

Forgive Us Our Debts

Matthew 6:12, 14-15

As a church we are going through a series right now on the value of prayer. Our main heart behind the series is to help you see that prayer works. It's worth our time, it's worth our effort; it's worth our faith because God loves to connect His saving power to our communication with Him. That's the heart of our Heavenly Father. And here is Matthew 6, Jesus' heart is to give us a method by which we can confidently engage with God in prayer to experience His power and His intimacy.

STORY: There's a story of an elementary school kid who often got in trouble at school. Even at home, he caused problems for his parents, more than what a typical kid should. (Some of you are even thinking now that maybe I'm describing your kid). It finally got to the point that his mom said she had enough and sent him to his room. Now she's a Christian mom, so she told him to go to his room and pray and not come back out till he's certain things would be different. After a while he finally came back out. She said, "Son, did you pray?" He said, "Oh yes, mom, I prayed hard." She asked, "Okay, good, so did you think things will be different now?" He said, "Oh yes, mom, if God answers my prayer, things will be so different." She exclaimed, "Okay, wonderful! Did you pray to be obedient, self-controlled, and kind?" He said, "Oh no, mom, I prayed a much bigger prayer than that! I prayed for God to show up in this house like He's never shown up before. I prayed for Him to move the mountains; for the wind of the Holy Spirit to rush through this place; for God to do a miracle!" She, being impressed, said, "Son, that's amazing! What is the miracle that you prayed to God for?" He said, "Mom, I prayed for God to give you patience." → Amen. Some of you might be raising that kid, so we are praying for you!

But the truth is that prayer works, and here is Matthew 6 Jesus tells us *how* it works. As we've worked through the Lord's Prayer, we've seen the importance of starting from a relationship with God as our Father. We've understood our need to lay aside our kingdom and embrace His Kingdom,

His will to be done. We've also considered our need for God to sustain us spiritually by the giving of the daily bread of Himself.

Today's focus will be on v.12, and this is an interesting one because Jesus tells us not just to ask God for something, but to tell God we are already doing something. Our text says, *“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”* In the Greek in the past progressive tense, it basically means, “Lord forgive our debts...As are continually in the process of forgiving our debtors.” So we are simultaneously asking God to forgive us our sins while also seeking to forgive those who have sinned against us.

Part of me wishes this connection wasn't in the prayer. It would be much easier to simply ask God to forgive us our sins and move on. But He doesn't let us off the hook like that! We all know that because of the broken world we live in, people sin, and sometimes that sin is against us. God is saying that as we receive His forgiveness we are to be extending that same forgiveness to others. Of course this isn't as easy as it sounds. Some of us know this more profoundly than others. You may have been hurt in a gut-wrenching way. The prospect of forgiving someone for that offense may seem impossible! It's for this reason that this part is included in the prayer.

The Greek word here for “forgive” is ἀφίημι (aphiemi), which means “to release, let go, to send forth like you would a slave you held captive.” In this way, we are to let our debtors go (or those who owe us something). God says, just let those people go who owe you something, who've wronged you. But here's the problem: I don't want to! We want to rewrite the prayer, “God forgive me of my debts, but crush my debtors.”

If I'm honest, what I really want is forgiveness for me, but justice for you. For example, if you cut me off on the highway and show me your special finger, I don't want to naturally bless you. I'm hoping your tire blows, you crash your car, and it catches on fire, all so I can say, serves you right! → See, what I want to extend is justice, not forgiveness. We want payback, justice, and revenge!

So again, what I want is justice for you, but forgiveness for me. Jesus says, ***“I know this is your nature, so here’s what I’m going to do in this prayer. I’m going to confront your hypocrisy in this prayer. I’m going to do so by connecting two things that you need to see together. I’m going to connect your need for forgiveness and your need to forgive others in the same sentence.”***

In case we miss this in the prayer, Jesus comes right back to it in v.14-15! ***“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”*** Jesus says that He won’t forgive me if I don’t forgive others. That’s heavy! He’s saying you can’t take something from me that you’re not willing to give to others. That’s hypocrisy. I can’t have my people going around getting grace but not giving grace; being forgiven but not forgiving.

This is so key because everything for us as Christians is about forgiveness! The whole concept of Christianity is that God forgives us our sins through the sinless life and death of Jesus. That’s it. If we don’t have forgiveness, we don’t have anything (salvation, peace with God, an eternal home, the Holy Spirit living in us, power for living, and so on). So forgiveness comes with a condition. Jesus is saying I can have it, as much of it as I’d like, but I also have to give it. ***I need to forgive like my forgiveness depends on it.***

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

The parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35 connects this point perfectly. → Jesus tells this parable in response to a question from Peter. In v.21 Peter asks, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times? In other words, does there come a time when even forgiveness *should* give way to justice and bitterness? → What does Jesus say? V.22 - ***“Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.”*** Jesus’ point is that as long as we are citizens of His Kingdom, we must always forgive the

offenses of even our worst enemies. Notice that Jesus gives no qualifications here.

Why? Why are we to be such a forgiving people? Does it not make us seem weak? Doesn't it often allow the offender to continue hurting others? Why are we always to forgive? Jesus' parable explains why.

In v.23-35 Jesus tells a story of a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began, one man was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. (A talent was a monetary unit worth about twenty years' wages for a laborer.) Clearly there would be no way this man could ever pay back the debt he owed the king. So the king ordered the man to be sold with his wife, children, and all his possessions for payment. But the servant fell on his knees and implored the king to have mercy!

For some reason, the king felt pity for the man and decided right there to forgive his entire debt. The man jumped to his feet and proceeded to leave a free man. But the first thing he did was not write the king a thank you card, or rejoice with his family. His first action was to find one of his friends who owed him 100 denarii and demand he pay it. (A denarii was just a day's wage.) He actually seized the man and choked him (which according to Roman Law was legal! If someone owed you money, you were allowed to choke that person - C'mon America!). Now this friend fell down on his knees and pleaded for mercy...but this man refused to forgive him. So he put him in prison.

Soon the king caught wind of what happened. He was confounded! He said to him in v.32, *“You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.”* (v.35) – *“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from the heart.”*

Those last three words (*“from the heart”*) are very important. It assumes we may forgive not from the heart. To put it differently, we may think we understand what forgiveness is, but in our hearts we don't understand it...because our actions don't prove it!

The conclusion to be drawn is this: ***If I can't forgive the sins of others, then I don't understand the forgiveness of God.*** It shows I don't understand the cost Jesus was willing to pay in order to forgive me. I may just be taking His forgiveness for granted.

Here's a key point: ***Forgiveness is free, but it isn't cheap!*** It is free for us, but someone, namely God, had to sacrifice for it to be freely offered. Jesus' blood had to spill in order for our sins to be covered. His hands needed to be nailed to a cross in order for the record of our debt to be nailed there, too. Jesus' head fell down into death in order for our sins to fall into the deepest ocean! Jesus, in His final few moments before giving up His Spirit, even quite profoundly said, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.”*

When we understand this kind of forgiveness, forgiving others becomes possible. We can let go of the wrath we want to give back to someone because God let go of the wrath destined for us!

Here's a great way to think about the Gospel heart of forgiveness:

Justice says, “I'll give you what you gave me.”

Forgiveness says, “I'll give you what God gave me.”

I'm not paying it back; I'm paying it forward. → See the difference?

Forgiveness is not about what someone did to you; it's about what Jesus did for you.

I sure know I'm not going to heaven because of justice. If it was based on justice, then I'd be going to hell. I'm going to heaven because of grace. So freely I receive, and so freely I must give.

Illustration: This prayer can be such an important reset in the relationships of our lives. I'm a Mac computer guy - any others here? I've been needing to install the newest update, but the request to do the install always comes at an inconvenient time. So I keep putting it off. Now if I were to go months and even years without ever installing the update, what would happen? I eventually would have multiple apps running and my computer would freeze (pinwheel of death). I'd have to resort to a hard reset, which is painful on the system, and when I restart the computer, I still have the same problem. → Many of us are like this computer; we take the hits of others and try to balance it with the many other stresses and hurts of our lives. We were not made to carry all this and we too may fall victim to a painful "hard reset" with no antidote for better living.

What we need is time alone with the Lord to receive His forgiveness afresh and to find the power through that to forgive others. This is the proper update and reset that our system needs!

We think forgiveness is for the other person, but really it's for us. Why? Because when we free the other person, we are actually freeing ourselves.

When we don't forgive someone, we are building a little emotional prison for them that we are not letting them out of in our heart. But the problem with this is that the person who has to stand guard 24/7 is us! So we're stuck there, having to revisit that pain and allow it to grow into bitterness. Instead of finding release from our pain, we actually stay chained to our pain. Our plan backfires! I've heard someone say before that unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. It's illogical and it never works that way.

Jesus deeply wants us to heal from the hurts caused against us. Think about the heart of God in relation to your sin. Even your most heinous and egregious sins don't lead Him to continually dwell on them and then deal with us according to them. Psalm 103:10 says, ***"He doesn't deal with us***

according to our sins or repay us according to our iniquities!” He is saying that we, too, can have this healthy relationship with the sins of others.

I know there are some people in this room with some serious pain in their life. I think we all have been impacted by the sins of others in some form or another, but some of you have had some extremely atrocious things done against you. → Let me clarify that forgiveness isn't saying “It's okay.” Forgiveness isn't giving them a pass; ***forgiveness is giving them to God. It's not saying it's okay; it's trusting God to make it okay. It's not letting go of justice; it's trusting God to perform His justice. Instead of us giving justice, we trust God to give justice.*** The Bible never says we can't be angry; it says we can't act on our anger. It's not our responsibility or place to give back to others what they deserve. Romans 12:19 says, *“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.”*

God's promise to us is that we don't need to repay the sins of others because in due time He will repay them Himself. This was the conviction of David while being chased down by King Saul. On multiple occasions David, the anointed future king of Israel, had the opportunity to justly strike down Saul, but he refused. Each time he said, *“Don't strike him, for who can put out his hand against the Lord's anointed and be guiltless? He added, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, the Lord Himself will strike him down. Either his day will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish.’”* ***David knew the result of Saul's life was not his to decide. He needed to trust God to give justice.***

But even more than trusting God to give justice, there must be a part of us as forgiven sinners that must trust God to give forgiveness. The Bible says we are to pray for our enemies. Does it mean we just pray for God to give them what they deserve? No, because in the context of praying for our enemies, God tells us in Matthew 5 to love our enemies. We don't love them by praying for their justice, we love them by praying for their forgiveness. This is only possible if God changes their hearts. One of the

hardest prayers to pray is that God would change the heart of our enemies and welcome them into our family as brothers or sisters in Christ.

As you think about this, you can see why Jonah had such a hard time taking the Gospel to the Ninevites. They were the longtime enemies of the Israelites! Who were they to receive God's forgiveness? Jonah was a reluctant prophet who brought the Gospel but kept bitterness rooted in his heart. He didn't pray for their forgiveness; he prayed for their justice!

Yet in this moment of bitterness is where forgiveness is so miraculous. Everything changes when we humbly realize that we were just like our enemies in that we too were enemies of God. There is a level playing field at the foot of the cross. When we contemplate in prayer the forgiveness we've received, we find our hearts transformed. Instead of pushing people away from the cross, our heart, like God's heart, pulls people toward the cross. What we see in others is nothing different than who we were before Christ. This is where our pride must be killed.

If we think we are better, our hearts will remain closed.

If we think of Christ as better, our hearts will become opened.

VIDEO: We are going to watch a short video that shows this miracle of forgiveness. If this man can forgive, it's only because he knows from the heart the forgiveness of God in Christ.

We have two options when it comes to the sins committed against us: We are either letting it go (ἀφήνι) or we are letting it grow. I'm either giving it to God or giving it power in my life to take over. One thing I hate about Florida is how quickly weeds sprout up in my yard. What I usually do is trim them down with the weed eater. It's a quick fix that allows them to blend in and not be seen, but what always happens? A few days later those weeds sprouted back up! The problem is that I never dealt with the root of the issue. Hebrews 12:15 says, ***"See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled."*** We have an opportunity to deal

with the root before it becomes a tree and causes far more damage. Trees are the result of holding grudges for years. But the roots are what sprout in the immediate aftermath of being hit by the sin of others. The Bible tells us to deal with the root today before it becomes a tree tomorrow. We are to let the offenses of others go or they will grow.

Maybe it's too late for that relationship, that marriage, that job opportunity, but here's the thing: Forgiveness doesn't always fix the situation, but it can always fix me.

CONCLUSION

There are two things we need to do today in response:

1. Let God forgive our sins
2. Let go of the sins of others

The beauty of this prayer in Matthew 6 is that it invites us to do both of these things. ***It must first start with letting God forgive us.*** You may be wrestling with some terrible things you've done, things many people may not even know about, things that have wrecked seasons of your life or hurt other people badly. What we have in this prayer is a plea to God to forgive our debts. We think that we can just forgive ourselves, but the debt is too much; the weight of it is more than we can handle. What we instead need to do is receive Christ's forgiveness. When hanging on the cross, Christ said the final words "tetelestai" or "It is finished." It's what people in the Roman world at the time would stamp on the final debt payment when it was finally paid in full. If you want the weight of your sin finally lifted from your soul, then let Christ stamp these words on your life: "It is finished. Your debt is entirely paid for in my death."

It's in this forgiveness that we find power to free others from the debts they owe us. We let God forgive us, so we must let go of the sins of others. Give them to God for either His justice or His forgiveness. Trust that His plan is wise and always good. If you need to go to someone today and tell them you forgive them, then you should do that. If it's just something you need to let go of before God, then do that business now.

CLOSING PRAYER

As we close in prayer, I'm going to lead us through this part of the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6. I will invite you to first let God forgive you. Here I invite everyone to hold out your hands so that God can shower you in His grace and kindness in Christ. But then I will invite you to let go of the debt others owe you. Here we will hold our fists shut, but then release them to symbolize letting go of those debts. Let's pray.