

“As We Forgive Our Debtors”

Matthew 6:5-15

Matthew 18:21-35

Luke 23:32-34

**Sermon preached by
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“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors...” or so we pray each and every Sunday morning when we gather together for worship. Some of us, of course, may have learned that prayer in a slightly DIFFERENT and, by the way, INCORRECT version...something like *“forgive us our TRESPASSES as we forgive those who TRESPASS against us.”* But they are OBVIOUSLY not lifelong Presbyterians...and OBVIOUSLY folks who haven't ever read the Bible! Every version of the Bible I read...every TRADITIONAL version of the Bible, that is...from the King James right on down to the Revised Standard Version to the Jerusalem Bible to the New International Version...they ALL say: *“Forgive us our DEBTS, as we forgive our DEBTORS.”* NONE of them say *TRESPASSES*. NONE of them! And when you go back to the Greek in which the New Testament was originally written, the word is *opheilema* which means DEBT...as in failure to pay a DEBT...failure to pay that which is DUE. Which is different from TRESPASS...which is to go across the boundary...to step over the line. So OBVIOUSLY, we PRESBYTERIANS...who are among the few who say *“debts”* instead of *“trespasses”*... have been saying the Lord's Prayer RIGHT all these years...while everybody ELSE has gotten it wrong! Which is just one MORE reason all you folks who are new to the Presbyterian church can be GLAD you've gotten hooked up with the TRUE church...the church that prays the Lord's Prayer the RIGHT way!!! YEA!

Well, all kidding aside, every Sunday...and maybe throughout the week as well...we pray this prayer – The Lord's Prayer...the one Jesus' TAUGHT us to pray. And every Sunday...and perhaps at other times as well, we pray:

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors!”

And yet, I oftentimes WONDER whether we really MEAN what we PRAY. Let me show you what I mean:

The little comments...the snide little remarks...the hurtful gossip that is said about us...behind our backs, whispered to be sure, but just loud enough to be heard...precisely so they will do their intended damage.

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors!”

The brother or sister...your own flesh and blood...who, through deceit and trickery of the worst kind, cheat you out of your inheritance and keep the whole of your parents' estate for themselves.

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors!”

The friend...or perhaps we should say FORMER friend...who, though you thought they would NEVER betray your confidence...talks about you in ways that makes you question why you EVER considered that person a friend in the first place.

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

The adult, who even today, YEARS later, continues to suffer the debilitating consequences of physical, psychological, sexual abuse as a child.

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

The friends whom you have known all of your life...with whom you've worked...for whom you've cared...with whom you have shared the bonds of fellowship and love throughout the years who, because of innuendo and rumor and comments that are simply not true...turn against you...reject you...and won't hardly even SPEAK to you anymore.

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

The husband...the wife...with whom you thought you'd live "*happily ever after...until death do us part*" in a fairy tale of wedded bliss who suddenly comes home one day and says: "*I don't love you anymore. I've found somebody else. I'm leaving.*" And suddenly, your world comes crashing down around you. And once you've gotten over the shock of it all, the anger...and the resentment...and the rage begins to build...and it grows...and it grows and it grows until it is this horrible MONSTER threatening to consume you and every hope and dream for life that you've ever had.

"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

However it happens...and happen it does, time and time again in life...you and I are often forced to face HEAD ON what may well be one of the most DIFFICULT issues of life...ESPECIALLY for our lives as Christians ...namely: what does it mean and how is it possible to PRACTICE FORGIVENESS?

Now, often in church, of course, we talked about the grace and mercy of our Heavenly Father...the greatness and the wideness of GOD'S grace and mercy and forgiveness which comes to us through Christ Jesus, our Lord. And it is true! God IS "*gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*" But the truth of the matter, of course, is that Jesus teaches us that that grace and mercy always has a "flip side" as well...a "*therefore*" if you will...the "*therefore*" of our BEING gracious and merciful – not in order to GET God's grace and mercy, mind you...but because we've already GOTTEN it. "*Therefore,*" in response to God being gracious and merciful and forgiving toward US, Jesus tells us, WE are called to be gracious and merciful...and most of all...FORGIVING toward others. ***"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."***

Yea, yea, yea! I know! I KNOW! "*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*" YAWN! How many times have I heard THAT before! Why don't you tell us something NEW, Preacher! Isn't there anything new under the sun?!?!?

To which, I'd have to say, Yes! You HAVE heard it all before. Yes! It IS old hat! But when you really stop and THINK about it, this FORGIVENESS business...if you really take it seriously...is pretty challenging and scary stuff. Because, what if...WHAT IF...we took this line in Lord's Prayer for what it really says? Have you ever stopped and thought about that? When you really stop and think about it, by saying "***Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,***" we are asking God to forgive US *in proportion* to...*in RESPONSE* to...OUR forgiving those who have sinned against US. "*God forgive ME in the same proportion...in like manner...to MY forgiveness of so and so.*" That's the reality of how Jesus taught us to pray. Which means, when you bottom line it, that we'd darn well better be forgiving people OURSELVES if we expect God to do much forgiving of US.

And yet, you know as well as I do that that's not always the EASIEST thing to do. God, after all, is GOD...and we are NOT! We're human, through and through. And sometimes we don't WANT to forgive. It's just that simple. We don't WANT to be gracious and loving and merciful and kind. We LIKE to carry our grudges and nurse our wounds...ESPECIALLY when it seems like the person who has hurt us...the person who has been mean or nasty to us KEEPS ON hurting us and being mean and nasty to us no matter HOW many times we've tried to forgive. And so, like Peter, you and I stand up before Jesus and ask, with all sincerity, "*Lord, how OFTEN must I forgive? As many as SEVEN times?*"

Peter, of course, THOUGHT he was being generous. The rabbis of Peter's time taught that if someone sinned against you, you should forgive them as often as three times...because forgiving three times was being gracious and generous...even as God has been gracious and generous to us! But if they dared stomp on your toes a fourth time...WELL, THEN...you could get out YOUR stomping boots and stomp right back...and not even GOD would expect any different. So Peter, hearing Jesus' call to practice forgiveness, not only DOUBLES the rabbis' requirement, he adds an EXTRA time for good measure. "*So Lord, if my brother keeps ON sinning against me, how often should I forgive him? As many as SEVEN times?*" Peter asked.

"No, not SEVEN times," came Jesus' reply, "*but seventy TIMES seven times.*" Which, for all you math whizzes out there DOESN'T mean 490 times...but an UNLIMITED number of times – 7 being the perfect number in Biblical numerology and 70 TIMES 7 meaning an INFINITE, UNLIMITED number of times. In other words, Jesus says, "***Forgiveness HAS NO LIMITS.***"

But, again, let's be honest about it. Forgiveness is TOUGH BUSINESS! There's no doubt about it. We know all too often those times in our own lives when good Christian folks like us have

had a hard time forgiving someone who has “done ‘em wrong.” When WE’VE been hurt...when someone we LOVE has been hurt...when someone NEAR AND DEAR to us has been knocked down and kicked around...WHATEVER the circumstances...forgiveness simply isn’t EASY to give. Instead, REVENGE rears its ugly head and wants to strike back. And if better judgment actually KEEPS revenge from striking back, then it’s all pushed way down deep inside where that grudge plants its seed within our hearts and within our souls. And before you know it, the resentment...the anger...the hatred (is that too strong a word?) the feelings of “ill will” toward the other person begin to grow...and grow...and GROW until like kudzu vines in the south, before you know it, it’s taken OVER our lives and choked the very goodness and love of life out of us and all that’s left IS the anger...and the RESENTMENT...and the ILL WILL...and the HATRED we feel for that other person.

But, Jesus said, it simply can’t BE that way...NOT, that is, if our lives are going to be lived as God INTENDS for them to be lived.

You’ve heard it said: “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you: LOVE your enemies! BLESS those who curse you! PRAY for those who mistreat you!

DO GOOD to those who hate you! If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other one also. And if someone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. LOVE your enemies and do GOOD to them. Be MERCIFUL, just as your heavenly father is merciful unto you. (Luke 6:27-32; 35-36)

“Forgive us our debts, as WE forgive our debtors.”

Now, let’s be very clear about something here. Jesus is NOT calling for a “doormat” kind of theology here. He NEVER says to intentionally let people walk all over you and wipe their feet on you. But he was also realistic enough to know that that would sometimes happen, precisely because people don’t always live the way they’re supposed to. Sometimes people ARE mean and cruel and do hurtful things and say things about us that simply aren’t true. So when it DOES happen, Jesus tells us, we are to FORGIVE those people...NOT because it is the EASY thing to do -- it’s much easier to hit them back, right square between the eyes – but to FORGIVE them precisely because it is the harder, yet RIGHT thing to do...to FORGIVE...as WE have BEEN forgiven – not just seven times...but SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN TIMES, if necessary. In other words, over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over again. WHY? Because that’s EXACTLY what God has done with us...time and time and time and time and time and time and time and time and time again.

No, we don’t forgive in order to GET forgiven, Jesus said...but because we recognize how much we OURSELVES have BEEN forgiven. Which is why he told a parable...a parable about a king and his servants and their debts...their FAILURE to pay that which was DUE.

The first servant had a TREMENDOUS debt which he owed to the king...the equivalent today of millions upon millions of dollars. In other words, it was a sum of money Jesus deliberately exaggerated so that his listeners could easily see that it was an amount the servant could NEVER repay. Never...EVER. It was simply TOO GREAT a debt. And yet, in unbelievable grace and mercy, totally without merit or cause on the part of the servant, the king FORGAVE that tremendous debt...EVEN one as great as the first servant owed.

Now, ideally, that first servant would have REALIZED how much he had been forgiven...what amazing grace he had received...and in joyous, grateful response, would have been EQUALLY FORGIVING with his fellow servant. In fact, he wouldn’t even NEED to be equally forgiving. He would only need to be HALF as forgiving...a QUARTER as forgiving...a TENTH as forgiving...a HUNDRETH as forgiving...what the heck, a MILLIONTH as forgiving. Because the debt the second servant owed the first servant was a mere PITTANCE compared to what the first servant owed the king...something like \$20 compared to \$20 MILLION. And yet, though he had been forgiven SO MUCH, he still couldn’t find it in his heart to BE FORGIVING.

So the king was very angry and sent that wicked servant to jail to be punished until he could pay back the WHOLE DEBT.

Which, of course, would have been NEVER because the unforgiving first servant would NEVER be able to repay such a debt.

"This," said Jesus, "is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive others from your heart." FROM YOUR HEART...Jesus said. From your heart of GRATITUDE...from your heart which gratefully RESPONDS to the forgiveness YOU have received such that others are, in turn, receive YOUR forgiveness.

You see, good friends, to forgive from the heart, you have to have sufficient REASON. And that reason is our DEBT...the debt WE owe and can NEVER repay, but for which we have ALREADY been forgiven.

Take a moment right now and think back over your life...or even just this past WEEK of your life. Think about those times you haven't been the person God would have you be...the person Jesus calls you to be. Think about those times when you have harbored ill will toward a neighbor...a friend...a spouse...a brother...a sister...a stranger...an enemy. Think about those times when you've held anger and resentment in your heart and WANTED to take revenge...get even...pay somebody back, even though you didn't DO it. Think about those things you've done...or thought...or said that you really wouldn't want anyone else to know about because it would embarrass you TERRIBLY if others knew what kind of person you REALLY are when your guard is down and your public face comes off. Consider the times you have failed to turn the other cheek or go the extra mile...those times you have cursed those who have cursed you and wanted to get EVEN with that person who mistreated you. THINK about those times. And then multiply this week's failures by 52 weeks of the year and that again by the number of years in your life. And then, maybe, you can begin to catch a glimpse of what Jesus meant by giving that first servant such a tremendous, enormous, unmanageable debt which he could NEVER repay. But the truth of the matter, of course, is that HIS is the debt of us ALL!

And if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we can begin to understand how it is that you and I CAN forgive the debts of those who trespass against us...who build up debts with us that THEY can never repay. We CAN forgive...we MUST forgive...precisely because WE have been forgiven so much...so VERY MUCH.

In the final analysis, you and I forgive because as long as we REFUSE to forgive, we get no mercy ourselves...NOT because God doesn't WANT to forgive. God DOES forgive and God HAS forgiven. That's what Jesus Christ is all about. But if we are to take Jesus at his word...and I think we can... and MUST...God's mercy is, in effect, NEGATED in our lives...done AWAY with...made NULL AND VOID when WE refuse to forgive others. In a very real sense, we can, and in fact DO, ruin God's forgiveness by our unforgiving spirits...by failing to joyously and gratefully receive what God has given US and then eagerly pass it on to others.

Then the king called him in and said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you the whole debt you owed me, just because you asked me to. But you couldn't forgive the measly debt your fellow servant owed you? You should have had mercy on him just as I had mercy on you!" The king was very angry and sent the servant to jail to be punished until he could pay back the entire debt he owed.

When all is said and done then, the bottom line is this: We forgive because we have BEEN forgiven. It's just that simple. Not in order to GET forgiven...NOT because its part of some BARGAIN God makes with us - "I'll forgive you if you forgive others." No, it's NEVER like that. Instead, we forgive because we have BEEN forgiven. In Jesus, the Christ...the only one who has ever lived who didn't NEED to be forgiven...the one who was ridiculed and scorned...who was whipped and beaten...who was finally hung up on a cross like some kind of hunk of meat until the life blood all drained out of him, and who, in the process of it all, said, "Father, FORGIVE them, for they don't know what they are doing"...in Jesus Christ, we HAVE been, WILL be, and even now, ARE being forgiven...in HIS name, we are called to forgive others...to **forgive our debtors**.

"How OFTEN? How MANY TIMES? As many as SEVEN times?" the generous, trying to do the right thing, Peter in us wants to know. But Jesus responds to our typically human request for legalisms with an answer which speaks only of grace: "As many times as it takes..." For that is precisely what God has done with us...and calls US to do with others. We forgive because we have BEEN forgiven.

May God make it so! May God make it so, on earth...in us...even as it is in heaven.
Amen. So be it. Amen!

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