

## **The Lord's Prayer; Forgive us our Debts**

Introduction: We turn now to our New Testament Scripture. We have been considering the topic of Prayer this season and The Lord's Prayer, in particular. This Sunday we will focus on the petition "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." I remind you that today's gospel reading is from Matthew's telling of the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus instructs his followers on all matters of faith. I just learned that this reading is smack dab in the center of the Sermon on the Mount indicating that the Lord's Prayer is central to our faith life and walk with God. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs the disciples on almsgiving, prayer and fasting. By the power of the Holy Spirit, listen now for a word from the LORD.

### **Scripture: Matthew 6:5-15 Concerning Prayer**

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'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

'Pray then in this way:  
Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
Your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And do not bring us to the time of trial,  
but rescue us from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

### **Proclamation of the Word**

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"You must pay for everything in this world one way and another. There is nothing free with the exception of God's grace." (Mattie, the narrator and heroine in *True Grit*.)

Jesus was speaking to people in language that they could understand. And just like folks in Jesus' day, we understand the concept of debt and account balances. In fact, we are facing a reality of debt and mortgage foreclosure like none we have seen in our lifetime. And Mattie is right, we must pay for everything in this world one way and another. There is nothing free with the exception of God's grace.

Forgiveness of debt, sin, wrong or trespass whatever you call it is a challenge. The Bible speaks of two kinds of forgiveness: Vertical and horizontal. First, forgiveness and grace are offered to us by God's generous nature. That's

vertical forgiveness. And in response, we are to extend grace as God's forgiven people. That's horizontal forgiveness. While it may be hard to forgive, some of us have the most trouble with accepting grace and forgiveness. Maybe we struggle to forgive ourselves.

We live in a world where nothing is free and we must pay for everything in this world one way or another like Mattie says. So God's grace is hard to wrap our heads around. Many of us struggle with accepting forgiveness and offering it.

I have had several conversations this week which reminded me of the challenge of forgiveness. In most instances forgiveness has come up in the topic of family relationships. Those closest to us, perhaps who have hurt and wounded us most may be the hardest to forgive. Interpersonal forgiveness is something all of us struggle with one time or another. Perhaps the person who has harmed or hurt you is not even living. The hope of that person taking responsibility for hurt seems impossible. Reconciliation in this life seems out of reach. But even God's love and grace reach beyond the grave.

Christians practice forgiveness because we first have been offered grace. I use the word "practice" because it is not always natural to forgive. Consider the old Hasidic tale of the rabbi and his disciples whose common purse was down to the last coin. They happen upon a beggar, not the pitiable kind, but a man of ill-repute, a scoundrel. The rabbi pulls out the last coin from the purse and gives it to the man. His disciples are incredulous. "Why would you give everything we had to an undeserving rascal like that?" they asked. The rabbi answered, "Do I dare be any choosier than was God who gave it to me?"

Forgiveness is a must not only for the healing of our personal relationships and souls, but for the healing of the nations, the world.

You may remember the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in post Apartheid South Africa when men and women publically told the truth of their oppression- family members murdered, brutally beaten or raped. And they did this in a public court facing the perpetrator. While painful for all parties, it was a testimony that forgiveness is not sweeping matters under the rug and simply moving on. Forgiveness and reconciliation requires gut-wrenching, honest truth-telling. And true reconciliation requires those who have done wrong to take responsibility for their wrongs.

We participate in the act of truth-telling each week as we confess our sins and the sins of the world. We speak the truth of the sin that exists around us and within us; we turn again to God, and ask God to create a clean heart within us. I have been asked why we pray things that may not apply to every individual in worship. That is because we are confessing the sins of the world on behalf of us all- all of us who are caught in the web of sin only able to be set free by the gracious mercy of the God who can change hearts and renew a right spirit within us. And it begins with telling the truth.

The truth may be, "I am angry God and I cannot let go of my hurt and pain, but I am placing my trust in you and asking you to help me begin to forgive him/her/them."

Or

The truth may be "God, I cannot forgive myself for what harm I have caused. I know that only you through the work of your Holy Spirit can heal and restore me to right relationship with you and others."

Or

In the case of South Africa- it is telling the truth of heinous acts of violence, not trivializing them or sweeping them under the rug. It is not dismissing injustice.

Truth-telling is essential, but so is grace. Perhaps you have seen the movie *Invictus* with Morgan Freeman playing the role of Nelson Mandela. You may know that for 26 years Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island for seeking justice on behalf of black South Africans. There is a scene when he has just taken office as President. His guards and policemen are having trouble getting along, black and white, now working together. He tells his captain Jason who is black, "Reconciliation starts here." When Jason replies, "But these men have tried to kill us."

Mandela responds, "Forgiveness starts here, too. Forgiveness liberates the soul. Forgiveness removes fear. That is why it is such a powerful weapon. Please Jason, try."

I have a bad habit of picking at a mosquito bite until it bleeds and forms a scab. Forgiveness is to choose to stop picking the scab over and over again so that the healing might begin.

Forgiveness is necessary for the healing of the nations. The only other way is continued violence and oppression. So we pray for healing and justice from Israel/Palestine to Northern Ireland, Cambodia to Egypt. The alternative is perpetual violence, and people who are unwilling to stop picking the scab. Forgiveness is the choice we make. It is a practice which gives us freedom. You and I have known people and nations so bound up in resentment and retribution that they are captive to their inability to forgive. Forgiveness is a brave and courageous act only possible through God's grace and strength. We have no future without forgiveness. Without it we are not free.

When Peter asked Jesus how many times one should forgive an offense in Matthew 18, he proceeded to answer his own question. Peter generously took the rabbinical formula of three, doubled it and added one for good measure, and suggested to Jesus that seven times would be appropriate. Expecting to be commended for his generosity, Peter must have been shocked by Jesus' answer.

"Not seven," said Jesus, "but seventy times seven." Now if you are a literalist, you will note that the total comes to 490. You can probably calculate it in your head, but this is divine arithmetic and we must do it by heart. Jesus really meant  $70 \times 7 \times 7 \times 7$ , and on to infinity. Forgiveness is not a matter of arithmetic but attitude. Once is not enough. When at last we stand before the Great God of the Universe we may expect Him to forgive us as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us. It is just as some pray together each Sunday, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Jesus said that if we do not forgive those who trespass against us, God will not forgive us. (Matthew 6:15) And like all equations, forgiveness must balance out equally on both sides.

Jesus goes onto tell Peter a parable... A master is owed a debt by his slave. The slave begs for mercy and forgiveness of the debt. He is forgiven by the grace of the master. The slave then goes out and meets a fellow slave. The slave is owed a debt by this brother. The forgiven slave is merciless. He seizes the fellow slave by the throat saying, "Pay what you owe." The fellow slave is thrown into prison even after begging for mercy. The Master hears of this and chastises the forgiven slave for refusing mercy to his fellow slave. "You refuse to forgive as you were forgiven," says the master. And the master turns the slave over to be tortured until he will pay the entire debt.

The first step of forgiveness is taking your hand off the throat of another. And in doing so one finds that you are no longer choking on your own resentment and hate.

The question we need to ask ourselves is **not**: *How can I bring myself as victim, to forgive those who have violated society and me?*

Rather: *How can I discover the mercy of God welling up in my own life and where does that lead me?*

If God forgives us for all the uncaring, unconcerned, mean things we do, can't we do this too?

Forgiveness is only possible by the grace of God. Listen to II Timothy 1:9 which celebrates the power of the God "Who hath saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began."

We start there with the grace first offered to us.

In the words of the hymn "I Come with Joy"-

***I come with joy to meet my Lord, forgiven loved, and free, in awe and wonder to recall his life laid down for me.***

It is from that place of grace that forgiveness begins...