

## Teach Us to Pray: A Series Through the Lord's Prayer

### *Forgive Us* (Matthew 6:12, 14-15)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on July 17, 2016

#### Introduction

- ❖ We've come to the petition in the Lord's Prayer that many consider wonderfully sweet. It's a request for forgiveness. "*Forgive us our debts.*" That's something we all need. Just looking back at this week alone, we're overwhelmed by our sinfulness.
  - ▶ Perhaps you lost it and snapped at your spouse, your children, or your parents. Perhaps you betrayed the trust of someone you love. Perhaps you harbored thoughts of envy or jealousy, inwardly hoping for that person to fail. Perhaps you've returned to the same sin and filth you've promised time and time again to walk away from.
    - Regardless of what you did (or what you didn't do that you should've done), **we're all familiar with the weight of guilt.** You tried to explain it away. You tried to justify your behavior or blame-shift and put it on someone else. You tried to keep yourself distracted and not think about it, but you couldn't shake it. Your guilty conscience keeps you up at night. The same scenes keep running in your head. You feel sick about it.
  
- ❖ And that's why it's so sweet and comforting to read these words. **Do you realize that God himself is instructing you to come into his presence you seek forgiveness?** Last week we talked about how in ancient royal courts, there were strict protocols in place to deter people from approaching the king with just any request. We saw this in the book of Esther. If you tried to approach the King of Persia without permission you'd be promptly executed unless he extended his golden scepter towards you in mercy.
  - ▶ **But here the King of kings and Lord of lords is extending his golden scepter – extending a personal invitation – for you to approach his throne in prayer.** And you never have to worry if it's safe for you to bring your requests before the Lord. He has extended his invitation even before you approach, before the thought of approaching even crossed your mind.
    - This open invitation is available not because you're righteous and deserving but because he's merciful and loving. Just remember, in this petition, you're asking forgiveness for offenses that you've ultimately committed against him! It's amazing that God is the One instructing and inviting you to pray this.
  
- ❖ But just as this petition is sweet and comforting, it can be scary and discomfoting as you read on in v12. "*Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.*" There's a connection between being forgiven and being forgiving. **Jesus is suggesting that forgiven people are naturally and necessarily forgiving people.** Then unforgiving people – those who cannot let go of grudges – demonstrate that they are *not yet* forgiven people, even if they've prayed the words of v12 countless times. **Martin Luther** says if you try to pray this verse, while harboring an unforgiving spirit, you're actually asking God *not* to forgive you.
  - ▶ Listen again to what you're saying, "*Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.*" **You're praying for God to treat you and the debts you owe him in the same manner as you treat others and the debts they owe you.** So if you refuse to treat others with forgiveness, you're actually asking God to treat you in like manner. That's a point Jesus reenforces in vv14-15.

- ❖ **So suddenly a prayer you considered comforting could become quite condemning if there is unforgiveness in your heart.** So this morning I want to help you understand what you're actually praying when you make this petition, and I hope we come away with greater comfort and boldness. I've got two points to consider. We'll look at 1) The need to be forgiven and 2) The need to be forgiving.

### **The Need to be Forgiven**

- ❖ First, let's consider our need to be forgiven. We're asking God to forgive us our debts (*opheilema*). That's a common term in the ancient marketplace. It refers to a financial obligation. But in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus is referring to a moral obligation. **We have a moral debt to God.** We owe him.
  - ▶ We are indebted for both our **sins of commission** – doing something you shouldn't do. And our **sins of omission** – not doing something you should be doing. You haven't just broken rules before God by what you've done. **By what you've left undone, you've failed to give God what he's due.**
- ❖ So what is he due? **What do we owe God?** We owe him our obedience. Remember, this prayer is taught in the context of the Sermon on the Mount. In chapter 7, Jesus says those in the kingdom of heaven are the ones who not just hear but *do* his word. Who *do* the will of his Father (Mt. 7:21, 24). **We are supposed to do the will of God.** It about our obedience. That's what we owe him.
- ❖ Now I realize if you're not a Christian, you might be thinking, "No, that's *your* moral obligation since you're a follower of God, but I never signed up for that. I never professed allegiance to him. I never turned to God for help, so I don't feel like I owe him anything."
  - ▶ **But let me ask, if that's true, then where does your guilt come from?** If you've ever felt guilty – I'm sure you have – where did that come from? You might say it comes from a failure to meet societal expectations or the expectations of your parents. Okay but what about your own thoughts? **Why do you ever feel guilty for your thoughts – about bad thoughts that no one knows about?**
    - If there is no God, if you define your own standards (at least within your own thought life), why would you ever feel bad about a bad thought, especially if it never gets out and never hurts anyone?
- ❖ The fact that you can feel guilty over bad thoughts, secret thoughts, proves that deep down you know you're held to a standard greater than yourself, greater than your parents, greater than society. The reason is because all of us have been made by God. **By virtue of being our Creator, he has the right to set standards and place moral obligations upon us.** We owe him. We owe him our allegiance, our obedience.
  - ▶ **But how much do we owe?** How much obedience does God require of us? Can you draw a line anywhere? Can you assign a passing percentage? Put another way, we're asking how much disobedience will God tolerate from us?

- ❖ Again if we consider the context, the Sermon on the Mount, the answer is none. **God requires a perfect obedience.** In chapter 5:48, Jesus says, “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” And in chapter 5:20, he says to enter the kingdom, your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.
- ❖ Now for his listeners that would’ve been discouraging since, in their day, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was already considered high and hard to attain. Now Jesus goes on to dismantle their righteousness, exposing it as superficial. **The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was based on a superficial reading of the OT that focused solely on surface-level behavior while ignoring the more important heart-level obedience.**
  - ▶ We owe God more than an external righteousness, more than a surface obedience. We owe him a perfect righteousness, a full obedience. He doesn't just expect you *not* to murder people. He expects you not to be angry with them (5:22). He doesn't just expect you *not* to commit adultery with another woman. He expects you not to look lustfully at her (5:28). He doesn't just expect you *not* to hate your enemy. He expects you to love him (5:44).
- ❖ You owe him more than just the avoidance of bad **but also the doing of good.** And you owe him more than just good behavior **but also good intent.** You owe God a good heart, a perfect heart. That's our moral obligation. That's what we owe him.
  - ▶ So can any of us claim to be debt free before God? Has anyone given him his due? Has anyone given him a life of full obedience? Of course not. We all fall short of the glory of God. **All of us have incurred an insurmountable debt.**
    - And the Bible says one day God will return to collect. If we can't pay off our debt in this life, we'll suffer for it in the next. **But our debt to God is so infinitely large that even if we were to suffer for a million years in the next, it wouldn't make a dent.** That's why our punishment is called eternal.
- ❖ That's the debt we're asking God to forgive. Do you realize how audacious this is? **It's like walking into your bank and asking the manager to flat-out cancel your mortgage.** Wipe out my debt. Zero it out. Forgive it.
  - ▶ None of us would dare do that. You'll be laughed out of the building, or they'll call security on you. It's a ridiculous idea. It's an audacious, absurd request. You can't just cancel a mortgage. No bank is going to do that. Unless it's paid off.
- ❖ But *that* is the good news of the gospel. This is not an absurd request. **It's a bold, serious petition that rests on the promise that our record of debt has been paid off by another.**
  - ▶ In **Colossians 2:13-14**, the Apostle Paul pulls from this imagery of debt. He writes, “<sup>13</sup>*And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, <sup>14</sup>by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.*”

- ❖ This is the liberating good news of the gospel. **The gospel calls you to believe that Jesus took your long record of debt with him to the cross.** He cancelled the debt that stood against you – not by sweeping it under the rug, by asking the Father to just let bygones be bygones – but by nailing it to the cross along with his hands and feet.
  - ▶ **He paid off your debt by living a fully obedient life and by dying a sin-atoning death in your place.** So you can pray this fifth petition, “*Forgive us our debts*”, with complete confidence because you know the One who teaches you to pray this way is the very One who paid your debt.
  
- ❖ Now if you’re not a Christian, this is the one petition in the Lord’s Prayer that you need to focus on. **Forgiveness is both simple and impossible all at the same time.** It’s simple for you. You just have to pray this prayer with faith. Truly believing the promise of the gospel. But for forgiveness to be available, Jesus had to do the impossible. He shouldered the full weight of your debt to God. And he let it crush him. He paid it all. **He took all the costs that you might receive all the benefits freely by faith.**
  
- ❖ I realize many here have already trusted in Christ and received full pardon. You’ve been fully justified by faith alone. And so you wonder if this fifth petition is still applicable to you. **If you’re a Christian, do you still have to ask for your debts to be forgiven?** Haven’t all of them already been nailed to the cross? It’s a good question.
  - ▶ Do believers still need to ask for forgiveness? If we’re approaching God the Judge, then No – there’s no need to ask him to repeatedly call our debt forgiven, to repeatedly call us justified. That declaration was handed down once and only once.
    - **But remember, we’re addressing the Lord’s Prayer – not to a Divine Judge – but a Heavenly Father.** We all know how sin can affect a parent-child relationship without annulling the relationship. In the same way, our sins in no way destroy our relationship with the Father but they certainly disturb it.
  
- ❖ **That’s why daily confession and cleansing of sins should be a normal part of the Christian’s prayer life.** Remember, when Jesus tried to wash his disciples’ feet? Peter initially refused, but Jesus said if you don’t let me wash you, then you have no share with me. So Peter acquiesced but said, “*Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!*”
  - ▶ But Jesus said to him, “*The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean.*” (Jn. 13:9-10) His point is that disciples don’t need to be washed from head to toe again. By his blood, we are completely clean.
    - But as we walk the Walk in this present evil age, our feet will get dirty and will need regular cleansing, daily washing. **So yes, Jesus’ disciples still need to pray this fifth petition, even as we pray it as justified, forgiven people.** This still applies to us.

## The Need to be Forgiving

- ❖ Now this is where it gets discomfoting. Because if “*Forgive us our debts*” still applies to all of us, then so does the rest of the petition. “*As we also have forgiven our debtors.*” Let’s move to our next point. We’ve seen the great need we all have to be forgiven. **And now as people who claim to be forgiven, we have a great need to be forgiving.**
  - ▶ Again as we’ve already mentioned, Jesus is drawing a connection between being a forgiven person and being a forgiving person. Now the nature of that connection could be misconstrued if we’re not careful.
    - **Jesus is *not* suggesting that our willingness to forgive the debts of others makes God more willing to forgive our own debts.** I know it can sound that way, especially in vv14-15. “*14For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*”
- ❖ It sounds like our forgiveness of others earns us the right to be forgiven by God. We seem to merit forgiveness by being forgiving. But that can't be. That would be a gross interpretation of Jesus’ words that contradicts the very heart of his gospel.
  - ▶ Yes, it says if you forgive others, then your heavenly Father will also forgive you. **But notice how it doesn’t mention *how* you became forgiving in the first place.** It’s not specifically address it here, but how your sinful heart got to a place where you can forgive your debtors and show them mercy is a pure work of grace.
    - **Jesus is not trying to answer the chicken-or-the egg question – which came first: us forgiving others OR God forgiving us?** That’s not his concern. He’s just saying you can’t have a chicken without an egg and you can’t have eggs without a chicken. **He’s just pointing to the inseparable relationship between us forgiving others and God forgiving us.**
- ❖ **Like I said earlier, Jesus’ point is that forgiven people are naturally and necessarily forgiving people.** That’s because the grace of God transforms. We are saved by grace alone. Not by our merit, my our righteousness, by our willingness to forgive. We’re saved by grace alone, but not by a grace that leaves us alone. It doesn’t leave us as we are. It inevitably changes us. **The grace of God’s forgiveness transforms us into forgiving people.**
  - ▶ And so by implication, if I harbor an unforgiving spirit towards my debtors, then I’m probably fooling myself to presume I’ve experienced God’s forgiveness, that I’m a recipient of his transforming grace.
- ❖ There’s this instance in Matthew 18, when Peter approached Jesus and asked, “*Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?*” (18:21) Peter was serious. Back then, the Pharisees taught that forgiveness should be offered up to three times, and if your offender still doesn't repent then you’re no longer obliged to offer forgiveness. You can keep your grudge. **So Peter figured that since Jesus’ followers need a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, then more than doubling that number of forgivenesses to seven should do the trick.**

- ❖ But listen to how Jesus replies, *“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.”* And then he goes on to tell his parable. *“<sup>23</sup>Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup>When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents [about 10 million in today’s currency]. <sup>25</sup>And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup>So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup>And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup>But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii [about \$100], and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup>So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup>He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.”*
  
- ❖ **Okay the point so far is that this servant clearly does not grasp the enormity of his debt.** He's minimized his indebtedness. That's the only explanation for his inexplicable attitude towards a fellow servant whose debt was so small in comparison.
  - ▶ Look at v31, *“<sup>31</sup>When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup>Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup>And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. <sup>35</sup>So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”*
  
- ❖ That last line is a warning. It tells us what's at stake if we refuse to forgive others. It's worse than ruined friendships. It's more serious than hindering your spiritual growth. **What’s at stake is our very soul!** If we refuse to forgive, then it says God's anger burns over us. V34 says the unforgiving servant is delivered to the jailers (literally the tormentors) and he'll have to pay off his own debt. That's a horrendous fate. And then v35 says that’s what the Father will do to every one of us if we don’t forgive others from the heart.
  - ▶ Now let's be clear: I don’t think this parable teaches that you can lose your forgiveness or your salvation. That God would ever rescind his pardon. No, that's not the point. **What Jesus teaches in his parable and in his prayer is that if I harbor an unforgiving spirit that refuses to let go of grudges, then that just proves I've never tasted the grace of God's forgiveness in the first place.**
    - The one who's tasted God's grace for himself will not spit it out, trample on it, and refuse to give it to others. **To remain in that posture towards your debtors demonstrates that you have yet to receive the saving and transforming grace of God.** That's a scary thought worth meditating on.
  
- ❖ So what does all this mean? It means if you're the kind of person who keeps grudges, who has a growing list of ex-friends that you refuse to forgive, and if you're fine with that – then you better think twice about praying this fifth petition.

- ▶ **Because this prayer is asking God to treat you the way you treat others.** Forgive me *as* I have forgiven others. Treat me in the same manner. But if you haven't, if you refuse to forgive, then do you realize what you're praying?
  - **Charles Spurgeon says, for the unforgiving person, praying this petition is like reading your own death warrant.** You're essentially praying, "Father do *not* forgive my debts as I have *not* forgiven my debtors."
  
- ❖ Do you see the urgency for you to forgive? To be a forgiving person? **Friend, is there anyone in your life that you need to forgive?** Are you harboring bitterness and grudges towards certain people?
  - ▶ Husbands and wives, is there something between you that needs to be forgiven? Children, are you still upset with your parents? Are you holding something against them? Is there someone at work or someone in your small group who wronged you, who snubbed you, who made an insensitive comment, and you're having difficulty getting past it? Who do you need to forgive?
  
- ❖ Now I want to be sensitive to those of you who are the victims of serious offenses. Please hear me: **Jesus is not suggesting that to forgive someone means you condone what they did to you.** It doesn't minimize the seriousness of their offense or disregard your sense of being victimized. You can still be upset or disgusted at their sin.
  - ▶ Forgiving someone doesn't mean you change your attitude about their sin. **But it does mean you change your attitude about the person.** Oh he's still a sinner. But now I see him as a sinner *just like me*. His indebtedness to me once seemed insurmountable, too large to forgive. But now forgiveness is possible as my eyes are open to my own indebtedness to God and how it's significantly greater.
    - It doesn't change how I think about what they did to me. **To be forgiving is not to be naive.** Be forgiving but be wise! If someone betrayed your trust, then wisdom says you shouldn't put your heart or life in their hands again.
  
- ❖ **I've heard it said that we're not responsible to trust an enemy, but we are responsible to forgive him.** Trust takes time to rebuild. But forgiveness doesn't wait for the offender to rectify the situation, to reform himself, or even to recognize and repent of his offenses. Forgiveness is not always a two-way street. Sometimes you're the only one walking on it.
  - ▶ But as, Lewis Smedes, once wrote, ***"To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner is you."*** Most times we suffer the most when we're unwilling to forgive. You're not responsible for others and their repentance of their own sins, but you are responsible for yourself and your own duty to forgive.
  
- ❖ **But how do you know if you've actually forgiven someone?** Because sometimes our idea of "forgiveness" amounts to little more than avoidance – avoiding the issue, avoiding the disagreement, or avoiding the person altogether. We've calmed down. We're not worked up about it anymore. But have we really forgiven?

- ❖ Let me suggest four signs that demonstrate your forgiveness is genuine. How do you know?
  - 1) **You know you've forgiven your debtor when you no longer hold ill-will towards the person and have no desire for revenge** (1 Thes. 5:15; Rom. 12:19). If you still wish them harm, then you have a ways to go. But that doesn't mean you can't still wish for justice to be done. If your offender has done something illegal, then seeking legal recourse, wanting justice in the courts, is only right. But we're not to take vengeance into our own hands.
    - ▶ **2) You know you've forgiven someone when you start praying for them – praying for their good, their spiritual good** (Matt. 5:44). Specifically, you should be praying for them to come to repentance. That they come to see what they did or said was wrong, and that they receive the grace of God's forgiveness once again, if not for the first time in their life.
  - 3) **You know you've forgiven someone when you've sought out reconciliation** (Rom. 12:18). Notice it says to forgive our debtors and not just their debt. The emphasis is on the *person*, on reconciliation, on the restoration of relationship. Of course there's no guarantee they'll want to reconcile with you. And it's not to suggest you'll ever be best friends. But if you can say you've sincerely done what you can, then you've forgiven them.
    - ▶ **4) You know you've forgiven someone when you're willing to serve them when they're in need** (Exo. 23:4; Matt. 22:39). If you still secretly smile when they suffer, then you have a ways to go. It's when you're as concerned for their good as you are for your own, that you know you've forgiven them.
- ❖ Forgiving is hard. **Forgiving is costly.** If a friend were to borrow your car without asking, completely wreck it, and return with only the steering wheel in hand – you're left with two options. You could demand he make it right and pay for the damages. Make him to pay his own debt. Or you could forgive him. Refuse to let him pay for anything.
  - ▶ But in either option, the cost of the damages has to be paid by someone. **Either he pays or you absorb the cost. The debt is not going to go away by itself.** It's going to be dealt with one way or another. In this case, forgiveness means bearing the debt of your friend's wrongdoing. **That's why Bonhoeffer once said that everyone who forgives someone bears the other's sins.**
    - So it makes perfect sense that God would forgive your sins by bearing it himself through the person of Christ Jesus, the Son of God. Forgiveness is costly. Thank God he refuses to let us pay. He absorbed the cost himself. And now he transforms us and calls us to do the same for others.