

Living from the Lord's Prayer, Pt. 5
Forgive Us Our Debts
Matthew 18: 21-35

First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

April 2, AD 2017
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Jesus never asked us to pray anything he did not pray. He gave us words to say after him. But these phrases weren't platitudes. They were living, breathing prayers, rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and flowing from the depths of his soul.

Today we take up the request, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." That's the Presbyterian version anyway. Other traditions pray the one with all the "s's". Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. When I'm doing a wedding rehearsal, I know there are usually people in the wedding party from lots of backgrounds. So I give them fair warning. I say, "We're going to say the Lord's Prayer. Now I say 'debts' and 'debtors.' If you say 'trespasses,' I don't think you're a heathen! In fact, I'll even wait for you to get it all out!" Why is there a difference? It just depends whether you base your version of the prayer on Matthew's gospel or Luke's gospel. You could even get rid of debts and trespasses altogether and say "sins," and you'd be right. It doesn't matter which word you use for they all point to the same reality: *I need to receive forgiveness from God and I need to offer forgiveness to others.*

But now, you might be wondering, "Wait. You said Jesus never taught us to pray anything he didn't pray himself. But Jesus had no sin. He lived a perfectly faithful and loving life. Why would he pray 'Forgive us our sins'?" OK, you got me on a technicality. Jesus did not have sins to confess. He also didn't need to get baptized. Because John baptized people as a sign of their repentance from sin. Jesus had no sin. So why did he go under the waters like any other sinner? Because he stood in for us. He took our side. He identified with the people he came to save. He went to the cross condemned as a criminal. But he wasn't a criminal. His sentence was unjust. But he took the place of a condemned sinner because he stood in for us. So he would pray the psalms in the synagogue with everyone else. When Psalm 32 and 51 confess sin and ask forgiveness, Jesus would pray them too: because he prayed them for us, as one of us, on our side. From Jesus' lips, "Forgive us our debts" is a prayer on behalf of those he came to save.

What really pierces me, though, is that Jesus prayed for forgiveness of those who wronged him. The deep, true heart of Jesus is revealed on the cross. Most of

us can fake it when we're in control, when we feel strong and we can work the room. But put someone under extreme stress, and they're not faking it anymore. What's inside comes out. A person in acute pain can't pretend to be nice. Pain is the great truth revealer. So think of Jesus. They flayed open his back with whips. They drove spikes into his hands and feet to pin him to the rough wood of the cross. They jammed a crown of thorns over his head. From that position, he looked out on his persecutors and prayed, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do." That's a heart truly full of love. We now see what today's Call to Worship from Psalm 130 meant, "With the LORD there is steadfast love. And with him there is plenteous redemption." This is what overflowing love looks like. When we do our very worst to him, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them."

That part of the prayer I like. I pray "Forgive us our sins," and look to the merciful God that showed himself in Jesus. But that's not the whole line, is it? Forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors. God's forgiveness of me seems to be linked to my forgiveness of others. Yikes! Just in case we think Jesus didn't mean this, right after he gave them the Lord's Prayer, Jesus clarified, "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" (Mt. 6: 14-15). If you forgive, God will forgive you. If you don't forgive others, God will not forgive you.

At this point, we start to get a bit desperate. We start dancing. He can't be serious, can he? How can God's forgiveness be linked to *my* forgiveness? Can someone get me a theologian? When I get a big ticket, I need a good lawyer to make it go away. When Jesus gets this convicting, I need a theologian to make it all go away. Come on, Jesus, I'm a Presbyterian. What about justification by faith alone through grace alone? Can't someone get me some better verses here?

A few chapters later in Matthew, Jesus told a parable that tightens, not loosens, the screws on us. Peter had a reasonable question. "How many times should I forgive my brother if he sins against me? Seven times?" That's really pretty good. Who actually keeps forgiving someone six, seven times for things they do against us? Jesus, of course, replies, "More like seven times seventy!" In other words, more times than you count. All the time, every time. But Jesus! Do you want me to be a doormat? Do you know what's been done to me? How can I understand this?

Jesus told the parable that we read earlier. About a man who owed a king a great debt. How much did he owe? One commentary said that in today's dollars,

the servant owed the king roughly \$6 billion dollars! We're meant to hear the impossibility of ever repaying such a staggering amount. Only a king with inexhaustible resources could forgive that kind of money. But in Jesus' story, the servant pleads with the king, and the king remarkably takes pity on him. He cancels the whole \$6 billion. On the way out of the court, this servant notices a fellow servant who owes him some money. He asks him to pay up. The amount of the debt was, in today's dollars, about 30,000. This servant also asked for mercy. But the guy refused. The guy who had a \$6 billion debt forgiven had the man who owed him 30k jailed for bad debt. Play with the math a moment. The first servant had owed the king 200 thousand times what his fellow servant owed him. 200 thousand times! The king, you might imagine, was furious. "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?" The king sent the man to prison until the last penny should be paid, which would be more years than we can count. Everyone hearing this story would have agreed with the king. What kind of ungrateful fool would act that way? Then Jesus zings them. "So also will my heavenly Father do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Mt. 18: 35).

This parable gives me the absolute willies. If it doesn't scare you, you haven't heard it. If we think we can theologize our way out of this bracingly clear point, we're no better than sophists and Pharisees. Jesus links our Father's forgiveness of my sins with my forgiveness of those who sin against me. He's deadly serious about this. And I'm knocked on my tail by his words. How in the world can I possibly do this? Let's consider some aspects of forgiveness.

First, forgiveness requires vast reserves of love and mercy. Now I don't have such power in myself. I have to draw from the one who already paid the full price for the world's sin. The truth is, I don't have the ability in myself to forgive some of the things done to me. Forgiveness always exacts a price from us. It's one thing to forgive you for spilling coffee on my couch. I can absorb the cost of having it cleaned, or even the cost of a new couch so that you can go free of guilt. But there are deeper cuts, stronger blows, than I know how to pay for on your behalf. I don't have enough spiritual cash to cover some debts others rack up against me. I must forgive, but I literally can't. I need someone with greater resources.

That person, of course, is Jesus Christ. He is the one who could pray from the cross, and mean it, "Father, forgive them." He shared his Father's heart. Only God has the resources to pay for the debts of wrong in this world. He came as Jesus Christ to take our sins upon himself. In Colossians 2, Paul writes that "God

cancelled the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” That financial metaphor clarifies how God forgives us. Suppose all our sin, both what we did and what we didn’t do, were written as a record of financial debt. It would be a bill approaching the \$6 billion of the servant in the parable. And suppose the king declared payment on demand. He called the loan. We are in an impossible situation. But then suppose there was someone who said, “I’ll assume your debt. Give me the document. Your debt becomes mine.” That’s Jesus taking our sins upon the cross. When he died, he cried out, “It is finished!” Some have said those are the very words that would have been used across a certificate of debt fully satisfied. It’s as if Jesus said, “Paid in full” as he gave up his life. Of course there’s way more going on at the cross than a financial transaction. But it’s an image we can get. I got debts I can’t pay. The document of that debt got nailed to the cross. Jesus made payment and my document got cancelled.

Now the news is that Jesus did not only pay my debt. He paid all debts. Our confession of faith says that Jesus made an atonement sufficient for and adapted to the whole lost race of man. That’s the basis for my forgiving someone else. I can’t do it, but Jesus already has. He already paid. And I am in Christ. I locate my life in him. I don’t try to forgive on my own. I go to Jesus to draw from his resources. I claim my access to his love. Jesus you paid the debt of this person who hurt me. I count on your forgiveness for my own.

Now, if we don’t do this, we stay stuck in unforgiveness. And we become blasphemers. Let me explain. Refusing to forgive someone is to say that Christ did *not* die for that sin committed against me. He did *not* purchase with his blood the wrong someone else did to me. That person sinned greater than Christ’s cross. Unique in all the world, that person foiled Christ’s reconciling life, death and resurrection. When you say such words out loud, you see how refusing to forgive others is in essence denying the power of Christ’s cross and insulting the price he paid for our atonement. Ultimately, not forgiving someone declines Christ’s forgiveness of myself—because if his atonement does not work for them, why should it work for me in the darkness of what I have thought and done? When I decline to forgive someone, in essence I deny Christ’s atonement both for that person and myself. That way lies destruction. That way lies endless bitterness and loneliness, the very definition of hell.

Rather, beloved, consider wrongs against you this way, “If Christ can forgive the deceit in my heart, what blood is on my hands, what evil lurks in my

soul, what poison comes from my tongue, then surely I can forgive another, for he has paid for us each and all.”

Here’s one more way to turn this. We have noted that Jesus never asked his disciples to pray anything he would not pray. Unjustly condemned, sentenced, and tortured, Jesus prayed forgiveness for his enemies. When we are pierced and bruised by others, we can know that Jesus has been unjustly wronged, cursed and condemned, more than we can ever be (for no one can be as innocent as he was). So we know that Jesus empathizes with us when others sin against us.

But even more important than discovering his empathy with us is discovering how our being wronged gives us empathy with Jesus’ suffering. We mustn’t miss this! Have you been wronged? Allow the shame, the bruising of that to link you to Jesus. Note how the sting of being sinned against allows you to feel something of what Jesus felt in taking our sins. Were you misunderstood by others this week? Jesus spoke the very truth of God and they scorned him. You have experienced a speck of the misunderstanding and distortion Jesus went through, but that speck can be a link to greater communion with him. Did someone slander you? Call you a demeaning name? Jesus came to love us utterly and they called him satanic. You have experienced a speck of the slander he took, but that speck can be a link to greater communion with him. Did you get ignored by someone, denied by someone, betrayed by someone? You have experienced a speck of what Jesus took in being deserted, denied and betrayed by his most intimate circle. But that speck can be a link to greater communion with him. Instead of thinking how Jesus’ pain comforts your pain, try considering how your pain enables you to feel sympathy for *him*.

Here’s the mysterious spiritual secret: Connecting to Jesus’ suffering actually heals us more than discovering his sympathy with our suffering! The path to forgiveness lies not as much in learning how Jesus sympathizes with me. It lies in letting wrongs done to me help me know Jesus in his sufferings. That communion creates a heart for forgiving, for I begin to share in Jesus’ own heart for the world as I take in and sympathize with the pain he bore due to our sins.

Forgiveness is hard work. It can seem at first to be humiliating. It seems like we are letting someone get away with wrong. It seems like we are asking to be hurt or hit or harmed again. It can seem weak. Of course the opposite is true. True forgiveness empowers us. It frees us from the harm inflicted upon us. It creates joy. It links us to Jesus and enables us to discover his plenteous mercy in every aspect of our lives.