

Special Section: The Lord's Prayer

Forgive Us Our Debts, As We Also Have Forgiven Our Debtors

This “terrible petition” can curse us or bless us. Dare we pray it?

By R. Kent Hughes



Calligraphy by Tim Botts

Robert Louis Stevenson in his *Picturesque Notes of Edinburgh* tells the story of two unmarried sisters who shared a single room. As people are apt to do who live in close quarters, the sisters had a falling out, which Stevenson says was “on some point of controversial divinity”—in other words, they disagreed over some aspect of theology. The controversy was so bitter that they never spoke again (ever!) to one another. There were no words, either kind or spiteful. Just silence.

You would think that they would have separated, but nothing of the sort. Possibly it was because of lack of means, or of the innate Scottish fear of scandal, that they continued to keep house together in the single room. A chalkline was drawn across the floor which separated their two domains. It divided the doorway and the fireplace so that each could go in and out and do her cooking without stepping into the territory of the other.

So for years they coexisted in hateful silence. Their meals, their baths, their family visitors were exposed to the other's unfriendly silence. And at night, each went to bed listening to the heavy breathing of her enemy. Thus, the two sisters (ostensibly daughters of the church!) continued the rest of their miserable lives.

No doubt when they attended church they were compelled often to “say” the Lord's Prayer. They obviously never truly prayed it—for it would have meant their reconciliation. The spiritual mutuality which the first three upward petitions enjoin as they begin with the words, “*Our*

Father,” would have called them up short. How could they truly pray “*Our Father*” and remain estranged? And if that didn’t do it, perhaps the first horizontal petition, “*Give us this day our daily bread,*” would have reconciled them.

And if neither of these worked, there would be the next petition, “*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*” “*Forgive us . . . as we forgive.*” There is no way they could have remained bitter and unforgiving and truly prayed these words.

This text, “*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,*” is eminently remedial. Seriously prayed, it can be the healing salve for a fractured spiritual life and broken human relationships. It is our Lord’s second great instruction on how we ought to pray concerning ourselves. This petition (Matthew 6:12) is an explicit prayer for forgiveness, “*Forgive us our debts,*” and it is also an implicit prayer for a forgiving spirit: “. . . *as we forgive our debtors.*”

So Jesus is telling us that ideal prayer contains both a request for personal forgiveness and a request for a forgiving spirit. Let us begin with the *second* clause.

A Prayer for a Forgiving Spirit

St. Augustine called this request “the terrible petition,” because he realized that if we pray, “*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*” with an unforgiving heart, we are actually asking God not to forgive us. We see this clearly if we substitute for the word debt the word sin, which is its intrinsic meaning. Then the petition reads, “*Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*”

Jesus does not want anyone to misunderstand, so He states it categorically in Matthew 6:14 and Matthew 6:15: “*For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*”

Startling words! Yet shocking as Jesus’ statement is, it was really nothing new, but was common to Jewish understanding. The author of the apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus, the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, says this: “*Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.*”

Then, to drive home his statement, the writer of Ecclesiasticus asks three questions.

First, “*Does a man harbor anger against another and yet seek for healing from the Lord?*” The unspoken answer is “*Absurd!*”

Second, “*Does he have no mercy toward a man like himself, and yet pray for his own sins?*” That can’t be.

Third, “*If he himself, being flesh, maintain wrath, who will make expiation for his sins?*”

Thus we see that Jesus’ words were in accordance with the ancient understanding of God’s people.

The New Testament fully corroborates itself on this teaching several times. Matthew 5:7 says, “*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*” A merciless, unforgiving heart will receive neither forgiveness nor mercy. James 2:13 says the same: “*For judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.*” And Jesus’ powerful parable of the man who was forgiven ten thousand talents by his lord, but refused to forgive his own slave a hundred-denarii debt, ends with this terrifying warning:

“*Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you*

forgive your brother from your heart.”—Matthew 18:32–35

So, we are in no doubt that Jesus means exactly what He says: “But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:15).

It was just such an awareness that occasioned one of John Wesley’s famous statements. Wesley was serving as a missionary to the Colonies and was having a terrible time with General Oglethorpe, who was noted for his pride and unbending nature. In a particularly prideful moment Oglethorpe said, “I never forgive.” To which Wesley replied, “Then I hope, sir, you never sin.”

Wesley knew that if we pride ourselves on never forgetting a wrong, if we make our unforgiving spirit a virtue, we cannot *be* forgiven. Charles Spurgeon agreed: “Unless you have forgiven others, you read your own death-warrant when you repeat the Lord’s Prayer.” And in our day, C. S. Lewis says:

No part of his teaching is clearer: and there are no exceptions to it. He doesn’t say that we are to forgive other people’s sins providing they are not too frightful, or provided there are extenuating circumstances, or anything of that sort. We are to forgive them all, however spiteful, however mean, however often they are repeated. If we don’t, we shall be forgiven none of our own.

Let us extend the principle even further. If we will not forgive, we are not Christians! I realize that this is a frightening thing to say—that we cannot be forgiven unless we have a forgiving spirit. But it is true, for when God’s grace comes into our hearts, it makes us forgiving. We demonstrate whether we have been forgiven by whether or not we will forgive. So the bottom line is this: If I refuse to forgive, there can be only one reason, and that is that I have never understood the grace of Christ. I am outside grace, and I am unforgiven.

These are hard words, but they are graciously hard. They are for religious people who can state all the answers, who attend church, who lead an outwardly moral life, perhaps a life of negation (they do not do a lot of things), but who hold a death grip on their grudges. They will not forgive their relatives for some infraction; they have no desire to pardon their former business associates, no matter what they do; they nourish hatred, cherish animosities, revel in malice. Such people had better take an honest inventory of their lives and see if they really know Jesus.

We are not referring to those who find that bitterness and hatreds recur even though they have forgiven the offender. The fact that we have forgiven and continue to forgive is a sign of grace. We are not talking about people who are struggling with forgiveness. We are referring to those who have *no desire* to forgive. These are the ones in soul danger. There also may be some who have been recently offended and are still in emotional shock, so that they haven’t been able to properly respond in forgiveness.

The point is this: If we are Christians, we can and will ultimately forgive.

How good of God to put it this way. It requires no elaborate reasoning process to determine where we are—no special knowledge—no “club words.” All it requires is honesty. Does the state of your heart as to forgiveness indicate grace or not?

Health Benefits of Forgiveness

This fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer not only helps us to understand whether we are believers or not; but, if we are believers, it also helps us to monitor our spiritual health. We all have the unhealthy tendency to be more conscious of the wrongs done to us than the wrongs we

have done to others. There is something within us that makes us tend to minimize the wrongs we have done to others. When others are hurt, we credit it to their oversensitive feelings. But when we are wronged, we tend to exaggerate our own hurt and the evil of the offender.

Our unhealthy tendencies to take offense and to offend take their toll on our relationships—oftentimes the relationship we value most. Our quickness to take umbrage and our reticence to forgive bring strain in even our best relationships. We try to mask it, but somehow our inner person is discernible. This unforgiving spirit, in turn, brings isolation and a compounding of our bitterness. It shows.

Self-pity finds its roots here. Then comes depression, as an unforgiving, offended self turns inward. We become even more fault-finding and “hurt” and unforgiving and depressed. This is all emotionally unhealthy. Not only do friendships sour, but our own healthy relationship with God becomes insipid. The heavens seem as brass to the unforgiving heart, and they practically are so. We suffer from spiritual ill-health.

On the other hand, the health benefits of a forgiving spirit are incalculable. The chief benefit is this: We are never closer to God, or more like God, than when we forgive. When we forgive, we are performing a function that has its origin in Heaven. When we forgive, we are like the Father. When we forgive, we are like the Son, who called to God *in extremis*, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34, KJV).

This fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer is, as Augustine said, “a terrible petition,” but it is also a gracious prayer. It cuts through all the evangelical jargon. And for Christians it is “terribly gracious,” because it monitors our spiritual health.

A Prayer for Forgiveness

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” is primarily a prayer for forgiveness.

The fundamental qualification for praying this prayer is that we are debtors—that is, sinners. It is probably true that most people who repeat this prayer today do not see themselves as sinners. People often pray the Lord’s Prayer with a condescending tolerance that permits them to say inwardly, “I’m praying this along with the people who really need it.” Thousands who say this prayer do not see themselves as debtors or trespassers or offenders. They don’t consider themselves guilty before God.

So often, the Lord’s Prayer is nothing more than an empty repetition by a self-satisfied soul. The fact is, it can be properly prayed only by “debtors.” Are we debtors? I realize that most of us are Christians and that our sins have been paid for—past, present, and future—by the blood of Christ. I realize that we are called in the pure sense to confess them, for they are already eternally forgiven (1 John 1:9).

We don’t need to excise the word “forgiveness” from our vocabulary, for this prayer teaches that we are to have a daily, ongoing awareness of sin which is accompanied by regular confession. In fact, confession is a sign of spiritual maturity. Healthy believers daily confess their sins.

In sum, this fifth petition, *“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,”* tells us to do two things. First, we are to ask God to forgive us. This request for forgiveness follows the request for daily food in the Lord’s Prayer, and numerous commentaries have noted that it should at least equal or actually surpass our craving for food. I urge us all that if we have not yet had our debts canceled and forgiven, we ought to deal with them before we take our next meal. We must ask God to forgive us by the grace and blood of Jesus Christ. I don’t know how to say it strongly enough—do it today!

The second thing this fifth petition tells us is to forgive those who have wronged us. And

here again, the importance of doing this cannot be overstressed. We do this for the health of our soul. If we forgive, we will avoid a thousand ailments—and that is not hyperbole. We do it for the health of the Church. The Church is sick from want of forgiveness among its children. We do it for the sake of the world. The world has not yet discovered what Christ is like. But it can, if we will truly forgive.

Resolve to practice forgiving now. Do we need to forgive our spouse? Covenant to do it right now. Have we been unwilling to forgive our parents? We can promise God right now that we will do it. Tell Him when. Have we forgiven our employer who wronged us? We need to do it now—and we can. Do we have a grudge against our last church? Its pastor, its elders? Forgive today!

We must do it for our sake, the Church's sake, and the world's sake. Forgiveness is not a psychological trick. It is a miracle. And God can help us do it. Do it for God's sake. Ephes. 4:32 says: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

This is a "terrible petition." It can curse us or bless us. Dare we pray it? Can we pray it? "*Lord, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Amen.*"

» **See Also:** *On Your Own: Just As God Forgave You*

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