



Reflections on the Lord's Prayer: A Lenten Study

SESSION 5

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 18:21–35

The Prayer We Will Answer

One day the apostle Peter confronted Jesus with a question. It wasn't a particularly noble question, but it was a very down-to-earth one and one that I'm sure interested the other disciples as much as it interested Peter: "How often must I forgive someone who has done me wrong? Perhaps as many as seven times?" I'm sure Peter felt he was on fairly safe ground. If I am honest with myself, I think there are not many people that I am willing to forgive repeatedly. Jesus took Peter's carefully calculated number and demolished it. Not seven times, Jesus said, but seventy times seven. Then Jesus proceeded to tell Peter and the other disciples a story—a story that puts the whole principle of forgiveness in a different light.

In Jesus' story, a certain king decided to settle accounts with his servants. I suppose he was seeking to tidy up his financial affairs, as people do from time to time. He found that one of his high-ranking workers, obviously a very trusted one, owed him a large sum; to put it in our terms, let's say ten million dollars. The man wasn't remotely able to pay; one wonders how he accumulated such a debt. So the king ordered that the man's assets be completely liquidated—which in that ancient world meant not only his land and savings but also that he, his wife, and children would all be sold into slavery. Terrified by such a prospect, the man fell on his knees before the king and pleaded for more time. In a gesture



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of remarkable pity, the king released him and forgave his debt—forgave him the entire ten million dollars!

As the forgiven man headed home, no doubt exuberant in the wonder of his new economic freedom, he came upon a fellow servant, one obviously much farther down the ranks, who owed him some twenty dollars. He seized the poor fellow by the throat and said, "Pay what you owe." The fellow servant fell to his knees, begging for mercy and for time to pay. The forgiven man not only refused the appeal, he ordered the other man thrown into prison until the debt was paid.

Word of this action got back to the king. He summoned the first man to him and said, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" (Matt. 18:32–33). The king then turned the man over to the jailers until he could pay

his debt. Jesus concluded the story by saying, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matt. 18:35).

That rather strange little story is a dramatic commentary on a sentence from the Lord’s Prayer. It is the prayer for forgiveness. Listen: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12).

It’s obvious that in most instances the answering of prayer is God’s business; that’s why we pray, because we wish to bring to God those matters that we cannot manage for ourselves. But this portion of the Lord’s Prayer is different, because this is the prayer that *we* will answer. God has left in our control the power to answer this prayer or to prevent its being answered.

Now here is a special irony: Several parts of the Lord’s Prayer might seem to us to be somewhat within our province, but this doesn’t seem to be one of them. As I indicated earlier, a good many of us would be pleased to take on more responsibility for our daily bread; some of us are even a bit offended that God thinks we need help in this particular. The activists among us are also ready to work at seeing God’s kingdom come. But the phrase in question just now—*forgive us our debts*—is very much God’s business. Sin, by ultimate definition, is a God issue, so we go to God to be forgiven of our sins. But this prayer, as given to us by our Lord Christ, makes it quite clear that in order for us to be forgiven of our sins, we must be ready to forgive those who have injured us. In a very real sense, we give God permission to forgive our sins.

Whatever Became of Sin?

But before I go further, let me deal with a preliminary issue. Vast numbers in our contemporary culture really aren’t concerned about having their sins forgiven. Perhaps even the language of this prayer carries a rather comfortable tone for our culture. *Forgive us our debts*. A good many of us receive appeals nearly every week urging us to take on some debts—that is, to get still another credit card. Financial debts are almost essential to our modern world of business. What would the banks do if no one wanted to be in debt? The word *debt* doesn’t frighten our contemporary culture unless it is associated with bankruptcy—and for some, even that threat is simply a legal process to be passed through.

And what has happened to the word *debt* has happened to the whole concept of sin. Our language shows it. We have found so many convenient synonyms for sin that the basic concept is almost lost to our society. Phyllis McGinley, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and a devout Catholic, observed that people no longer see themselves as sinful but only as immature, underprivileged, frightened, or sick. Notice what is missing in all these words: they leave us exempt from responsibility. They don’t require us to say, “I am guilty. I was wrong.” So we’re socially maladjusted; what can you expect when we live in a socially perverse culture? If we have a negative personality pattern—well, that’s better than having no personality at all, isn’t it? Such is the thinking of a culture that has learned new and improved ways to avoid spiritual self-incrimination.

The late Karl Menninger, who was in many ways the most formidable name in twentieth-century psychiatry, observed what was happening in our modern scene and finally wrote a book that he aptly titled *Whatever Became of Sin?* He insisted that we needed to restore that ancient, direct, and quite offensive word to our vocabulary.

Words matter, because they not only convey thought; they also shape thought and give order to thinking.

Ultimately, we can’t get around the fact of our sins. We may call them by another name, but we can go only so far in fooling ourselves. David H. C. Read is right in tying together the two petitions of the Lord’s Prayer that ask for bread and for forgiveness. “Our natural life and health depend on getting our daily bread; our spiritual life and health depend on getting our sins forgiven.”¹ This language suggests that forgiveness from God is a matter of life and death, and while we may persuade ourselves that it isn’t really that big a deal, I doubt that we can convince our psyches. As Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, has said, “real forgiveness is something that changes things and so gives hope.”² Take hope from life and every day is a dead end. So Jesus teaches us to pray each day for bread, so that our bodies can survive, and to pray just as regularly for forgiveness, so that our souls can survive. And as surely as our need for bread is daily, so too our need for forgiveness is a daily matter. The sin that lies unforgiven becomes in time a malignancy of the soul and spirit, drawing all the spiritual nutrients to itself while the soul slowly dies.

The Word *Sin*

Let me say something about the word for sin that this prayer employs. It is a word of special importance to the common run of us humans, especially the kind of people who go to church and who try to live basically moral lives. Many of us might easily think that confession of sin is not that big a matter for us, since we don't murder or rape or steal. But this prayer asks that God should forgive our *debts*. The Bible uses a Greek word that means "a failure to pay that which is due," and thus a failure in duty.³ We are asking forgiveness not simply for what we have done but also for that which we ought to have done and have failed to do. And we are called to seek forgiveness not only for heinous sins that make headlines but just as surely for the pettiness, the neglect of goodness, the inconspicuous sins, and the sins about which our culture shrugs its shoulders and excuses with the line that is a kind of *carte blanche* absolution, "Everybody does it."

I sense that this phrase is a personally tailored prayer. When we speak these words, each of us needs to find the size that fits his or her unique condition of soul. When I say, "Forgive my debts," the prayer has a different content than when spoken by a ten-year-old. What is my debt to God, and how is the quality of that debt shaped by the opportunities of faith and growth that have been given me? For one thing, if I ask forgiveness for words hastily and unkindly spoken, the quality of my sin—and thus the size of my debt—depends in some measure on my personality. Some of us seem wired up to respond more quickly and thus with less thought than others whose nature is naturally more tentative and cautious. Are the two persons to be judged differently, even though they spoke with rather similar acerbity and unkindness? And another thing: is more expected of a mature Christian than of someone just beginning the faith journey? I think so. Thus, when you and I pray, "Forgive us our debts," the prayer has quite different content from one person to another.

There is beauty in this prayer—and wonder, too. Human wickedness and failure seem often to be so much beyond our coping. In the story I quoted earlier, Jesus used strong figures as illustration. The servant owed his king ten million dollars (translated into our currency), Jesus said. What servant can hope to pay such a monstrous debt? Even by the sale of all his resources and by placing



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himself, his wife, and his children into slavery, the servant couldn't clear himself. Jesus is telling us that each of us has a debt to the King of the universe that is altogether beyond our capacity to pay. So what can we do in this quite hopeless situation? Jesus tells us that God has a disposition to forgive. Jesus wouldn't have urged us to ask forgiveness of God if God were not inclined to mercy. The gospel doesn't leave us wallowing in interminable and hopeless guilt; it offers instead the mercy of glad deliverance.

God Is Not Casual about Forgiveness

Now we return to the conditional nature of this prayer. God doesn't forgive us willy-nilly. Generous as God is, God is not casual about the business of forgiveness. Forgiveness is far too great a matter, far too crucial to the very structure of the universe, to be treated casually. Even so, the prayer asks, literally, that God shall forgive our sins in proportion to the forgiveness we extend to others. Which is to say, we can determine the measure of the forgiveness that we receive. One day General Oglethorpe, founder of the Georgia colony, told his Anglican priest, John Wesley, "I never forgive." Wesley promptly answered, "Then I hope, sir, you never sin."

This brings us back to Jesus' story. We recalled a few moments ago that the first debtor in the story owed ten million dollars—a hopeless debt and properly symbolic of our human debt to God. The man's fellow servant owed him just twenty dollars—and of course that figure, too, is symbolic and in most instances pretty descriptive of the debts we owe one another. Jesus was making his point by way of humor. If you don't have a sense of humor, this is a patently ridiculous story; how could a person be forgiven a debt of ten million dollars and then be outraged that a colleague can't pay back a mere twenty dollars? Jesus wants us to laugh when we hear the story; he wants us to say, "How utterly absurd that

I should hold anything against another human being when God is willing to forgive me! Because no matter how much anyone owes me, it is in no way to be compared to what I owe God.”

Jesus is telling us that in some strange way, forgiveness is all of one piece. As we forgive, we are forgiven. Mind you, the process of forgiveness begins with God, who has extended mercy to us. But this divine majesty is meant to be passed along, and if it is not passed on, it ceases to work in our own lives. So many legends have grown around Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of the Last Supper, and of course by this time it is impossible to separate legend from fact. But the best of the stories convey truth, whether history or legend. It is said that da Vinci expressed his hatred for an enemy by painting the face of that enemy on the shoulders of Judas Iscariot. When the artist tried, however, to paint the face of Christ, he found that he could not bring up an image for his Lord. Then he forgave his enemy and painted out the disgracing picture. That night, da Vinci had a dream in which he saw the face of Christ and was able again to paint him.⁴

History or legend, the lesson is true. When we hold something against another person, we begin to shut out the face of Christ, and when the image of our Lord is blurred, we no longer have the faith to accept forgiveness. When we see Jesus, our hearts can envision the forgiveness we humans need. But when we are angry with someone, that person’s face, so to speak, constantly comes before us. Try as I will to see the face of our Lord, that face is clouded by the image of the persons I resent. So it is that forgiveness for my own sins is made impossible—not because God is unmerciful, but because when I hold something against another, I shut out the vision that gives me the faith to accept forgiveness.

When Robert Louis Stevenson lived in the South Sea Islands he conducted family worship for his household regularly. Some of his prayers from these occasions are still available, and they inspire us with their integrity as well as their literary beauty. One morning, midway

through the Lord’s Prayer, Stevenson rose from his knees and left the room. Since his health was constantly in peril, Stevenson’s wife feared he was suffering some sudden illness. She followed him from the room. “Is anything wrong?” she asked. “Only this,” he answered; “I am not fit to pray the Lord’s Prayer today.”

In our best and most sensitive moments, many of us realize that we we’re not fit to pray this greatest of all prayers—not until we have cleared the rubbish from our souls. With God’s help we sweep away bitter memories, deep resentments, hatreds that we have embraced as if we feared God might take them from us. But then, if we are fortunate, we hear the Holy Spirit’s reminder that when we keep such stuff in our lives we not only build a barrier between ourselves and our fellow human beings, we rob ourselves of the priceless gift of forgiveness. Then, by God’s mercy, we are ready to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” And granting forgiveness to others, we receive forgiveness for our own souls.

It’s a very simple formula, this prayer for forgiveness, a formula so simple that only the profoundly wise are willing to receive it.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. David H. C. Read, *Holy Common Ground* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 63.
2. Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), 50.
3. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 222.
4. *The Interpreters Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1951), 314.