



The Lord's Prayer

Part 7 – Forgiven and Forgiving

Matthew 6:12, 14

“The Christian lives through forgiveness.” So writes J.I. Packer. It is true of course. Where would we be if not for forgiveness of sins? How could we go on if we remained under sin’s penalty? How could we bear to address God in prayer if Jesus had not born our sins on the cross? Since the greatest problem men and women face is their own sin, it follows that their greatest need is forgiveness.

The fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer is, “...and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Sandwiched in between the petitions for daily sustenance and spiritual protection is the request for forgiveness.

Keep in mind that Jesus gave this model prayer to his disciples. It is a prayer for Christians to pray. The petition to be forgiven of sin has perplexed some who have supposed that since Christians stand forgiven of all their sins, any prayer requesting forgiveness is redundant and unnecessary. But Jesus teaches us to continue to offer petitions for forgiveness. This is because we continue to sin. Yes, we stand fully justified before the Lord, the penalty of our sin having been dealt with through the dying of Christ. Nevertheless, there is a difference between our having been fully justified and our current state of *being* daily sanctified; that is, growing in likeness to Christ. As Christians being sanctified we are to daily confess our sin and petition the Lord for mercy just as we ask him for daily bread.

Notice that Jesus trains us to pray that our experience of the Lord’s forgiveness would coincide with our willingness to forgive those who have offended us. What would be our present state if the Lord dealt with our sins in the same way that we deal with those offenses committed against us? The lesson seems clear: Forgiven people become forgiving people. Those who have been shown great mercy by God will show great mercy to others.

Main Idea: Having been justified entirely by God’s grace as a gift, Christians are grieved by their continuing sin, confess it regularly, and are growing in their grace toward those who have offended them.

1. What we all are

Vs. 12 – “Forgive us our debts...”

- The fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer acknowledges the fact that we sin every day and therefore are in need of daily mercy from God. We are all, without exception, sinners (**Romans 3:23**). The words “debts” and “debtors” are key to our understanding of sin. Unlike many of the more contemporary therapeutic definitions of sin, the Bible makes it clear that sin belongs to moral and theological categories. Sin is fundamentally lawlessness. To sin is to rebel against God, to break his law. The Bible variously depicts sin as wickedness, evil, defilement, filth, rebellion, and pollution. When Christians sin, either by doing what God forbids (sins of commission) or refusing to do what God commands (sins of omission), then it is needful for them to cry out in repentance and plead for their Father’s mercy. “Unless Christians come to God each time as returning prodigals, their prayer will be as unreal as was that of the Pharisees in Jesus’ parable” (J.I. Packer).
- “Sin is the crucial issue in any consideration of the Christian life. Go wrong here, and everything else bends out of shape. Entertain light views of sin and light views of holiness will be the result. To take sin less seriously than the Bible takes it is to fall into one of sin’s most treasured qualities: deceitfulness (c.f. Heb 3:13).” – Derek Thomas
- The words Jesus uses are rightly translated “debts” and “debtors.” These are more fitting words than “trespasses” and “trespass” since debt carries with it the idea of the position in which our sins have placed

us. It is true that we have “trespassed” God’s law. But more is happening when we sin than simply the act itself. Since sin is directed (consciously or unconsciously) toward God who is holy and just those sins place the sinner in a position of moral and spiritual debt to God. A trespass may be overlooked. A debt must be dealt with objectively.

- The word “debt” reminds us that we owe God our full and complete obedience. As the *Book of Common Prayer* reminds us, we have done those things we ought not to have done and have left undone the things we ought to have done. More times that we can possibly count have we broken our obligation to God.
- Some Christians balk at the language of obligation. They suggest that because we are children of God all talk of obligation is unfitting. Obligation, it is thought, creates the wrong impression of God. We are to relate to him as children to a father. It is a relationship of trust and love, they suggest. All of this is true of course. But this implies that obligation and love are mutually contradictory, which they are not. I love my wife, but does that mean I am not obligated to love her? I love my children, but does that mean that they are not obligated to me as their father? Of course not! Love does not remove obligation. Love makes obligation sacred. We are obligated to obey God and because we have sinned repeatedly we have accrued a debt so massive we are hopeless to pay it back.

2. What we all need

Vs. 12 – “Forgive us our debts...”

- The only hope for sinners is grace. To be a Christian is to be forgiven. Christ died for sinners. He took our place upon the cross and shed his blood for the remission of our sins. His dying in our place was an entirely satisfactory act. That is, Jesus death in our place satisfied for all eternity God’s justice. Therefore, the penalty of sin which stood against us has now been erased, the debt having been fully paid (**Colossians 2:13-15**).
- But why do Christians – those who stand forgiven – need to pray for forgiveness?
- **Psalm 51** is David’s great prayer of repentance after having been confronted by the prophet Nathan concerning his sin with Bathsheba and against her husband. David was a member of God’s household; a believer. Nevertheless, he had need of repentance. The proper response to his sin was to cry out for forgiveness.
- Another way for us to understand how those who have been forgiven completely in Christ must continue to pray “forgive us our debts” is to be found in Jesus’ words while washing the feet of his disciples: Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus said to him, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean...” (**John 13:8-10**).
- *The Westminster Confession of Faith* states it well: “God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and, although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God’s fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of His countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance” (11:5).

3. How we are changed

Vv. 14-15

- Many who understand the Bible’s message of justification by grace through faith alone have been perplexed by the words of Jesus in verses 14 and 15. It seems as though Jesus’ words make our acts of forgiving others, works that merit God’s forgiveness.
- The conclusion that is made by some is that only the forgiving, forgiven. But the better way to understand Jesus’ words is that truly repentant are forgiving. Do you see the distinction? It’s an important one. We know that Scriptures make it clear that our being forgiven by God of our sins is not the result of our doing good works like forgiving others. Such an equation destroys the gospel. But Jesus’ words are not about our being justified before God. Rather, Jesus’ words related to the sanctification of those whom God has already graciously justified: truly repentant sinners. A feature of the sanctification of justified sinners is that they grow more and more in their understanding concerning the gravity of their sin and, therefore, the enormity of God’s mercy. It follows that such people would then callously withhold mercy from those who have offended them.
- Jesus’ words in verses 14 and 15 can also be understood in terms of God’s use of means. The Christian hears the words of Jesus and responds with a heart to be forgiving.