



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"The Conditional Nature of Divine Forgiveness"

Lord, Teach Us How to Pray:

A Sermon Series on the Lord's Prayer

Matthew 18:21-35

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Introduction.

There was once a Sunday School teacher who was teaching his class about the Lord's Prayer, and they came to this phrase, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." The teacher asked the class, "What is a debtor?" There was a long silence, but then one boy piped up and said, "It's someone who is really, really dead. There's dead and then there's deader!"

Someone once gave me a Family Circus cartoon which had one of the boys praying with his mother before going to bed, and the caption read, "...and give us our trespasses as we give it to those who trespass against us!"

These are examples of the way in which there is some confusion about this petition of the Lord's Prayer, and it is perhaps the most misunderstood phrase of the prayer Jesus taught His disciples. Some churches use the word "debts", other churches use the word "trespasses", and still others use the word "sins." What exactly is this request all about?

I. The Debt of Our Sin.

The first words of this petition of the Lord's Prayer are, "Forgive us," and when we pray this prayer we are acknowledging we need God's forgiveness. But forgiveness for what? The request Jesus instructed His disciples to make is, "Forgive us our debts."

There are many words in the Greek language which are translated "sin." There is *hamartia*, which means "to miss the target," and it was used in the sport of archery. In this sense, sin is the failure to hit the target of the life God expects. There is also the word *parabasis*, which literally means "stepping across." Sin is stepping across the line which is drawn between right and wrong. Then there is the word *paraptoma*, which means "a slip." It is the kind of slip which a person might make on an icy road or sidewalk. Sin occurs when we are swept away by impulse or passion; when we lose our self-control and we slip. And there is the word *anomia*, which means "lawlessness." It is the sin of a person who knows what is right, and yet willfully does the wrong thing.

But the word Jesus used in the Lord's Prayer is the word *opheilema*, which is translated "debt." It means "a failure to pay what is due." Now why in the world would Jesus use this word to teach us about sin when He had so many others to choose from to teach us about sin?

Maybe the simplest way to explain this is in the area of finances. Last winter Lorie and I took the Dave Ramsey *Financial Peace* University course here at our church, and I learned a whole lot about debt! Let's say you borrowed money to buy a house and a car, and then you used a credit card to pay for gasoline, groceries and some clothes. Who is expected to pay the monthly mortgage? Who is expected to pay the credit card bill? The basic rule in society is: You owe, you pay! You are a debtor, and the bank wants their money.

If you're not sure how this rule works, feel free to test it out. Go to your bank and ask to talk to a bank officer. Tell him your feelings honestly. "This debt I'm carrying is just too great for me. It's

affecting my lifestyle, and it's hard to pay these bills every month. So I think I'll quit for a while. That's okay, isn't it?"

You are likely to discover that people who lend money are very touchy about the whole "paying it back" thing. They keep careful accounts of what you owe them, and they sometimes even have a person on their payroll who will make a personal visit to get you to pay what you owe. Oftentimes his name is Guido!

In this prayer, Jesus wasn't talking about financial debt. He addressed another kind of debt. It's the debt of sin and moral failure. The truth is, each of us has a mountain of moral debt we can't pay off which has accumulated by all the things we have done which have broken not only God's law but also His heart. It's a debt we owe to God and a debt we owe other people for how we have wronged them, too. Each of us has been a perpetrator of sin, and each of us has been the victim of sin, as well. We have debts, and we have debtors.

Jesus paid the penalty for all our sin. He paid the debt we owed to God when He laid down His life and died on the cross for us. Through His shed blood, He took the debt we owed, and He paid it in full, clearing the balance on our ledger with God. From the riches of His sinless life, He provided the payment for the debt of our sin out of His grace and mercy.

When Jesus told the parable in Matthew 18, everyone laughed. But when they got the point of the parable, they sobered up. Jesus said there was a man who owed the king 10,000 talents of silver, about \$10 million in today's money. The king called the man in to pay his debts, but the man fell on his knees and pled with the king, "I can't pay. Be merciful to me." The king was ready to throw him into prison, but then unexpectedly he said, "Oh, well. Get up. Your debt is canceled. The slate is clean, forgiven." And the man went free.

What a burden was lifted from that man; what a weight was taken from his shoulders, all because of the mercy and kindness of the king. That is what you and I have been given by God - mercy and kindness. The debt we owed God because of our sin has been canceled; it has been forgiven. The slate has been wiped clean, and we have been given a new start. Each time we pray this petition of the Lord's Prayer, we are saying that we agree with God about the debt we owe Him for our sin, and we acknowledge our need of forgiveness. There is no more precious gift the Father can give us than the forgiveness of our debt of sin.

It's not very popular to talk about sin nowadays. I came across a cartoon which reflects this attitude. A woman is at a greeting card store, and she asks the clerk, "Do you have a card that stops short of saying 'I'm sorry' yet vaguely hints at some wrongdoing?" We live in a day of tolerance and acceptance, and there is great reluctance for anyone to label anything "sin." We're afraid of appearing judgmental, so we shy away from facing the biblical facts. But before we can experience God's forgiveness, and before we can extend forgiveness to other people, we must acknowledge the sin in our lives and the moral debt we owe. In 1 John 1:8 we read, "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*"

The Lord's Prayer does not duck the fact of sin. Every person on the planet is in need of forgiveness, and we ask God to forgive every time we pray this prayer.

II. God's Call To Forgiveness.

This petition of the Lord's Prayer is, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." The basic thought of the request brings to light not only our need of forgiveness but also God's call to a life of forgiveness for those who would be Jesus' disciples. If we have experienced the forgiveness of God ourselves, then we are called to extend forgiveness to others, as well.

The word “as” in the Lord’s Prayer is a scary word. It should cause us to stop and think. “Forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors.” In other words, forgive me, Lord, only to the extent I’m willing to forgive others. If I’m not willing to forgive, then I place myself in a rather presumptuous position, just like the servant in Jesus’ parable, in that I’m expecting God to forgive me, but I’m not willing to forgive others. It is one thing to get caught up in a tit-for-tat with your spouse or a co-worker; it is quite another thing to get caught up in such a cycle with the God of the universe.

As the late John R.W. Stott once wrote, "Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offense against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear by comparison extremely trifling. If, on the other hand, we have an exaggerated view of the offenses of others, it proves that we have minimized our own."ⁱ Forgiveness received and not passed on, or forgiveness requested of God but denied to others, is faithless forgiveness.ⁱⁱ

This is what the parable Jesus told in Matthew 18 was all about. Our Lord said that as soon as the man whose debt had been forgiven left the king's palace, he ran into a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii, about \$8,000 in today's money. The man ran up to the servant, grabbed him by the collar, and demanded, "Pay me what you owe me." The servant fell on his knees and said exactly the same words the first man had said to the king, "Be patient with me; I'll pay you back."

But the man refused, and he had the servant hauled off to jail. According to the story, the king learned of what happened, and he called his debtor to come back, and he said to the man, "You evil person; I canceled all of your debt of \$10 million, and you're trying to squeeze \$8,000 out of that man!" The king turned to his guards and ordered, "Take him away and let him rot in jail until he pays me every dime he owes!"

The point of the parable is that we are hypocrites if we ask God to forgive us and then fail to forgive others. If He has canceled our great debt of sin, how can we be so reluctant to overlook the wrongs others commit against us? Martin Luther once said that when we pray this prayer, we are saying to God, "Don't forgive us unless we forgive. Hold back your pardon, [Lord,] if we're holding back our pardon. If we're carrying bitterness and resentment against other people, O God, don't forgive us."ⁱⁱⁱ

Philip Yancey has said that forgiveness is really an unnatural act, in that it requires us to go against our natural instincts of wanting justice and revenge. But forgiveness is the only way to break the cycle of blame and pain in relationships. It does not settle the questions of blame; it does not settle the questions of justice and fairness. Rather, it often evades these questions. But it does allow relationships to start over again. It loosens the stranglehold of guilt, and it puts the forgiver on the same side as the party who did the wrong.^{iv}

In the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another person, I am simply trusting that God is better at justice than I am, and I leave the issues of fairness to the Lord for Him to work out. Wrong does not disappear when I forgive, but it does lose its grip on me, and God is able to take and redeem the brokenness of life.

Last fall Gordon MacDonald spoke at our church and led our staff retreat. He is a remarkable pastor, author and Christian statesman, and recently he was appointed Chancellor of Denver Seminary. However, many years ago, after gaining notoriety as a successful pastor in Boston and becoming president of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Gordon had an extra-marital affair, and his world fell apart. He resigned his position at InterVarsity in disgrace, his book publishers canceled his contracts to write for them, and no one called him to come and speak anymore. To his credit he owned up to his sin, and he submitted himself to a group of believers for discipline. For three years he stuck to their requirements for counseling and the restrictions they placed on what he was allowed to do.

But what about his marriage. Gail had been his partner for over 20 years, and the affair devastated her. Would she ask for a divorce? Would she kick him out of the house? What would be their future?

Gail writes about those difficult days in her book *A Step Farther and Higher*, and she was candid when she wrote about how hard it is to forgive. Listen to her words:

"Forgiveness is more often a lifestyle of grace than a one-time act. We have fooled ourselves if we think that the resolve to forgive someone who has hurt us can be wrapped up in an overnight decision. That's an unreal expectation and an inhuman pressure to put on ourselves. ...I am convinced that we do not learn to forgive in the hour of crisis; we actually train for it. Is it strange to say that in our best moments we prepare for the potential worst ones? In this case, we study the meanings of forgiveness and how it is portrayed in Scripture. We watch and learn from others who are going through situations needing forgiveness. And we monitor our own spirits to observe our progress in times of small irritation or conflict. Are we instantly vindictive or easily drawn to give grace? Do we hold grudges easily? Is it difficult to let go of hard feelings toward another who has offended us? Are there those with whom it would be difficult to sit down and pray because we harbor hostilities toward them? Asking such questions is imperative if we are to guard our hearts closely. For... few things are more crippling to the person who wants to go a step farther spiritually than the inability to forgive."^v

Gail learned to forgive Gordon as he asked for her forgiveness and repented of his sin. But it wasn't easy, and it didn't happen overnight. However, God restored their love and their relationship, and He restored Gordon to ministry again. And they were such a blessing to us last year.

Isn't this the way of Jesus? What did Christ pray as He hung on the cross, as He endured the pain and disgrace of death by crucifixion? *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

Conclusion.

I don't know what each of you has brought to this service in the way of personal pain today. Perhaps you are a person who is hurting because your spouse wounded you deeply and said, "I no longer want to be married to you." Maybe you've been deceived by someone you loved and trusted. Maybe you're a parent who has poured your life into a child, and become belligerent toward you, or they're not turning out like you had hoped. Maybe you're an adult who is just beginning to understand how emotionally crippled you are because of the sins of your parents. Maybe you're a teenager, and recently someone has destroyed your reputation at school by saying things that aren't true about you. Or maybe there is someone in this congregation who has hurt you deeply, and when you see them coming down the hall you walk the other way.

Regardless of where you are this morning, this message of forgiveness is for you. There is forgiveness for everyone who acknowledges their sin before God and realizes that they are in His debt because of the way they have wandered from His law and His love. But there is also the gift of forgiveness available to each person to extend to others, if we are willing. It isn't easy, and there are no short cuts. But in the decision to forgive someone, we share with God in a divine act which has the effect of setting us free from the bondage of pain.

In 2006, a tragic school shooting left the Amish community in Nickel Pines, PA, devastated, but it didn't make them resentful. Charles Roberts wasn't Amish, but the Amish knew him as the milk truck driver. On October 2, 2006, he walked into the one-room Amish schoolhouse and shot 10 young girls. Five of them died. Then he killed himself.

Since the tragedy, people around the world have been amazed and inspired by the way the Amish expressed forgiveness toward the killer and his family. Thirty Amish people, some who had buried their own daughters just the day before, were in attendance at Roberts' funeral, and they hugged his widow and other members of the killer's family. The Amish community even donated money to the young widow for her three young children.

One member of the community said, "Tragedy changes you. You can't stay the same. Where that lands, you don't always know. But what I found out in my own experience was if you bring what little

pieces you have left to God, he somehow helps you make good out of it. And I see that happening in this school shooting as well. One thing that the whole world got to see was this simple message of forgiveness."

In this the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer Jesus gives us the way of redemption, and He also gives us the way of release from pain and resentment. Both paths are difficult ones. The path of Christ's death brought about the forgiveness of our sin, and the path of our forgiveness of others brings grace and peace to our souls. This is the way of Jesus, and we are never reflecting His love for us more than when we echo our Savior and say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Amen.

ⁱJohn R.W. Stott, *The Sermon On The Mount*, pp. 149-50.

ⁱⁱBruner, p. 253.

ⁱⁱⁱQuoted by Richard Wilke, *Our Father*, p. 79.

^{iv}Philip Yancey in "An Unnatural Act" in *Christianity Today*, April 8, 1991, p. 37

^vGail MacDonald, *A Step Farther and Higher*, p.76.