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### **Matthew 6:5–16 ESV**

<sup>5</sup> *“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

<sup>7</sup> *“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. <sup>9</sup> Pray then like this:*

*“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.*

<sup>10</sup> *Your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.*

<sup>11</sup> *Give us this day our daily bread,*

<sup>12</sup> *and forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

<sup>13</sup> *And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.*

<sup>14</sup> *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

### **Psalms 38:17–22 ESV**

<sup>17</sup> *I am on the verge of collapse,  
facing constant pain.*

<sup>18</sup> *But I confess my sins;  
I am deeply sorry for what I have done.*

<sup>19</sup> *I have many aggressive enemies;  
they hate me without reason.*

*<sup>20</sup> They repay me evil for good  
and oppose me for pursuing good.*

*<sup>21</sup> Do not abandon me, O LORD.  
Do not stand at a distance, my God.*

*<sup>22</sup> Come quickly to help me,  
O Lord my savior.*

### **Raking leaves.**

One day, when I was eleven, I believe, I was in my parents' front yard, raking leaves. We lived on a corner lot and had a few big trees. It was my job each Fall to rake. I remember having a big pile built up; I liked seeing how much of the yard's worth of leaves I could rake into a single pile. And no, I did not run and jump into the pile, as Wendy tells me kids are supposed to. I just wanted to make a hill of leaves that was as high as possible. I was actively raking when I heard a man's voice shouting at me; I don't remember the exact words, but it was something like "Don't move. Drop the rake and put your hands up!" I looked up – and it was a uniformed cop, leveling what I think was a .38 at me. He was a young man, but very calm. I did indeed drop the rake and I shot my hands into the air. He was about ten feet from me, and I noticed that he seemed angry and that he was doing his best to keep it contained. There was something in the officer's expression that was eerie: he seemed disgusted with me. My father had come out of the house, and he slipped in between the cop and me. My father

told the officer, in a loud but calm voice, that everything was okay, that his son would cooperate.

The officer told my father in a controlled voice that he was going to have to step aside. My father moved out of the way, and as he stepped aside, his eyes moved between the officer's face and his gun. My father repeated: whatever has happened, my son will cooperate. But the conversation between my father and the officer went on for a while, with my father asking the officer to please lower his gun, that his son had been raking, and whatever happened, the kid had nothing to do with it. The officer asked my father how long I had been there raking. My father pointed at the big pile of leaves and said for at least a couple of hours, and that I was a straight-A student and would never do anything wrong. The officer kept the gun on me as my father asked him what had happened. The officer said that a vicious crime had just been committed. I could see the officer's expression change subtly; he was beginning to wonder if I was the right kid. But the officer told my father that he was going to arrest me. I'll get back to this.

Our first quote is from Jesus' sermon on the Mountain. In this long discourse, Jesus describes what it means to truly be a believer and how believers should treat each other. I thought it would be fun to look at the Lord's Prayer in Matthew. We say it every Sunday, and we remind ourselves that Jesus taught us

this prayer himself. Notice what it says leading up to the prayer, how Jesus tells people they should pray:<sup>5</sup> *“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.* <sup>6</sup> *But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.* <sup>7</sup> *“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.* <sup>8</sup> *Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.* <sup>9</sup> *Pray then like this:*

Jesus then says the prayer that we have named after him. We see that prayer is between us and God, and it is not something offered because we want people to think we are holy. The real test of prayer is when it is just you and God – and no one else is around. Consider verse 14, which comes after the Lord’s Prayer: <sup>14</sup> *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,* <sup>15</sup> *but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.* Jesus reminds us that to truly earn God’s forgiveness, we must first forgive others. What this really means is that a Christian always has forgiveness in their heart. That is the part of the prayer that Jesus chooses to repeat – because it is so important for us to remember. It’s not

that forgiving is a requirement of being forgiven; it's that forgiving others is a test to see if we are genuine believers.

Our second passage is from Psalm 38:

*<sup>17</sup> I am on the verge of collapse,  
facing constant pain.*

*<sup>18</sup> But I confess my sins;  
I am deeply sorry for what I have done.*

*<sup>19</sup> I have many aggressive enemies;  
they hate me without reason.*

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and oppose me for pursuing good.*

*<sup>21</sup> Do not abandon me, O LORD.  
Do not stand at a distance, my God.*

*<sup>22</sup> Come quickly to help me,  
O Lord my savior.*

We say the Lord's Prayer in church. The Psalms were prayers that the Israelites and then the Jews often sang in their services. The first part of this Psalm is a reminder that if we have done wrong, we will be on the verge of collapse. We will be in constant pain. The answer? We need to admit what we have done wrong, apologize, and make it right. I'll get back to the last part of this Psalm. But remember what we learned from our two passages – first, that when we have wronged somebody, we're in a state of anxiety until we confront what we have done, and second, that we must always forgive.

Let's get back to that police officer, whom I learned later was very new at his job. After my father and the officer spoke to each other for a minute or so, the officer nodded at me. He told me to relax, that he would not hurt me, as long as I did indeed cooperate. Then, another officer, a man who was a bit older, came running up. He told the first officer to "stand down", that the kid who had attacked the older lady had been caught down the street, that they had him in cuffs. It was then that the young officer holstered his gun – and suddenly looked very embarrassed. He told my father that he was very sorry. He turned to me and said that he was sorry to scare me. The second officer explained that the kid they had just arrested did look a lot like me, and his partner was working off a description of that kid. The woman had been robbed and thrown to the ground – and had a serious head injury. I heard the siren of an approaching ambulance.

My father said everything was okay, that we both understood. I of course followed suit and said that I was fine, no problem, although, in truth, I was beginning to shake inside. The young officer and his partner walked away. I did not see the kid they had arrested, and later, when someone told me his name, I didn't recognize it. Later that evening, our doorbell rang. My father answered – and it was the young cop. He was still in uniform. He asked my father if he could please speak to me. My father called for me. The officer said that he had just

finished his shift, and that he had been thinking about me. He said that he had little kids at home and how terrible he would feel if one of them had been scared like that. He said that he couldn't go home without making sure I was okay and apologizing one more time. I thanked him for coming by. I asked him how the woman was doing. The officer said that she was in the hospital and that it didn't look good. Then both the cop and I were silent for a moment. We stood in my parents' living room, looking at each other. My father nudged me and said, "and what else?" I looked at him. "What are you going to say to someone who just apologized to you?" said my father. "Huh?" Then I remembered. I told the officer that I forgave him, and he should just forget about it, that I understood why he was angry, why he wanted to arrest me. My father smiled and nodded.

Now, I know from the stories that I have told you that very few of you are going to want to move to the area where I grew up. But I chose this story, and in fact, I saved it for a quite a while, looking for the right Sunday to use it. I talk a lot about what it means to live like a Christian, what it means to emulate the life of Jesus, and how doing so lifts us up and allows us to live with joy. We should think about the most important lesson that Jesus taught us. It is indeed forgiveness. But here is a bit of a twist on the forgiveness lesson: forgiveness is a three-way thing. It involves someone apologizing, or perhaps not apologizing at all, and in

fact, perhaps remaining defiant and refusing to admit any wrong. The second person is the one who forgives. The third party is God – and God waits for us to forgive. God is especially appreciative if we have forgiven someone who hasn't even apologized. Then God blesses us. That is the glorious moment, when we feel God touching us with a deep, powerful grace.

Let's get to the second part of that Psalm fragment. It's actually very odd.

- <sup>19</sup> I have many aggressive enemies;  
they hate me without reason.*
- <sup>20</sup> They repay me evil for good  
and oppose me for pursuing good.*
- <sup>21</sup> Do not abandon me, O LORD.  
Do not stand at a distance, my God.*
- <sup>22</sup> Come quickly to help me,  
O Lord my savior.*

I don't like to use Scripture out of context, and so I want to point out that the original purpose of this passage is to tell us that if we do wrong, we are going to suffer. It's a brutal message. It says that if we do wrong, and we don't try to make it right, God will come down on us hard. In this Psalm, God uses other people to make the sinful person suffer, as often happened in the Old Testament. But there is something else we today can get from this Psalm – there are people in our world who are here to serve us, and who find themselves being repaid with evil. I want to ask you to lift up your hearts for police officers and other first

responders. I see police officers at the hospital bringing people into the emergency room. It is officers who are the first ones on the scene when someone is run over by a car while crossing the street, who is shot, or who falls off a ladder, or is beaten by a spouse, or is in a horrific car crash. Police officers get overdosed drug addicts and frightened runaways to the hospital. I always see these officers acting with kindness and empathy. Please pray with me.

*God, thank you for the first responders who are always there to help us when we are in need. We particularly want to thank police officers. We know that among any group of people there will be those who do evil. But we also know that you taught us to act with love and empathy, and most of all, forgiveness. Please keep our officers safe and please bring joy to their lives. And help all people learn something that has been forgotten – that forgiving is a requirement of living like Jesus. Amen.*