

“Forgive us Our Debts”

Lent: Teach us to Pray

Matthew 6:7-15

03/26/23

Introduction

Pray.

KKi. In the summer of 2013 I had the opportunity to work for a non-profit in Southern California. It was, for all intensive purposes an incredible gig – I got to live in a house in Orange County 2 blocks from the beach, work for an organization that I believed in, and my job for the summer was essentially travel to various music festivals and art shows spreading awareness about the work of this particular organization. It was a fantastic summer. Except for one part in particular that still sticks out in my mind.

About mid-July, I returned back into the offices after one of my road trips to a couple of different festivals. And I remember thinking that I had just crushed it. I was doing an awesome job, hustling out on the road to connect with people and spread the message of the good work this organization was going, only to walk into the office on my first day back, directly into a meeting with my supervisor who let me know some of the complaints he had received from the coworkers I was on the trip with about some particular weaknesses and inadequacies I had that were making their lives and work very difficult.

There’s something uniquely exposing about having a person in authority over you know specific ways you’re not awesome.

Have you ever had that experience? A bad review at your job OR a sit down with a teacher or professor where they tell you all the things you’re doing wrong Or maybe back when you were in high school and you broke the rules and your parents said those 4 powerful words – “I’m disappointed in you.”

I remember that meeting in the summer of 2013 like it was yesterday. How I instantly felt embarrassed, exposed, wanting to defend myself and my actions.

- There’s something vulnerable to feeling incompetent.
- There’s something uniquely jarring about those moments where we become unavoidably aware of our own shortcomings and mistakes.

That’s why today’s line in the Lord’s Prayer can be so difficult.

Matt 6:12 – forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

This is a jarring line of exposure. As one pastor says it’s like the unexpected wave that comes up in the middle of the lake that throws the whole thing upside down.

Here we are, cruising along in the Lord’s Prayer. We just saw last week this beautiful invitation to ask for daily bread, to bring all of our requests to God. Next week we’ll learn to pray — deliver us from evil.

And here in between a prayer for provision and a prayer for protection we get...**Matt 6:12 – and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.**

A line which invites us to open up even the most broken, jacked up, and evil parts of our souls to the Lord showing him what he already knows – that there are specific ways we are not in fact awesome.

A moment in prayer to declare to the Lord – I'm not as put together, good, and holy as I often think myself to be or as I want to present myself to the world. But in fact, I am broken, full of sin, rebellious at my core, and desperately in need of the saving work of Jesus and the continual forgiveness of my heavenly Father.

That's the nature of this line in the prayer. Are we ready for that today?

Awesome. Let's do this. We'll break down this line together, make sure we're on the same page of what Jesus is telling us to pray here, then we'll apply it into our prayer lives as we seek to be a people who don't just think about and consider prayer, but actually pray.

Breakdown of Text

Matt 6:12 – and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Our Debts

Let's start by talking about that word in the middle of the line – “debts” – or in the greek “opheiléma”, which can be translated as some English translations do – “sin”. (NLT - forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us)

Let's spend a moment talking about sin...

There are many ways the Bible talks about sin.

- **A crime** – Sin often involves the breaking of God's laws, the governing rules of life that He has established and set for us to live in.
- **A shortcoming** – a missing of the mark. God has a standard, and sin is when we break that standard, either through the things we do contrary to his design or the things we don't do that he calls us to do and live out. God has called us to love the poor, so when we fail to do that, when we neglect the poor, we miss his mark for our lives and that is called *sin*.

But sin is not just things we do, the Bible takes it much deeper than that. Sin is also described as:

- **A positional status** – Being “in sin” means we are in a state of enmity, separated from God. Those who do not worship God are his enemies, separated from and rebellious against Him.
- **A pollution of the soul** – sin is the corrupting force inside of us which bends us against the things of God.
- **A decayer of the world** – sin is described in Scripture as the force operating in the world which breaks things down towards death and decay.

Sin is a very very big problem. In fact, it is shown as the greatest problem of humanity (both internal and external) and the very thing Jesus came to deal with – as Paul writes to his disciple Timothy in **1 Tim 1:15 – 15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...**

DEBT – Here in the Lord's Prayer specifically, Jesus refers to sin as a **debt**. This is one of the predominant pictures for sin we get in the Scriptures. Sin puts us under a debt.

And here's what that means – when we sin, we do not sin against a rule or a law; we sin against the person of God. We have gone against Him. And when we do so, we put ourselves under a moral debt to Him.

God has commanded us, His creation, to be holy and perfect, as he is holy and perfect. So with even one sin, even what might feel like the smallest thing – losing our temper, a little white lie – whatever it may be we fall hopelessly short of God’s standard. And because of that, as unpopular as it may be to say, the Scriptures are clear – what we deserve, rightfully and justly from the perfect God of the Universe is death and punishment for eternity.

Rom 6:23 – For the wages of sin is death...

That is the debt we owe. That is what Jesus means when He says debt. We owe a debt to God that is so massive, it should require our very life.

Which is why those first two words in this line are so important.

Forgive Us

We don’t need help. We don’t need a guide towards being “our best selves”. We don’t need aid. We don’t need God to simply overlook or give us a little bit of leeway.

We need nothing short of miraculous debt payment, pardon and forgiveness. We need someone else to step in and say – this debt is canceled, I’ve paid it.

And that’s exactly what we get offered to us in Christ Jesus. Christ comes, lives a perfect life we cannot live (meaning is never put under the debt of sin), and yet goes to the cross, taking our sins upon himself to pay the debt we owe God.

Our debt payment requires nothing less than our lives, and yet Jesus gives up His life instead. He pays the debt to God. So we can be forgiven.

Our sins are done away with. As the literal translation of this text would read – “send our sins far away from us.” Go to the books which record our debt, cancel out the debts, and then burn the books.

Which is what God does for all who trust in Jesus. For all who look on the cross of Christ and believe – Him in my place for sin – we are forgiven of our debts.

Col 3:13-14 – 13 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, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

That is what is offered to us in what Christians call “the gospel”. That is the foundation of our faith – Jesus in our place for our sin to cancel our debt we owe to God.

Now, then here comes the tricky part – This prayer is part of a sermon where Jesus is speaking to His disciples, His followers. So He’s not talking about salvation prayer. He’s talking to those who already trust in Him.

So how do we pray this prayer as Christians? If our sins have already been dealt with...Once and forever for all who trust in Jesus – we have forgiveness of sins. Jesus doesn’t keep dying. He died one time, once. When you put your faith in Him you are forgiven - for sins past, for sins present, and for sins future. You are sealed. We don’t have to keep receiving salvation. It’s done.

Then why this prayer? Why this line? If God has forgiven my sins through Jesus, why do I need to keep asking for forgiveness?

I find a few folks really helpful here.

Justin Dillehay (pastor in TN) – “The reason we pray “Forgive us our debts” is not because we’ve lost our state of grace and need to be re-saved. Justification is permanent. Rather, confessing our sin reminds us there’s more to salvation than being justified. Salvation also involves being sanctified and treated as sons and daughters.”

RC Sproul - “Yes, my sins have all been paid for, once and for all, on the cross. But Jesus taught us to pray for forgiveness as part of our ongoing communion with God. We need a fresh understanding, a fresh experience, of His grace and His forgiveness every day.”

One pastor talks about it like a judge and a father. In our prayer of saving faith, God the judge is satisfied. Yet in the prayer of daily confession, we learn once again to walk in communion with God our Father.

We don’t ask for forgiveness in a salvific sense, but rather in a relational sense. This is a prayer for the restoration of personal fellowship with God when that fellowship has been hindered by our sin.

Trash. Let’s say Lindsay and I are having a discussion, and I lose my temper and yell at her. And that rightfully makes her upset. I have sinned against her. If I were to say “Well we’re married. She’s already committed herself to me for life, I don’t need to apologize.” That wouldn’t make any sense. Though it is true that our commitment was declared in the past, me not apologizing for the way my sin went against her, is me getting in the way of the communion and intimacy we are to actively have in our marriage relationship. In fact the longer we’re married the more I should understand how my sin hurts her and the more ready I should be to apologize and seek reconciliation.

This prayer (for forgiveness) was supremely and totally answered when you put your faith in Jesus...but the continual call of the Scriptures is to go back each time we rebel against our Father, and receive from Him renewed daily grace and mercy for our ongoing sin and shortcomings.

Then we must deal with the 2nd part...

As we also have forgiven our debtors

This is the only part of the Lord’s Prayer where Jesus tells us to include a caveat. He doesn’t say – “Give us daily bread as we provide others their daily bread.” But here Jesus says – the forgiveness we ask God for is directly connected to the forgiveness we are willing to give others.

Forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors...

Does this mean forgiving others is a requirement to being forgiven? Yes and no.

Forgiveness is a gift, freely available to us through Jesus. The Scriptures are abundantly clear on that and they do not contradict themselves. BUT the Scriptures are also clear that those who receive and live by God’s forgiveness must imitate it.

So this is not a condition, but rather an evidence and aspiration.

Those who have been forgiven much by God, and who live in the daily reality of that forgiveness – are those who forgive others. Being forgiven by God and forgiving others are inseparable. Forgiven people forgive. If you don’t forgive others, it’s (according to Jesus) overwhelming evidence you have not fully embraced His forgiveness for you.

The parable Jesus tells Peter in Matthew 18 is helpful here. Peter comes to Jesus and asks - How many times do I have to forgive my brother if he sins against me? 7 times? (Jewish teachings were 3 times, so this is Peter trying per usual to appear extra holy). And Jesus says, "no Peter, let me tell you a story."

He goes on to tell a story about a man who was forgiven a debt of billions of dollars that he owed to the king of his land. Then he turns around and finds a man who owed him basically like \$100. And the man doesn't forgive him.

And this is how Jesus ends the story, **Matt 18:32-35 – 32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'**

Peter asks, like we often do – "how much should I forgive? And how often? And who? And how bad does their sin need to be for me not to forgive?" We ask those same questions. Jesus essentially says through this story to us, "People in my kingdom forgive. If you're not forgiving, perhaps I'm not your King."

Invitation to Fearless Examination

So let me summarize all of this for us – "Forgive us our Debts" in an invitation to a daily practice of confessing our sins to and asking forgiveness from our heavenly Father.

Now, here's where the rubber hits the road for us today:

- ***In order for us to confess our sins, we have to name our sins.***
- ***And in order to name our sins, we have to know our sins.***
- ***And in order to know our sins, we have to be willing to actually stop and look at the dark parts of our heart.***

In other words there is a practice that comes before and as the first step of confessing our sins to God, and that is the practice of **examen**.

Examen – A daily exercise of opening our hearts and lives to God.

An ancient practice rooted in the Scriptures, the prayers of the Psalms, the practices of church history – where we learn to sit still with God and let Him expose the dark parts of our hearts to us, such that we might confess it to Him and receive His tender love, forgiveness, and care.

To come before the Lord in humility, courage, brokenness – fully aware of our Heavenly Father's profound love and kindness to us in Christ, open our hearts before Him, and ask very simply and courageously – show me my sin that I may ask you for forgiveness and turn it over to you.

Psalm 139:23-34 – Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Search me. Test me. Examine the wicked parts of my heart. Actually know me God. Know the inner workings of my heart. Know the secret thoughts I hide from others. Know the wicked parts of my soul that I'm scared to even know myself.

Search me, show me sins I don't even know exist myself. Be with me in the midst of this. And then forgive me gracious Father.

It's once again an invitation back to communion.

The central goal of prayer is communion with God. Here too - in "forgive us our debts" we're once again invited back to a place of communion, asking him to examine us, look at the dark corners of our hearts, know us, even the parts we'd much rather keep hidden.

And this is hard for us for a whole host of reasons...

- Because we're **busy** people, and this requires us to sit still, and wait on the tender voice of God.
- We're **chaotic and noisy**, we rush into prayer ready to talk and say things (even good things like adoration), and this requires silence.
- We're trained to **never think we're wrong**. We live in a victim culture where we're trained to always point fingers and push the blame onto others.

And still, more than anything, this line and the practice of examen is so difficult because – we are resistant to the very things it requires – being vulnerable and exposed.

I think about Adam and Eve in the garden. They sin and rebel against God. First sin in the history of the world. And immediately they feel the need to hide from God, cover themselves up and blameshift onto others. Their first gut reaction to sin, is to run from God and hide.

Nothing has changed, has it?

This is still the experience of sin and shame today. If I open myself up to God, and agree with Him that there are very real parts of me that are wicked, evil, against Him and His design for the world and my life – that's uncomfortable and painful. And so I'd much rather blame others, I'd much rather hide, I'd much rather stick my head in the sand and shout "I'm doing fine LORD!" until I can convince myself that's true.

And yet we learn in this practice to remember – **the place of communion is not running from, but running to.**

That's why I wanted to start this morning with a reminder of the gospel. Because that foundation – That Christ has stood in our place, for those who trust in Him is the foundation of this practice. We are safe and secure in the arms of our Father who longs for us to be honest with Him about the ways we still rebel, we still run, we still turn.

Henri Nouwen – "Only in the context of grace can we face our sin; only in the place of healing do we dare to show our wounds; only with a single-minded attention to Christ can we give up our clinging fears and face our own true nature...It is a place where Christ remodels us in his own image and frees us from the victimizing compulsions of the world."

That **examen**, like everything else in the Lord's Prayer, is once again an invitation to communion with God.

Frederick Beuchener – "To confess your sins to God is not to tell him anything he doesn't already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abyss between you. When you confess them, they become the bridge."

Steps to Examen

So what does this look like?

1. *Silence and Solitude*

Nouwen – “Solitude is the furnace of transformation.”

2. *Invite God*

Communion***

3. *Identify + Name*

Doctor. One of the names thrown around for Jesus is the great physician. But think about what would happen if you should up to the doctor, and resist His very specific treatment for your own generalities.

“Your foot is broken.” No, I think I just have some pain. No, your foot is broken. “Come on, just give me some pain meds.”

If you show up to a great doctor and describe yourself as “generally sick” and resist all of their specific diagnosis, you’re not going to be able to receive the full weight of treatment they want to offer you.

To confess is to say, “I want to name my symptoms, completely and comprehensively, because I want healing, completely and comprehensively.”

We put away the generic confession of sin, and we learn to name it:

- We go from “I was angry” to “Lord, I blew up on my spouse again. I yelled, I was short tempered. I should not have said those things that I said. Forgive me Lord.”
- We go from “I had some bad thoughts” to “Lord, I lusted after my coworker again. They are a temptation to me. I gave in to thoughts about them that devalued how they are made in the image of God. I need your forgiveness and your pardon.”

Sins to Identify:

- **Blatant Sins** – These are sins on the surface (actions, thoughts)
- **Ongoing Idols** — This category reminds us that sin reveals who or what we really trust. Searching here reveals the motivations behind our actions. (e.g. security, power, control, affection, pleasure, approval, etc.).
- **Commission** – Things we did.
- **Omission** – Good we have left undone.

4. *Confess + Repent*

We actually confess it – we agree with God on it.

We repent – We ask God for strength to turn from it.

Part of this step of repentance might be to go forgive others. We might realize as we’re ready to ask God for forgiveness we need to first go forgive someone we’re still harboring resentment and unforgiveness towards.

5. *Receive Forgiveness and Welcome*

Too often we stop at confession. We must also receive from God his pardon. Forgiveness.

Read Psalm 32:1-5 as lead into practice.

Out of practice – Psalm 32:10-11.