

The Lord's Prayer: Forgive Us Our Debts

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Prayer of Illumination

Lord Christ, we believe in you.
Help our unbelief. Amen.

Background

Each time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray:

"Forgive us our debts as ...

as what? ...

we forgive our debtors." (Matthew 6:12 KJV)

Forgiveness is at the very center of Jesus' ministry and mission. Jesus taught the disciples,
Forgive your *"brother or sister ... seventy times seven"* (Matthew 18:21-22 CSB)

In the Upper Room, Jesus took a cup, offered thanks, and gave it to the disciples saying,
"Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the ...

for the what? ...

forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:27-28 CSB)

And on the cross:

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do". (Luke 23:34 KJV)

In the *Apostle's Creed* we declare that we believe in the *"forgiveness of sins."*

The author of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Treasure Island* is Robert Louis Stevenson—who was also a devout Christian and Presbyterian. One morning he was praying the Lord's Prayer with his family on his knees. During the middle of the prayer, he got up and left the room. His health was fragile, so his wife got up and followed him to see if everything was OK. He shared with her,

"Yes, I'm OK, but I'm not fit to pray the Lord's Prayer today."

Can you guess at what line he got up from his knees?

Jesus is not easy on us in this portion of his prayer. In fact, I think it's the most demanding line in all of Scripture.

But praying to be forgiven and to forgive is one of the best things and kindest things we can do for our body, mind, and soul. We need to pray this prayer every day. It's spiritual *broccoli*. We pray for God's will to be done, then we seek to do God's will by the power of the Spirit.

Part of God's will for us is that we forgive. The Lord's Prayer reminds us of something very important: we must see our need for forgiveness *first*. In bankruptcy court, when a new case begins, the bailiff exclaims in a loud voice: "*All debtors rise.*" That's all of us—we're all standing in that spiritual court. You can only truly forgive when you realize first that you're forgiven of something much greater.

God loves us very dearly—but we're no angels. Scripture is very honest about our true condition, we're told that: we miss the mark, that we've stepped across the line, we've fallen short, we've lost our footing, we've known the law, yet we've still broken it.

And this morning Jesus rubs it in--reminding us we're debtors— we've all racked up a debt we can't pay. We've failed in our duties. We can't get ourselves out of the mess we got ourselves into. But here's the good news: God's forgiven us in Christ Jesus. And here's the tough news:

We must also forgive others.

It's a reciprocal principal. A two-way road. A two-sided coin. Jesus left us no wiggle room. No escape clauses.

Poet and pastor George Herbert put it this way:

He that cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he must pass if he would ever reach heaven, for everyone has need to be forgiven.

If we refuse to forgive ... we refuse to be forgiven by God. Gulp. This isn't fluffy stuff ladies and gentlemen. This line in the Lord's Prayer is The Grudge Buster.

The blood of Christ shed on the cross brings forgiveness and reconciliation not only in our vertical relationship with God, but also our horizontal relationships with one another. The two are interconnected: Forgive us ... as we forgive.

God ennobles us by extracting us from a tit-for-tat existence and then incorporating us into a gracious circle of forgiveness. It's a gracious circle dance of leading and following. A to and fro. A give and take. Rights and responsibilities. Forgiven and forgiving. Receiving and giving.

Grace is free and unmerited, yet God's grace isn't cheap. Grace has expectations. God equips us and expects us to use the gifts he's given us.

So let's hear now the word of the Lord.

Scripture: Matthew 6:12, 14-15 (NRSV)

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And just to make sure we realize how serious this is, Jesus gives his only commentary on his prayer a verse later...

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.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – The Lord’s Prayer: Forgive Us Our Debts

Pope Francis calls the family a “training gym for forgiveness.” Really all of life is a training ground for forgiveness—towards our spouse, family members, friends, strangers, fellow church members, employees, bosses, fellow students, and enemies.

Whenever we invest in a relationship or whenever we love someone, we expose ourselves. Love opens us up to great joy—and *profound hurt*. All of us have been hurt—some of us quite a bit. And all of us have hurt others—some of us quite a bit, too.

Many times we need to be forgiven just as much as we need to forgive. Some of us have gone through or have loved ones who have experienced horrific trauma: divorce, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. Falling-out with family members. Relationships burned by addiction. Victims of a crime or tragic loss. Wounds from bad church experiences. Some of us might be angry at a loved one who died and left us alone too early.

Some hurts can be shrugged off with some humor and thick skin: annoyances, oversights, slights, or disappointments. In those times we need to suck it up, not take ourselves too seriously, and let it roll off our backs.

Then there are other wounds that call for the miracle of forgiveness: they’re personal, unfair, and very deep. Whether our hurts are small or massive, one of the main teachings of our faith is that we need to *forgive*. Forgiveness is *so hard*, but *so important*, nonetheless. Forgiveness is the only thing that can heal us from the poison of hatred and bitterness.

When we forgive the person that hurt us, we have a new vision of them—as needy and broken people. We cultivate a new feeling towards them—we wish them well, rather than seethe with hatred. Lewis Smedes says, “You can reverse your future only by releasing other people from their pasts.”

Forgiveness is just as much for us, as it is for others. Forgiveness is usually a process—not a single act. It's an on-going act, a struggle—of ups and downs. Forgiveness also comes at great cost. It involves suffering. It doesn't always happen overnight.

I'll never forget an interview with a father whose daughter was senselessly killed in a shooting massacre. "*Can you forgive the shooter?*" the reporter boldly asked. He paused, "*Not yet.*" The grieving father knew he would have to ... just not yet. It's important to remember that forgiveness doesn't mean the act was acceptable in any way.

Here are some helpful steps on the road to forgiveness.

Leave the righting of wrongs to God.

We're not God. We need to stop wishing to be God. There are times when we just have to give up trying to understand, fix, judge, or change the persons that have hurt or abused us—it never will make sense. We have to be reconciled to the fact that many times the forgiveness we come to in our own hearts toward a person will not be received by them. Rather than being mutual, maybe we're the only one who can forgive, while the other holds on to bitterness.

We trust that God's hand can reshape human evil.

We're called to take a broad view of things—to see the big picture of what God's doing. With the God of hope, we can be tragic optimists. "*You intended to do harm, but God intended it for good,*" said Joseph to his brothers who sold him into slavery. Forgiveness frees us from the prison of resentment.

It's important to remember that this doesn't mean God is the source of evil. God doesn't will the evil that some of us have experienced. Betrayal and any kind of abuse is unacceptable. Cruelty comes from humans—from the sin and selfishness that resides in us. But God miraculously transforms these evils—and brings good out of them. The evil is still evil—but it's not the complete or final say.

We take ownership for our part.

Others of us need to repent, to fess up to the evil we've done. There are times when we're guilty, or at least partly guilty. Own what's our part. It takes courage to confess.

Several years ago, a principal from a nearby school brought a student to meet with me in the office. The middle schooler did some vandalism on our campus. His actions also impacted a number of people—the church, the plumber, the water company, parents, classmates, and himself. This program at his school teaches the students to take responsibility for their actions. The principal lovingly facilitated the meeting. The young man was literally shaking—but he admitted his wrong. He did community service here at the church. We told him the church harbored no ill-will toward him. We told him he was courageous to admit his wrong-doing, and that he was in a great position for a new start, to make wise decisions in life. I don't know how things turned out, but hopefully this making amends got him on a good track.

With God's help we can move from being the victim, to a survivor. The wound of hurt or abuse—sexual or physical or emotional—becomes *one* of the most important events in the person's life—but not *the only* or *defining* moment. Forgiveness helps us to heal and continue to live life, rather than be held in bondage to the past.

When we forgive, we see the person differently—with magic eyes—and wish them well, rather than harm. But sometimes the hardest person to forgive is ourselves. We need to see ourselves with magic eyes, with loving eyes. The road to healing and recovery involves forgiving ourselves:

- for believing false things about ourselves,
- for treating ourselves poorly,
- for lashing out at others because of our hurts that spill over.

If trust has been violated, it's hard to trust anyone, even those who are trustworthy. Forgiveness and dealing with these things is a process and it takes time.

The last step is the coming together.

Sometimes we get there. Sometimes we don't. Reconciliation is possible—but it must always be a two-way road. Our passage speaks of mutuality—receiving and extending forgiveness. Fractured marriages. Parent and child, sibling to sibling relationships. Friendships and work and church relationships can be healed. They can be made even stronger after the hurt with true reconciliation, or strict conditions set up for the possibility of reconciliation in the future.

Other times there will be forgiveness, but no reconciliation. Though you forgive, the other sees nothing to be forgiven of. They may not want to return. Then you experience forgiveness alone. In those cases, there is a parting of ways.

Other times you forgive, but you have to be wise. If a person will trample on that forgiveness and continue to abuse—you can forgive, but not enable that destructive and dysfunctional behavior. You need tough love and healthy and reasonable boundaries.

To quote Smedes again, "After a hurt, we make our new beginnings, not where we used to be or where we wish we could be, but only where we are and with what we have at hand."

With God's mending work and the living hope of Christ, we can experience the healing of forgiveness for a meaningful future—where we daily live into the reality that we're a forgiven and forgiving people. We long for this not only for ourselves, but for others, too. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Amen.

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