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Series: The Sermon on The Mount
Message: Forgiveness Guaranteed

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Matthew 6:12

When someone tells us to do something, when somebody gives us a directive that we think of as an order and we're supposed to do something or there's an obligation has been placed on us, I think it's very much a part of the human nature to oftentimes have two very immediate questions arise up within our hearts and minds. The first one might be who said so? And the second one might be why should I? When we come to the Lord's prayer and we see these directives given to us like we do this morning, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, there is a very clear directive. There's a very clear statement from our Lord that He places upon us. When we ask those two questions and we say who said so, we know in this case it's the Lord Jesus Himself. This is red letter stuff. Remember back in the day, I think you can still get them but a lot of Bibles have red letter sections in the Gospels, the very words of Jesus. These statements clearly are from our Lords Himself. When we ask why? Why should we do it? Jesus is going to answer that question in a very direct way as well and He is going to do so in verses 14 and 15. and as we get into that we're going to see that this is a very challenging couple of verses. It's kind of puzzling at first. Augustine called those verses in verses 14 and 15 a terrible petition. We're going to see why in a little bit. So we look this morning at the fifth statement in the prayer of our Lord. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. We want to see this morning that the forgiveness that we so desperately need and so graciously receive from God, we are to graciously and freely extend to each other.

Let's catch up. If you haven't been here with us, we've been working our way through the Sermon on the Mount. We're in the section called the Lord's prayer. As we've gone through the Lord's prayer, we've noted a couple of things. The first thing we noted is we're really dealing with eternal matters, eternal things especially in the first half of the Lord's prayer. It takes our focus and is putting it directly on God Himself. It's

really eternity that is in view. It's God's glory that's in view. The whole first half of the Lord's prayer focuses on God. It focuses on His name. It focuses on His program. It focuses on His will. It focuses on His purposes. We're really in a sense transported in the first part of the Lord's prayer into our heavenly citizenship and we're reminded that it is our heavenly Father that we have this opportunity to be in conversation with.

We also noticed secondly that while we're to have this expanded perspective because it's really eternity that is in view in the whole first part, we don't leave out the day-to-day stuff. You move quickly into the second part of the prayer and we focus on today. We focus on the needs of today. We focus on the fact that we call out to God to meet us with regard to the details of life. All the nitty-gritty stuff gets dealt with in the second part of the prayer and the struggles that we bring.

What is the very first word of verse 12? The very first word of verse 12 is the word "and". There's a reason for that. There's a connection there. We've just asked God in that previous petition for our daily needs. Give us today our daily bread, which is as we talked about an expanded way of saying all the things that I need, all the necessities of life. God, the things that I depend on day-to-day I'm calling out to You to meet those needs in my life. Guess what? Verse 12 begins with the word "and". He's just linking that together and saying you know what? That second request is also a daily need. We need to recognize the daily need for forgiveness.

So let's look at that. The need that we have is for God's pardon. We need God's pardon. I think it would be accurate to say we need God's daily pardon. Let's think about it in that way. Forgive us our debts. I want to have us begin by thinking about the problem that is in view in that statement. The problem that is in view and the problem it seems to me is answered in the question what is it with the word "debt"? In verse 12 when we read forgive us our debts, that really zeros us in on the problem that we all have. We need forgiveness daily because we have a debt. Here's the interesting thing. The Bible uses more than 30 different words to define and to describe sin. It is a rather fascinating thing. When you think about the words that God uses for grace and mercy, there is really just a handful of words that take us into that realm. But as you read through the Old and the New Testament it's amazing how many different words in the Hebrew and Greek are used to describe our problem. Our biggest problem is sin. It's

almost as if God goes out of His way to clarify, to describe and to define it, to make it obvious to us what our greatest problem is. It says that we transgress and that we trespass, that we fall short and we miss the mark, we go astray and we do lawless things, that we do bad and evil things. Just go through the list. It's very descriptive. Things that we do. Things that we say. Things that we think. Things that we didn't do that we should have done. Things that we did that we shouldn't have done – all of those are really constituting the problem that we have.

Here's what I want you to see by way of our need for daily forgiveness. Why is that? We need daily forgiveness because we're sinners by nature and we're sinners by choice. We're sinners by nature and we're sinners by choice. When Jesus says you need to ask God every day for the daily needs of life, for the very food that you eat, for the shelter over your head, the things that sustain your very physical life, the very next thing He takes us to is the matter of forgiveness. He said you need this every day as well. You need it every day because you're a sinner by nature and you're a sinner by choice. What is it that sin does?

Let's just look again at the word "debt". We have this very vivid picture. I think all of us can understand that pretty clearly. We live in a nation of debtors. We're a nation of debtors. This is a word that should really hit home to us because our national debt is north of 21 trillion now. These numbers – we don't even know what to do with do with them. Consumer debt is very close to 4 trillion. Student debt is 1.5 trillion. These are things that we can't even hardly process in terms of what kind of numbers we're talking about. Debt is a part and parcel of most of our lives. It puts us under obligation. It becomes a burden to us. It's like a weight, a backpack on us filled with rocks. That is what debt does. We probably all have experienced that at differing levels.

I listen to sports radio when I drive home for lunch or drive home after work and there's a commercial that they play all the time having to do with being in debt to the IRS. It talks about people who are in debt to the IRS to the tune of 20, 30, 40, 50, \$100,000. This huge number and then the guy is talking about what it does to you and all the bad things that the IRS could do to you. He talks about how miserable life is when you're in that place and how this company and this business and this attorney can solve your problem. You can get your debt reduced and live happily ever after. Well,

that is really the picture that Jesus gives to us here. We have this debt, this burden, this obligation. Sin puts us in a terrible place in our relationship with God. The word specifically that Jesus uses here for debt is the idea of something that is not being paid down. Somebody doesn't have the capacity the ability to take on. It's one thing to have a debt and be servicing the debt. But the word Jesus uses here is a word that speaks of somebody who is in debt and they've got no capacity to service the debt. They are not paying anything with regard to the obligation of that debt.

That brings us to the provision. The problem is we're sinners by nature and by choice. The provision that comes before us, and we ask again the question, what is the provision that God has made? What's the provision that Jesus talks about in this statement in the Lord's prayer? How do we get from out from underneath this debt? How do we get this obligation taken care of? How is it going to be paid? The word that Jesus uses is the word "forgiveness". Forgiveness. Forgive us our debts. When you have a debt, there is no greater day than when you get out of debt. You get to take that mortgage statement, that car loan statement or the student loan papers and you get to burn it. It's gone. It's over. It's been paid. That's the freedom of being out of debt. The burden gets lifted.

The word "forgiveness" here is a compound word. We have two words that are brought together to make this word for forgiveness. *Aphiēmi*. *Apo* is just the preposition "from". *Heimi* is to send away. So we have a compound word. to send away from. That is the picture that Jesus gives us here. It is a picture that if you know the Old Testament, and again this is the value of reading your Bible and not neglecting the Old Testament because the Old Testament informs so much of the New Testament in terms of the pictures that God wants us to see. Remember in Leviticus 16, God told Aaron to take two goats on the Day of Atonement. He was to bring those goats before God and there was the casting of lots. One goat was going to be offered as a sacrifice for sin and the other goat was going to symbolically have the sins of the people put upon it. Then that goat was going to be taken outside the camp and was going to be sent away from them. It was going to symbolically, visually show the children of Israel this goat has been sacrificed for sins. Its blood has been shed. This goat with your sins is literally being

sent away out of the camp. That was the picture that was in the minds of these people when Jesus said forgive us our debts. It was this picture of this goat being sent away.


Remember in John 1. John the Baptist sees Jesus coming and he says behold, the Lamb of God who takes away from us, who takes away the sin of the world. John is looking ahead to the cross and he is visualizing Jesus as the lamb upon whom the sin of the world is going to be placed and He is going to take away from us. He is going to take away the sin of the world. Now here's the important thing to understand in a very practical way, what Jesus is telling us to do in this fifth statement. How this word is used is critical to understanding what it is that Jesus is directing us to do every day. Every day, we are to forgive the debts of others, as those debts have been forgiven by God for us. We're to understand this spiritual truth of forgiveness. The Bible uses this in two different ways.

The first way I want you to see is it talks about forgiveness and salvation. Forgiveness and salvation. At some point in your spiritual journey, when you understood who Jesus Christ is, that He is the Son of God, that you understood why He came, that He came to die on the cross and He did that for you. You understood that God is not wanting you to earn anything by way of salvation. He is making it available to you on the basis of grace. If you will in fact put your faith in what God says about His Son and what He did, that's what we call salvation. That's what we call being born again. That's what we call putting your faith and trust in Christ. That's what brings you into this prayer.

Remember this prayer starts off our Father who is in heaven. How do you get God as your Father? You get God as your Father by putting your faith and trust in His Son. Here is the amazing thing. When that happens, and that happens at some point in time. We may hear the gospel many times before it finally is impressed upon us what that really means. But at some point, when you put your faith and trust in Christ alone, at that moment do you know what the Bible says? The Bible says that your sins are forgiven. Your sins of the past are forgiven. Your sins in the present are forgiven. Your sins even that you have not yet committed that are yet in the future have been forgiven. How the world can be? Because when Jesus died on the cross, where were all of your sins? They were all future. It's not a hard concept when we understand it in that way. But the writers of Scripture tell us when you put your trust in Christ, past, present and

future, they are sent away. They're forgiven. They're removed. They're covered. Ephesians 1:7 Paul says "In Him we have redemption, even the forgiveness of sins because of His blood that was shed. Listen to what Paul says in Colossians. There is a whole series of statements that he makes. Colossians chapter 1:13 "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Listen to what he says over in chapter 2 and verse 13: "And you who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive with Him, having forgiven us..." A lot of our trespasses? Having forgiven us most all of our sins? No, He says having forgiven us all our trespasses. He tells us that they're all taken care of. Look at verse 14: "By canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands, this He set aside and nailed to the cross."


When the Bible talks about forgiveness, one aspect of God's forgiveness has to do with the area of salvation. When we first put our faith and trust in Christ. we have a big word for this theology. It is called justification. We're declared righteous by God. picture yourself standing in a courtroom before a judge and you're guilty. Yet he brings down the gavel and he declares you to be innocent. You have been declared righteous. You have been set free.

This can best be pictured in a circle.  Our forgiveness in this circle is something that that X represents as a point of time and salvation. We enter into that circle of faith and our relationship with God. We are within that circle forever. It is perfect forgiveness. It is permanent forgiveness. It is unchanging forgiveness. We call this our position in Christ. When God looks to you as a child of God, He no longer sees you, but He sees the righteousness of Jesus Christ. It's an amazing, amazing truth. It's a part of the story of adoption into the family of God. It is how God sees us as His children. It's all of His grace.

Now here is my question to you. If all of this is true, if this is what the Bible teaches as these verses have stated to us, that all of our sins are forgiven, past, present and future, it is perfect, it is permanent, it is unchanging. You never get out of that circle. Then how do you explain verse 12? How do you explain verse 12 when Jesus says: and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. My question to you is

why in the world are we asking for forgiveness every day if what I just said is true? I'm glad you asked because here's the answer. Because I still sin. I still sin. My position in Christ, God sees me as being perfect. That is my position. But in my daily walk, in my daily life, the imperfections, the failings of my walks are evident every day as I fall short, as I miss the mark, as I trespass against the holiness of God and of other people. So we're saved and we're forgiven, but we're not perfect.

That brings us to the second aspect of what the Bible teaches about forgiveness and that second aspect has to do with forgiveness and fellowship. We have forgiveness and salvation. We have forgiveness and fellowship. Guess which one is in view in the Lord's prayer? It is this one. Forgiveness and fellowship is in view. This again comes to us in two different areas. First, in my fellowship with God. First, in my fellowship with God. I'm praying here not to become a Christian. I'm praying as a Christian. I'm praying as a child of God, not to become a child of God. Jesus is instructing those whom He refers to as children of God. They have God as their Abba Father. Not by birth physically, but by supernatural birth spiritually. This is the realm of communion. This is the realm of fellowship. This is life in the family of God.

Here's the reality. We all know it. We know it well. Sin is a disruptor. Sin puts up walls. Sin puts up barriers. Sin brings the division and strife. It brings hurt. So what do I need to do when I sin? Well of course, I need to go get saved again, don't I? No. That's not our theology. That's not the theology of the New Testament. The theology of the New Testament is you get in the circle in your relationship to God and that is permanent. It is unchanging. It is forever. But look at the second circle.  X The second circle speaks of the matter of fellowship. and in this case we illustrated it with an X outside the circle and an X in the circle. The X in the circle would speak of when I'm walking in fellowship and communion with God. When I'm outside of that circle of fellowship, it is the result of sin. 1John 1:9 says if we confess our sin. You're not pleading with God to forgive you. If we confess, he said. He didn't say plead with God to forgive you because you have been forgiven as a child of God. So what are you doing now? You're agreeing with God. Confess. You agree with God that what you did was wrong. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Here's life within this circle.

It is easily illustrated with marriage. In marriage, every marriage from the point that they are joined as one here in the church and they walk out that door, marriage is just perfect and happy and it couldn't be any better. It is just happily ever after for all of us. The reality is that we struggle. We struggle every day. We're in the most intimate human relationship that you can be in. you're in a relationship in which God tells you from the outset you're going to be sandpaper in each other's lives. You're going to be sanding on each other for all of your time together. In the midst of that, you're going to fail each other. You're going to hurt each other. You're going to do things to each other that are harmful and hurtful. So what do you need to do? You surely don't need to run to a pastor or a justice of the peace and get remarried every time that happens. You see, that is the theology of some people. They think you move in and out of the first circle like you move in and out of the second. The Bible says once you're in the first circle, you're there. But in the second, you have to be mindful of your daily walk with God. All that requires of course is restoring the fellowship. You go to your husband or your wife and you apologize. You tell them you're sorry. You ask them for forgiveness and that restoration takes place.

A beautiful picture to us of this is in John 13. Remember in John 13 Jesus takes the towel and the basin. He goes around the room and He is washing the feet of the disciples. This is the most unbelievable picture of the servanthood of Christ in all of the Bible. Peter is watching this happen and he is thinking He is coming to me. Then he gets to Peter and what does Peter do? Peter says Lord, there is no way in the world You are washing my feet. And Jesus says okay, I'll just skip you and go to the next guy. No, He doesn't. he says Peter, if I don't wash your feet you have no part of Me. You and I are not connected in the way that we should be. Peter says Lord, if that's the case, don't just wash my feet, wash all of me! I want it all. Jesus says back Peter, you don't need a bath. You've already been washed. That happened at the point of faith and trust in Christ. That's how you got in that first circle. What you need is the restoration of fellowship and how more pointed could it have been in the life of Peter than to know that that very night he would betray the Lord three times. That is the picture that we have here. Our fellowship with God is what is in view in verse 12. We are to acknowledge failure when the Holy Spirit brings it to mind.

The other area is fellowship with each other, as we been talking about within the context of marriage and in all relationships. We forgive our debts as we have forgiven other people their debts. I want you to see something in Ephesians. In Ephesians chapter 4 we have this amazing picture. Verse 1 of chapter 4 starts off by talking about unity in the body. Paul is a prisoner. He urges you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you been called, of all humility and gentleness and patience. He's talking about maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Look at the last verse of chapter 5. What is the last verse of chapter 4? Our scripture memory verse for today. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:1,2,3 is all about unity in the body. The end of the chapter is all about forgiveness. Look at verse 31 of Ephesians 4: "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice." He's just given us a description in verse 31 of what an unforgiving spirit looks like. An unforgiving spirit as described in verse 31 is one of bitterness and anger and clamor and slander. When you choose to not forgive, you choose to live in spiritual defeat. When you choose unforgiveness as the path that you are going to stay on, because it is your right, then you choose spiritual defeat. You can't walk in fellowship with God and be out of fellowship with your brothers and sisters in Christ. You can't walk in fellowship with God and be out of fellowship with your husband or your wife, your children, your mom, your dad, your uncle, your, aunt, your neighbor, your friend who's a believer. Forgiving one another is absolutely essential to spiritual health.

Listen. In a room with this many people, I'm pretty sure there are people in this room who are living in spiritual defeat because they are unwilling to forgive a brother or sister in Christ, maybe even somebody sitting right next to them. Maybe somebody sitting in Covenant North. Maybe somebody sitting in Covenant south or Covenant central. They've done something that has offended you and hurt you. It may be very legitimate. You are choosing to not forgive them and you can't figure out why it is you don't have the joy of the Lord in your life. You can't figure out why it is that it just feels like you're living in spiritual apathy and defeat. Jesus doesn't tell us in Matthew 6:12 to engage in this daily exercise because it's something that is insignificant and minor. It's a big deal in our life. It's a big deal in our spiritual life.

Now when you go to verses 14 and 15 we get to the commentary that Jesus gives to us about verse 12. Again here's the interesting thing. Out of all the Sermon on the Mount, the only verse that Jesus comments on is this verse about forgiveness. He doesn't make any other additional comments about any other parts of the Lord's prayer. Look at verses 14 and 15: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." I want you to see the reason that Jesus elevates this matter of forgiveness and the importance that He places on it because I just read it in verses 14 and 15. This is a big deal. It is also very puzzling for people at times. It's very challenging. Pull some commentaries off of the shelf about verses 14 and 15 and the explanations are all over the place, most of them to my way of thinking not very helpful. I'm just going to share one small statement from someone that if I said their name many of you, most of you would recognize. This is what he said as he taught on this passage to his church family. He said: "The greatest risk we face as a church in these days is that we may lose heaven because one way to lose heaven is to hold fast to an unforgiving spirit and so prove that we have never been indwelt by the Spirit of Christ." I want you to understand why Augustine when he came to verses 14 and 15 and even to Matthew 6:12 referred to this as the terrible petition. The weightiness of what Jesus says should not be lost on us, but hopefully we will understand what He meant and what He intended.

I want to start off by saying what I think He did not mean. When Jesus said what He did in verses 14 and 15, I do not think He means that our forgiveness is in any way earned, that we somehow have to do something to earn God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness comes to us on the basis of grace. It is poured out on us by the mercy of God. It is not conditioned on works. It's not conditioned on our efforts. It's not something that is earned. He certainly is not saying there is any one-to-one equivalency between God's forgiveness and ours, even though as you read that, perhaps that could be pulled out of that. I don't think He necessarily intends for us to read this verse and to begin to wonder if we're really a Christian at all. That's the most common understanding of verses 14 and 15. Most of the commentators say what you need to do in light of verses 14 and 15 if you have an unforgiving spirit is you need to figure out if you've ever even

been a believer. Best I can tell, I've been a believer for about 55 years. I have had countless periods in my life where I've struggled to forgive someone. I don't think because you struggle to forgive somebody it's the number one indicator that you aren't a child of God. I think it's the number one indicator of what sin does in our life and the effects of sin and the battle with sin and the division of my heart when I grapple with these things.

So here's what I think this means. Remember what's in view here? What circle are we in? we're talking about the circle of fellowship. We're talking about being in the circle of God's family. We're not talking about the need to go back and get saved again. He's talking to us as His children. In effect, I think this is what Jesus is saying. Lord, deal with me as I have dealt with others. Deal with me as I have dealt with others. That's why Augustine called this a terrible petition. If you're praying that and you have an unforgiving and bitter heart, if you have a heart that is bent on malice and clamoring all of those things that Paul describes in Ephesians 4:31, then we pray Father, forgive us our debts. Then that little word... "as". That's the key to understanding the whole thing. That little word "as". As we forgive our debtors. All the while we harbor resentment and an unforgiving spirit, we're actually asking God to not forgive us. God, you treat me the way I'm treating others. You treat me the way I'm treating that person, which is to say God, don't forgive me because I'm sure not going to forgive them. If I see myself truly as I should through the eyes of Scripture and I have a humble heart and a humble spirit, I see my brokenness before God. I see my need before God. I see that beam in my eye rather than the sliver in my brother's eye. If my attitude is one of self-righteousness and pride, if I will not be treated that way, I will not be spoken to that way, I will not forgive, then we've taken a stance in our own relationship with God. We're saying God, I want You to treat me as I'm treating other people. It's a terrible petition.

In fact, let me just put it practically. We're praying something like this: Lord, You know so-and-so. You know how they wronged me. Of course, they didn't wrong me even close to how I've wronged You, but I can't forgive him. I can't forgive her. I want You to deal with me in the exact same way that I'm dealing with them. Lord, You know I'm nursing a grudge because so-and-so didn't talk to me this morning. I'm pretty sure they saw me. I don't even think they smiled at me, God, and that's wrong. I am hurt by

that. I want You to deal with me in the same way I'm dealing with them. Lord, I can't wait to pay back that guy for the way he hurt me. And, oh by the way, would You deal with me in that same way? That's what Jesus is saying in verses 14 and 15. That is what Jesus says in verse 12. Forgive as we forgive. How can we, as a part of a forgiven community, not be the first to come to a holy, righteous, just God and seek His forgiveness, which He graciously and freely gives just as we graciously and freely extend to each other.

Our forgiveness secondly does not cause God to forgive us. It is evidence that we have entered into God's forgiveness. Those who have been forgiven much should be willing to forgive much. Jesus taught a parable in Matthew 18 of the man who owned in today's terminology \$100 million. He worked at McDonald's on an hourly minimum wage. He could never pay it back. And yet, his debtor forgave him all of his hundred million. Then he went on into his life and a friend owed him 10 bucks and he couldn't pay it back and he had him thrown into jail. That's the point that Jesus is pressing on us here. To one who graciously has received and has stood in great need of forgiveness, we are compelled by the very nature of the mercy and grace of God in our lives to do the same to others. The forgiveness we so desperately need and so graciously receive from God, we graciously and freely extend to another.

Here's my take away. Very practical. Very simple. You and I commit daily to make every effort to simply keep short accounts with God and with each other. That's what Jesus is calling for us to do. Daily make the commitment this morning. Daily determine before God because your spiritual health depends on it. Your very spiritual vitality depends on you having a spirit of forgiveness to others within the family of God. So we commit to make every effort, to keep short accounts with God. That's simple. we do something wrong, we say something wrong, and instead of waiting hours or days or whatever, we just immediately pick up the phone, we immediately go in the other room, we immediately say a word of acknowledgment to the person we have hurt or wronged. God will honor that. That should be the the habit of our life. Jesus says every day just as you ask for daily provision, ask that God would so work in your heart and mine that we would have that same heart to forgive others.

Forgiveness begins at the cross, doesn't it? It begins at the cross. That's how we get into the family of God. We don't earn it. We don't deserve it. It comes to us by God's grace. We would want for everybody here this morning to be in that first circle, to be in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and to realize that it is not something that we earn, not something that we deserve. It's all of God's grace.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, we are eternally thankful to You for Your amazing forgiveness of us as Your children. We thank You again and again, Father, for this great grace that has found us. We pray for healing within the body of Christ. Father, I pray for healing within the families, within marriages, within relationships, within covenant community church and beyond, Father, that we as the forgiven people will be the first to forgive. To You be glory and praise. In Jesus's name, amen.