

## Forgiveness

Matthew 6:12

When you say, “I forgive you,” what do you mean? What is forgiveness anyway? What does it mean to be forgiven? And what does it mean to forgive? In my experiences, way too many Christians don’t rightly or fully understand all of what is meant by those words.

For some, it is a feeling. An emotion. And that, of course, makes it hard to accomplish. Because if forgiveness is an emotion, then you can’t forgive someone until your emotions change. For others, it is something similar to a judicial probation. You are released from jail, but under probation. There are certain conditions to be met, and if you fail to meet those conditions, back to jail you go.

For some, forgiveness is but an empty promise. It is a temporary reprieve, perhaps, from the consequences of your actions, but the record is unchanged. The offenses remain. And upon a whim, any reconciliation is removed and the breach reinstated.

Some people, in seeking forgiveness, simply apologize. “I’m sorry...” are the familiar words. But by themselves, those words come with no acknowledgement of wrongdoing and no confession of guilt. Just “I’m sorry,” perhaps accompanied by a sense of personal shame. Or a sorrow for getting caught. But nothing in terms of restoration. Nothing in terms of reconciliation. And those are the things which forgiveness is all about.

So understanding forgiveness is necessary for you to understand the Lord’s Prayer, and to understand what it is that you are praying for.

v.12 “...and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

Understand that petition requesting forgiveness begins when,

### **I. WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE NATURE OF OUR SIN.**

The simple fact is that you will not understand forgiveness until you understand sin. Your sin. Not sin in general. Not sin in theory. But sin in practice. Sin in evidence in your life. Sin that resides within your own heart. For when you pray, “forgive us our debts”, you are acknowledging those debts. You are confessing them. Declaring them. Admitting them.

Thus asking forgiveness is grounded upon,

#### **A. A confession of the guilt of our sin.**

I believe that three of the hardest words to say, together, are the words, “I was wrong...” But that’s a confession of sin. “I have sinned.” You say to God, “I have broken your commandments. I have violated your laws.”

Today we call sins “mistakes.” Or errors. Misjudgments, maybe a lapse in judgment. We often dismiss our sinful behavior with medical jargon or diagnostic labels. We are taught to minimize, to downplay, and to excuse our sin with extenuating circumstances or rationalizations, confessing anything but the free and open declaration of David in,

Ps. 51:3 “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. 5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

That’s a confession of sin. Before God, the words are so explicit. “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight...”

Sin means that you miss the mark. You fall short of the standard which God has set. A transgression. A violation. Sin is lawlessness, according to 1 John 3. Breaking the law. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.

But sin is also a debt, as that particular word is used here in Matthew 6, “Forgive us our debts.” The reason for that word is actually quite simple, that sin incurs a debt. Sin incurs an obligation to justice, a repayment. If sin is represented by a crime, a criminal offense, then the debt of sin is the punishment prescribed by the law. So a certain offense might bring about a defined prison sentence of 5 years. Or 10. Or life. The sentence is the debt that must be paid, and your confession of sin is actually, therefore,

**B. A confession of our inability to atone for our sin.**

An inability to pay the debt.

When you pray, as Jesus taught you to pray, “Forgive us our debts,” you are confessing your inability to pay your debts to God’s justice. In terms of that image of debts, you are going to the judge and declaring bankruptcy. You cannot meet the obligations which your sin has incurred, the debt, the duty, the punishment which has accumulated.

This is a huge stumbling block, this notion of confessing sin, because unbelievers typically want to cling to the notion that they are basically, inherently good. Not born in sin. Not evil in God’s sight. Not wicked, so that God is justified in condemning us to hell. No, we human beings like to think of ourselves as good.

And, where we might admit to some limited shortcomings, we like to think we can make up for it ourselves. So we try harder. We boast about our own good works or good efforts. We claim

sincerity, and the evidence of a good Christian life. People do good, thinking they are doing enough to make up for their sins. But true confession is confessing the very opposite. Forgive us our debts. Forgive us those obligations that we are simply unable to meet. Confession is admitting that inability.

I cannot do good enough to get to heaven. I cannot do good enough to make up for whatever bad I have done. I cannot do good enough to outweigh or counterbalance the bad. I cannot atone for own sin by my own effort or by my own good works, and so we pray, “Forgive us our debts...”

Note that the prayer is put in terms of “we” and “us”. It is a corporate prayer, and confession of sin ought to be corporate. That’s why we have a confession so regularly in our worship services each week. When God’s people come into God’s presence, we must come, first of all, with confession of sin. As the people of Israel came to that laver, that sink in the outer court of the temple, to wash their hands, we come to God with confession of our sins, confessing both our guilt and our complete and total inability to satisfy the demands of God’s unyielding justice.

We plead guilty and throw ourselves on the mercy of the court. That is what confession of sin is before God. He is the judge in his courtroom, and we are the defendants. We stand before his majesty and plead guilty. Guilty as charged, your honor. And until you do that, you can’t pray this fifth petition in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts.”

But as you acknowledge the nature of your sin, note that in this confession of sin, in this request for the forgiveness of sin,

**II. WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE NATURE OF GOD’S FORGIVENESS.**

So what, then, are you asking for when you pray, “Forgive us our debts?” In other words, what is forgiveness? What is the nature of God’s forgiveness. I can answer that clearly. Forgiveness is,

**A. A commitment to remove sin from our record.**

Forgiveness is not an emotion, but a commitment. A decision. A determination that a particular offense will not be held against you.

The image of a financial contract is an obvious illustration, isn’t it? Forgiveness means that the debt is removed. It is considered to be paid in full. That’s the definition of forgiveness. So we read,

Ps. 103:8 “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. 9 He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. 10 He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. 11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”

Beloved, can it be any clearer. Here is the east. Here is the west. They are as far apart as can possibly be. So it is with me and my sin.

How about this description,

Micah 7:18 “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. 19 He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.”

Is. 43:25 “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.”

“I will not remember your sins.” That’s forgiveness. But that’s not exactly “forgive and forget,” because God, of course, cannot forget. God doesn’t lose his memory, nor erase his mind. But he does forget, and to allow the Scripture to interpret the Scripture, that means that removes our sins from us. He does not count them against us. In the court of his law, he declares us ‘not guilty.’ He gives us a clean record. He does not hold our sins against us. And that is forgiveness. We are freed from the guilt and justice of our sins. They are no longer raised against us, as a record of wrongs.

And in that record, God’s forgiveness is also,

**B. A commitment to be satisfied with the finished work of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice.**

It isn’t that God simply says to us, with regard to our sins, “Oh, it’s all right. I know you meant well.” God doesn’t simply forget our sins as if they never happened, as if no punishment of his justice were required. For when he pardons your sin, when he grants forgiveness, he does so on the basis of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

The big word that you really should know, at least in concept, is the word propitiation. Jesus is the propitiation for our sins.

1 John 4:10 “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

Or, Rom. 3:21 “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in

Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

You see, God doesn't grant forgiveness at the expense of his own justice. He doesn't exercise his grace at the expense of his own justice or holiness. There is a propitiation, a sacrifice by which the fullness of his wrath is satisfied. The full and complete demands of justice are fulfilled.

And what are those demands? You know the verse. In the simplest form,

Heb. 9:22 "Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins."

The shedding of blood. That's the requirement of justice. Death. The principle was clearly established in,

Lev. 17:11 "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life."

And so the blood of the covenant, the blood of the Old Covenant animal sacrifices, became the blood of the new covenant—the blood of Jesus.

Mat. 26:26 "Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' 27 And he took a cup, and when he

had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'

My blood of the covenant. Luke identifies it as, "the new covenant in my blood."

Forgiveness means that God accepts the blood sacrifice of Jesus in your place, on your behalf. He accepts the blood of Jesus as sufficient to satisfy the perfect demands of his justice. His blood, the blood of the new covenant, is the blood by which your sins are cleansed, by which you are forgiven.

Heb. 9:11 "But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent ( not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God."

Heb. 10:11 "And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 16 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my

laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,” 17 then he adds, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.” 18 Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.”

It is finished. The work of your salvation, the sacrifice by which your sins are atoned. Jesus paid the price. Jesus shed his own blood. And the forgiveness of God means that God accepts Jesus’ work on your behalf. Beloved, that is the gospel. And so, when we confess our sins, when we ask for the forgiveness of our sins,

### **III. WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE EFFECTS OF FORGIVENESS IN OUR OWN LIVES.**

Most notably,

#### **A. A willingness to believe and trust in God’s grace.**

In other, when you ask God to forgive you your sins, your debts, you believe it to be true. And you rely upon that finished work of Jesus for your salvation. You trust in him, and not in yourself. And it becomes a ground of great praise and thanksgiving.

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight.”

And so, you cry out, Abba Father. But there is something else that happens in your life as well. There is another effect of this

great work of forgiveness, and that is,

#### **B. A willingness to exercise that same grace toward one another.**

In other words, as the Lord’s Prayer puts it,

v.12 “...forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

Forgiving others is not a good work you do in order to earn God’s forgiveness of you, but rather it is the evidence of your acknowledgement of the forgiveness of your own sin. For how can you truly understand forgiveness and rejoice in that blessing, if you are unwilling to offer the same forgiveness to others?

So pray for forgiveness. Ask for forgiveness, that God would remove your sins from you. And recognize, realize, and appreciate that that is the central promise of the gospel of his grace. And that is the gospel which I preach to you,

Eph. 1:7 “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence.”

Col. 1:13 “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, 14 in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.”