and he was imprisoned for sedition in 1964. He was a Methodist with a quiet, yet steady faith. He suffered much in his nearly 30 years in prison: he slept on damp concrete floors in his dank prison cell, he was put to hard labor, and his vision was permanently damaged by the glare of the rock quarry he worked in. But he also studied the Bible and the teachings of Christ over the decades:

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...”*

By the late 1980s the *Apartheid* regime was crumbling from internal and external pressure. And on February 11, 1990, **Nelson Mandela** was released from prison. And when he met with his prisoners, he did so with the firm resolve of the restorative power of forgiveness and mercy.



**Bishop Desmond Tutu** bravely declared these words:

*“When confession is made, then those of us who have been wronged must say, ‘we forgive you.’”*

The forgiveness proclaimed by Mandela and Tutu freed their oppressors to come into the open and seek forgiveness for the years of wrongdoing. The perpetrators knew mercy awaited them, not punishment. **Forgiveness** gave the green light for healing and change that would have been impossible without it.



And on Easter Sunday 1994 at the Zionist Christian Church Conference, a few weeks before his election as South Africa's first black president, **Mandela** preached these words saluting Christ who had died for the whole world:

*"Easter is a festival of human solidarity, because it celebrates the fulfillment of the Good News! The Good News born by our risen Messiah who chose not one race, who chose not one country, who chose not one language, who chose not one tribe, who chose all mankind!"*

Truly this was one of the greatest days in church history. Why? Because of forgiveness. The mercy of God.

Jesus says, *"Love your enemies and do good to them," SO THAT you might be children of the living God.* This kind of love makes us godly, like God. Jesus describes here what his Father is like:

*"God is merciful and kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." (Luke 6:35)*

We are made in this God's image. Love frees us from a slavish existence chained to tit for tat living. Now, is loving our enemies easy? Heavens no. Is it comfortable or natural? No. But life is just too short to be filled and consumed with bitterness. It's not worth it.

We can't do it, but Christ in us can!

By the grace of God, we can put on—the heart of Christ.

"Great is your reward," says Jesus if you do this. It's costly, but the reward is great.

- Be merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful.
- You are made in God's image.
- Look for the image of God in others.
- Sometimes this is easy, sometimes it's hard—do both!

Let your *Agape* love go beyond reciprocity.

Don't just love others SO THAT they'll love you.

Don't just love because someone loved you.

Love because we should love. Because God is love!

God is the standard by which we love.  
Love others because they are loved by God.  
Love all because these actions display mercy.  
And "*mercy triumphs over judgment*" as the Scriptures teach. (*James 2:13*)

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd*," Julia Bridget Hayes, [Ikonographics](#).

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