

Forgiving and Being Forgiven

Matthew 6:12

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

We continue this morning in the Lord's Prayer, which is itself at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. For prayer, shaped by this prayer, is at the heart of Christian ethics. As mentioned before, the first three petitions are God-centered, and then, in the final three petitions, we address our needs.

Today, we come to the fifth petition: Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. Last week, we looked at the fourth petition, give us this day our daily bread. There is a bit of instruction in the very order. Bread, then forgiveness. It's as if the structure of the prayer says: what food is to the body, so forgiveness is to the soul. As basic, as essential, as repeatedly necessary as eating is; so basic, so essential, so repeatedly necessary, is the forgiveness of sins. With that, we will make two points. Forgiveness received in verse 11a, and forgiveness given in 11b and 14 and 15. Forgiveness received, and forgiveness given.

I. Forgiveness Received

First, then, forgiveness received. Forgive us our debts. As mentioned, given that we pray for DAILY bread, we can assume the other petitions are to be prayed at least as frequently.

There's no surprise in that. This is the prayer which shapes all praying, and we are to pray without ceasing. The Christian life is to be an incense offering of prayer. Union and communion with God in Christ, through the Spirit, takes the shape of prayer (Calvin: Principal act of piety). And thus prayer, ordered this way, lifts us up to the high, permanent, and eternal things. Here is a short snippet from the Puritan collection of prayers, which I've recommended to you many times, called the valley of vision:

In prayer I launch far out into the eternal world, and on that broad ocean my soul triumphs over all evils on the shores of mortality. Time, with its gay amusements and cruel disappointments, never appears so inconsiderate as then. In prayer I see myself as nothing; I find my heart going after thee with intensity, and long with vehement thirst to live to thee. Blessed be the strong gales of the Spirit that speed me on my way to the New Jerusalem. In prayer all things here

below vanish, and nothing seems important but holiness of heart and the salvation of others.

Prayer then, most basically, lifts us up to God, to heaven, up into eternity and out into the age to come. Prayer makes all things here below vanish – except for holiness and the salvation of others. And this petition focuses on that holiness part. To pray – daily, hourly, perpetually – forgive us our debts – as the first thing which concerns our spiritual lives -- is to take the posture of a beggar. It is to say repeatedly: I am a sinner. I stand in need of mercy. I need to be forgiven. It is to place OUR sinfulness – not the sinfulness of those people, not the sins of the culture – but our sinfulness, at the center of our self-consciousness, and at the center of our prayer.

And almost nobody does this. That is how radical this petition is. To pray, repeatedly: “forgive us our debts” is to embody the ethos of the beatitudes. How does one pray this – seriously, earnestly – without being poor in spirit? Without being meek? Without mourning? Without seeking peace? Without being merciful? Without loving ones enemies?

How is it that praying this prayer – and this petition for forgiveness – has become compatible with so much arrogance and hubris and rancor and division and snide condescension among Christians? The answer here is, I think, simple. We just do not see ourselves as great sinners. The enormity of our sins before God does not move us. Other people’s sins – very much so. Our debts? They don’t seem really that big. And this word – debts – it’s basically equivalent to sins or trespasses – but debts high-lights something. Something that needs an accounting. A reckoning. Something requiring restitution. A payment that must be made. A burden that needs to be lifted. For great debt is a crushing burden. The Westminster Larger Catechism puts it this way:

In the fifth petition we acknowledge, that we and all others, are guilty both of original and actual sin, and thereby become debtors to the justice of God; and that neither we, nor any other creature, can make the least satisfaction for that debt. (posture of this petition)

So, we have an enormous debt and – of ourselves – we cannot make the least dent in satisfying it. For the standard by which our debt is calculated – and to which our debt is owed-- is the justice of God. The intrinsic holiness of the infinite God, revealed in the splendor of his moral law, is, if you will, the collector of our debt. And this means our debt is infinite. This is the humbling plight of those who pray this petition with self-knowledge and reverence.

Thankfully, God, who alone can forgive sins, is infinite in mercy. And it is that oceanic mercy of God which – in sending forth his Son -- satisfies his justice, which pays, which discharges the debt, which lifts from us the heavy burden. The Son is the propitiation, that is, the wrath-bearing sacrifice, who pays for the sins

of the world. It is, Paul says, in Romans 5, by his blood that we are justified, and shall be saved from the wrath of God. And, as Isaiah 53 says: the Lord has laid on him (taken our debt, our burden, and placed it on his back), he has laid on him, the iniquity of us all. This awful load, this price paid by Christ to the justice of God, is why salvation is free for us.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses (debts), according to the riches of his grace. Notice the economic, monetary terms. Redemption, forgiveness, debts, riches of grace. In salvation, in the economy of redemption, forgiveness and grace overwhelm the economy of debt, sin, trespasses, and burden.

To pray this petition – forgive us our debts – then, is to be taken into the heart of the everlasting gospel of God our Savior. For the forgiveness of sins, full and free, is at the very heart of the New Covenant.

In Jeremiah, the promise of the New Covenant, rests on this promise: “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” This is good news. But it is better than we often realize. God, in forgiving sins, REMEMBERS them no more. Meaning, not that they escape his knowledge, but that he refuses to act in terms of our sins toward us. He remembers that we are dust. He remembers that Christ has acted as our Substitute. And thus, he does NOT remember our sins – it’s a covenantal act. A kind of committing of the memory of our sins to oblivion. He does not deal with us, Psalm 103 says, according to our sins or – note – repay us according to our iniquities. He removes them, as far as the east is from the west.

Forgiveness is, in short, a supernatural act. A miraculous action of God. A miracle of gospel mercy to indebted, burdened, guilty sinners. To pray this prayer. To confess our sins – daily, without ceasing across the whole of our lives – looking to Christ, the friend of sinners, is to cast ourselves into the vortex of this mercy. It is to be truly blessed, for blessed is the one whose sin is forgiven.

II. Forgiveness Given

That’s forgiveness received. Let’s look at forgiveness given. We are to pray, forgive us our debts, AS WE ALSO have forgiven our debtors. Now this just seems completely backwards to us. Forgive us – AS we have forgiven others? If it wasn’t Jesus saying it, we might be tempted to pull the brother aside and straighten some things out. After all, how could our being forgiven, be suspended on the forgiveness we extend to others? Again, this seems backwards. What is going on here?

So let’s be clear: This is not a statement that our forgiveness earns, or is the basis for, God’s forgiveness. How could it be? God has already been set forth as

our Father; we have already addressed him intimately as children. We are already in the household. Yet, just because we are addressing God as Father, does not mean we can be presumptuous about this relationship. People in the house of God can be, and are, cut off.

So, there is a warning here, and you can see it in verses 14 and 15, where Jesus expands on this petition. There we read that if we forgive others when they sin against us, our Father will also forgive us. If we do NOT forgive others their sins, our Father will NOT forgive our sins. Far from backing off on the condition, Jesus doubles down on it.

This type of language often makes us nervous, as if it were teaching some sort of salvation by works: forgiveness through forgiving others. There are two things we can say about this. First, it's not teaching salvation by means of your extending forgiveness to others, and second, it means just what it says.

The point is, that, if we are living unforgiving lives, we should not expect God to forgive our sins. Habitual un-forgiveness, a refusal to forgive, is a sign that we have not grasped the gospel and truly repented. If we HAVE grasped the enormity of our sins against God, we will see the sins of others against us for the relatively minor things they are. If we think our sins against God our relatively minor, we tend to view others' sins against us as enormous.

This is, you'll recall, the whole point of the parable of the unforgiving servant, who was forgiven an enormous debt – I forgave you ALL that debt when you pleaded with me -- the master in the parable says. And yet, he refused to forgive what was a small debt, relative to the debt he was forgiven. This disparity between the debt we owe to God, and the relatively trifling debts other owe to us – this is at the root of the unforgiving person.

And it is a venomous, monstrous, soul-destroying lack of perspective. It creates angry, bitter, counting, remembering, self-righteous people. On the other hand, those who know that they've been forgiven much, love much, and thus forgive freely. But, we might say, I am willing to forgive – within reason. But this person has done me a great wrong. If I forgive, it will only occasion more wrong-doing.

Forgiveness sends precisely the wrong message. Besides, this is really unforgivable what they've done. To which there are two things to be said: First, the One commanding us here, the One we are to imitate, is the one who said of his murderers: Father, forgive them, they know not what they do. And second, this One, when asked by Peter: "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Said: "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."

C.S. Lewis summarizes this well. No part of Jesus' teaching is clearer, and there are no exceptions to it. He doesn't say we are to forgive other people's sins

provided they are not too frightful, or anything of that sort. We are to forgive them all, however spiteful, however mean, however often they are repeated. If we don't, we shall be forgiven none of our own.

In short, the absence of a forgiving spirit is a sign that true repentance is missing. Now, and this is an important caveat – we are not talking about struggling to forgive. Or desiring to work through unforgiveness and stumbling at it. We are talking about a person who flat out refuses to forgive. About such a one we must soberly confess: Their unforgiveness may be (is?) a sign that they do not belong to Christ.

A proud general once told John Wesley: I never forgive. To which Wesley replied: Then I hope, sir, that you never sin. The Puritan, Thomas Watson, said: one can go to hell for not forgiving, just as one can, for not believing. In fact, C.H. Spurgeon said: Unless you have forgiven others, your read your own death warrant when you repeat the Lord's Prayer.

So the point is simply that forgiven people forgive others, and they do it from the heart, and thus have confidence to ask God to continue to forgive them, not on the basis of, but just like, they have forgiven those who sin against them.

As the Shorter Catechism puts it: we are encouraged to ask for forgiveness because, by God's grace, we are enabled from the heart to forgive others. One scholar summed it up this way: There is no serious prayer for forgiveness, except on the lips of a forgiver.

And this condition – unless you forgive, your heavenly Father will not forgive you – this condition – if it needs to be said -- is not because of God's peevishness, or unwillingness to forgive. Quite the contrary. God delights to forgive sinners. It is a cause of great joy in heaven to do so. So let us not lose hope over our sins, let us never despair. Even if we are struggling to forgive others.

When our God shows his glory to Moses, he says, he is a God who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin. He designates himself in Isaiah this way: "I, I am he, who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins." He waits on high to show compassion, and he will abundantly pardon.

And we heard this marvelous passage from Micah in our Call to Worship: Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. What we are called to, then, is to reflect the family likeness, the perfection of the Father, the greater righteousness of the kingdom.

And of course, this can only be done if we have first genuinely received pardon for our enormous debt, our daily accumulated debts. As Paul puts it: Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, AS God in Christ forgave you. Blessed are those who, having been forgiven, forgive others, for they shall continue to be forgiven. Amen.

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