

Sunday, February 20, 2022

# Forgive Us Our Debts and Sins

(Series: "Lord, Teach Us to Pray")

(Message Seven)

## Scripture:

*<sup>9</sup> "This, then, is how you should pray:  
'Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread...  
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors..."*  
(Matthew 6:9-12)

## Message:

**Richard Hoefler, in Will Daylight Come, tells of a little boy who was given a slingshot while visiting his grandparents.**

He practiced in the woods but could never hit his target. As he came back into Grandma's yard and saw her pet duck, he thought he would take aim and let the stone fly. The stone hit; the duck died; the boy panicked. Desperately he hid the duck behind the wood pile only to look up and see his sister, Sally, watching him. She said nothing.

But after lunch, when Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes," Sally said, "Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen today, didn't you Johnny?" (She whispered, "Remember the duck.") Johnny did the dishes.

Later Grandpa asked if they wanted to go fishing. Grandma said, "I'm sorry, but I need Sally to help make supper." Sally smiled and said, "It's all taken care of, Johnny wants to do it." (She looked at him and whispered, "Remember the duck.") Grandpa and Sally went fishing.

After several days of Johnny doing his and Sally's chores, he couldn't stand it any longer. He went and confessed to Grandma that he had killed her duck. "I know, Johnny," she said, "I saw the whole thing through the window. Because I love you, I forgave you. I just wondered how long you would let Sally make a slave of you."

**We have been studying the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Today, we'll focus on the fifth petition, "*Forgive our debts and sins...like we forgive those who owe us or have harmed us...*"**

With this petition we again engage an essential part of the Gospel - Jesus' teaching on forgiveness and reconciliation.

We can't overstate its importance in Jesus' ministry, in our world, and in our lives. Without forgiveness, our world is left with vengeance and retaliation. Without forgiveness, we are left with a life of guilt and alienation from God. Without forgiveness, no marriage, friendship, or church can survive.

Forgiveness has been linked to lower stress, and better mental and cardiac health.

**The two sides of this petition – *forgive us* and *as we forgive* – underscore that we all need forgiveness and we all must extend forgiveness.**

## **THE ESSENCE OF FORGIVENESS**

### **What is forgiveness?**

The Greek word here is *aphiemi*; it means to *let go, to release, or to send away*. Forgiveness means **letting go**, releasing or sending away resentment and the right to exact revenge over a wrong done or an unfilled promise. When we ask God to forgive us, we're asking him to release us from his right to hold our sins over us and from the guilt and shame we feel. When we forgive others, we let go of our right to be angry and hold a grudge.

Forgiveness doesn't mean we're released from all the **consequences** of our sin; there may still be natural consequences, remunerations to repay and legal implications. Forgiveness forgetting, excusing, or saying it doesn't matter.

### **What is the nature of this wrong that needs forgiveness?**

Matthew defines this wrong as "debts." Luke writes, "*Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us*" (**Luke 11:4**; NIV misses this).

People use the words interchangeably; but each has significant theological meaning:

Debts, *opheilemata*, literally refers to something owed to another, to **unfulfilled obligations** towards God and others, to things/commitments left undone. Many in Jesus' day owed someone something (farmers leased land, borrowed money for seeds, borrowed to pay taxes; etc.) – a debt they needed to repay. A poor harvest meant carrying the debt over to the following year. Many in Jesus' day were never free of debt; it made their lives miserable.

Debts are unfulfilled responsibilities (e.g., not loving God, not loving our neighbor...); and if you couldn't pay, you would become a slave until you worked off your debt, or you're sent to debtors' prison until someone else pays your debt.

Someone paying your debt is called *redemption*; the person who does it is your *redeemer*. This petition asks God to pay our debts.

*Trespases (paratomata)* means **falling away**, a misstep; stepping on another's property against their will; *sin (hamaratia)* is an arrow **missing the target**.

Scripture is filled with descriptions of our "target" – loving God; loving our neighbor; doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly; making disciples. *Missing the target* means we're not in harmony with God's will, i.e., we are disobedient.

In Aramaic, the word Jesus likely used, *khoba*, covers both **debts** and **sins**. The Greek (and English) requires two words to cover "sins of omission" (debts, things we haven't done/fulfilled), and "sins of commission" (trespases, misses)

Matthew chose one word; Luke uses both words. When we pray this petition, we are acknowledging we have not only failed to **fulfill** what God **requires** (debts), we also fail to do the **right thing** (trespases, sins). We need forgiveness for both.

**And every day we mess up, so forgiveness is a recurring need.**

This petition is logistically and realistically side by side with our request for bread. Life requires **daily prayers** for bread and forgiveness. Forgiveness is not, as some have suggested, a one-time dramatic act at the beginning of our journey of faith, a basic need at the heart of our well-being.

Each day, we need to ask God to pick up the broken pieces of our lives, to release us from the guilt of unfulfilled responsibilities and burden of wrongdoing and restore the joy of our salvation. Each day, we need to actively **seek** forgiveness and reconciliation with those we have alienated, offended, ignored, maligned, and marginalized. Each day, we need to reach out and **extend** forgiveness to those who have alienated, offended, ignored, maligned, and marginalized us.

Paul Tillich wrote: "*Forgiveness is part of the daily bread we need and which we must be willing to extend.*"

**Forgiveness is essential for a healthy community: our means your AND my sins. Our means you forgive me, and I forgive you and God's forgives us together.** Unless we are willing and able to seek God's forgiveness and

forgive one another, we will be unable to live together in our marriages, families, jobs, neighborhoods, schools, businesses, faith communities...

The healing that comes from forgiveness makes it possible to continue in community; the more forgiving we become, the less offense we take from others. The truth must be told, forgiveness offered, reconciliation pursued (and attained).

**Jesus' invitation to pray for forgiveness reminds us that we have all sinned and need forgiveness; God is willing to forgive us, we need to ask for his forgiveness.**

## THE CHALLENGE OF FORGIVENESS

Once again, Jesus connects our relationship with **God** to our relationship with our **neighbor** (he also connects it in the Great Commandment, cf. Matthew 22:37-39) and connects his willingness to **forgive to our willingness to forgive**. This is a significant departure from the **tradition** in which Jesus was raised...

While the Jewish prayers (*Tefillah*) included a prayer asking for forgiveness from God, that forgiveness was not connected to forgiving others. Jesus connects it. The connection underscores Jesus' emphasis on *our*, on the community; the forgiveness of sins means we are forgiving others and others are forgiving us.

Jesus routinely taught his disciples the essential nature of a **forgiving heart**:

**Mark 11:25** – *“If you hold anything against anyone, forgive them so that your Father in heaven may forgive your sins.”*

**Luke 6:37** – *“Do not judge...do not condemn...forgive and you will be forgiven.”*

**Luke 17:4** – *“If someone sins against you seven times a day and seven times comes back to you saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”*

In **Matthew 18:23-34**, Jesus tells of a servant whose master forgave him an enormous debt and then the servant turned and refused to forgive a fellow servant a very small debt. The master, in anger, consigns the unforgiving servant to prison (which symbolically is where people find themselves when they refuse to forgive).

Jesus underscores this interconnectedness at the end of this prayer: *“If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.”* (**Matthew 6:14**)

**People often assume that the violator (debtor, sinner) must ask for forgiveness before the wronged party is expected to grant forgiveness.**

But in this petition, Jesus requires the person who is wronged to forgive the wrong doer even **before** there is a **confession** of guilt. Wow!

Should Christians of Southern Sudan forgive the Sudanese Muslim government for forty years of murder and genocide? Should the Armenians forgive the Turks for the genocide which the Turks still deny took place? Must Native Americans and African Americans forgive the wrongs they suffered? Should Japanese Americans pretend the incarcerations they endured didn't happen? Are we to forgive the drunk driver who killed our daughter; the dealer who sold our son the drugs; the doctor who failed to catch the early test results?

These are incredibly hard questions; those of us who have never endured such suffering should not presume to give **easy answers**, but healing and restoration cannot begin until we forgive.

Jesus didn't hold out until people confessed. His words from the cross echo across history: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" Jesus raises the bar and expectations considerably.

Neither Pilate, the chief priest, nor the centurion ever offered an apology. But Jesus didn't wait, he prayed for their divine forgiveness in the midst of their brutality.

This is not the inclination of the human wisdom; this is the grace of God. This is not the cry of the weak; this is the awesome voice of the strong. Jesus says forgiveness must be offered even when it is not requested, and the offense isn't acknowledged. If we don't, the bitterness, resentment, and pain only grow and fester. Our hesitation destroys community and only deepens our pain.

**In this petition, Jesus also requires we forgive our neighbor first - i.e., before we can go to God and ask for his forgiveness.** This petition doesn't say to ask God for forgiveness and then forgive each other; Jesus links God's forgiving grace to ours.

So how are we doing? This petition is incredibly difficult to pray because we can't pray it unless we are also willing to be part of the answer to that prayer. It's hard to accept forgiveness from God and others when we are unwilling to forgive. It's hard to ask God to do something we are unwilling to do if we insist on holding on to our bitterness, resentment, and anger.

**How often have we prayed these words and never really heard them?**

## **THE TRANSFORMING NATURE OF FORGIVENESS**

**Biblical forgiveness doesn't mean the injustice (debt/sin) was "no big deal."** It doesn't mean the pain is insignificant or not real.

Forgiveness does not **excuse poor behavior**; forgiveness doesn't imply the injustice must be ignored or tolerated; forgiveness doesn't erase (all) consequences. Injustice occurs in every culture, in every community, in every life. People everywhere struggle for justice as they understand it and fight for causes that are to them more sacred than life.

Today, across the world, from Iran to Sudan, from Central America to the United States, various communities in difficult and critical situations are demanding justice. For those suffering, the word *justice* looms large. Christians are committed to struggle for **justice** (**Micah 6:8**).

In praying this prayer, we are not condoning injustice; we are not saying the injustice should continue; we are not saying injustice doesn't matter. But forgiveness is in (perfect) harmony with a continuing struggle for justice. Forgiveness and justice are not opposites. Forgiveness purifies our struggle for justice. This petition and our willingness to forgive should never make us doormats.

So how does forgiveness relate to injustice?

Assuming the person struggling for justice is not on an ego trip and the injustice they've suffered is real; this prayer asks the offended one to forgive the person or persons with whom he or she struggles. Through forgiveness, the bitterness, anger, hatred, and desire for revenge are set aside and the focus can return to changing the injustice out of genuine compassion.

**Biblical forgiveness transforms the struggle.**

After forgiveness is offered (and received), the struggle for justice continues but **vengeance** and **retaliation** are off the table. As the Civil War was coming to its end, Abraham Lincoln said, "*With malice towards none; with charity for all; ...let us...do all that which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace.*"

Only after forgiving (the enemy) is it possible to pursue justice as God would.

The world despises this (Biblical) approach because the world sees **anger** as the **fuel** for the struggle against injustice and believes that forgiveness diminishes that passion. And so, we watch the anger on our television sets as people protest – often violently.

Christians disagree: "*I will forgive, and I will struggle for justice. I may be angry, but my struggle for justice will be purified by forgiveness and be more effective.*"

What about historic, systemic, deeply embedded injustice? There are plenty of examples. But those who have truly suffered can (often) forgive because they know their own weakness.

Laurens van der Post was interned by the Japanese during World War II; it almost cost him his life. In *Venture to the Interior*, he describes how, after the war, the war crimes officers – who had not suffered in the conflict – were “*more revengeful and bitter about our treatment and our suffering than we were ourselves.*”

*“I have so often noticed that the suffering, which is most difficult, if not impossible to forgive, is unreal, imagined suffering. There is no power on earth like imagination, and the worst, most obstinate grievances, are imagined ones. Let us recognize that there are people and nations that create, with submerged deliberation, a sense of suffering and of grievance, which enable them to avoid those aspects of reality that do not minister to their self-importance, personal pride, or convenience. These imagined ills enable them to avoid the proper burden that life lays on all of us. Persons who have really suffered at the hands of others do not find it difficult to forgive, nor even to understand the people who have caused their suffering. They do not find it difficult to forgive because out of suffering and sorrow truly endured comes an instinctive sense of privilege. Recognition of the creative truth comes in a flash: forgiveness for others, as for ourselves, for we too know not what we do.”*

**We will never mend the entire human family, nor will we ever forgive as **perfectly** and **completely** as Jesus. But forgiving will keep us from becoming further enslaved.**

Jesus calls us to **pray** about it and to try forgiving and embracing forgiveness, out of our obedience and love for the Father who **forgave** us in Jesus, our **Redeemer**.

Let us begin with our families, and our faith family. Let us bring to each other the balm of Christ’s boundless grace and mercy. Let us pray and watch where His forgiving grace leads...

*Our Abba, Father, in the heavens,*

*Holy be your Name.*

*Let your Kingdom come,*

*Let your will be done...here on earth as it is in heaven...*

*Provide us daily with the essential bread we need that doesn’t run out.*

*Forgive us our debts and sins, because we already have forgiven those who have sinned against us and are indebted to us...Amen*

Dr. Douglas Kamstra  
Covenant CRC  
7171 Willard Ave. SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49548