

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Teach Us to Pray: Forgive Us Our Sins

Matthew 6:9-13

Today we continue our sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. So far, we've listened as Jesus calls us into his relationship with the Father, who is the source of our life and salvation, and whose holiness shapes us, individually and together. Then we listened as Jesus teaches us to long for and pray for the loving sovereignty of God, the reign of Christ, to be fully and finally manifested in the world and in our lives. Then last week we listened as Jesus reminds us of our dependence upon God for our daily provision, and our responsibility for practicing the kingdom by providing for the hungry. "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread."

That brings us to the next petition in the Lord's prayer: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." This is one spot where praying the Lord's prayer with others can get tricky. Instead of sins, some people will say "trespasses" and others will say "debts." The Greek text, and the history of translation, leave room for different interpretations. Remember that the Lord's Prayer appears in Matthew and Luke. Matthew uses a Greek word that indicates "money owed," while Luke uses a Greek word that indicates "sins forgiven." In his 1526 translation, William Tyndale used "trespasses," and later on the King James Version used "debts." So you can see that opinions have varied.

The best translation is probably "sins." It's true that Jesus may have in mind the Jubilee, a Jewish celebration in which debts were forgiven, slaves were freed, land was redistributed, and normal relationships were restored. This would point more to the release from "debts." But overall, asking for forgiveness from God, and practicing forgiveness toward others, were common elements in Jewish prayers. Put all this together, and "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" is probably the closest to what Jesus meant. Plus, sin itself is like a debt, something we owe to God that's beyond our capacity to repay. As one person has described God's work in Christ, "We incur debt, but God puts nothing in the debit column of our life's account. We owe, but we don't have to pay."¹ That's because Jesus has taken care of our indebtedness to God. Jesus took upon himself our sin debt, paying what we owed because of our disobedience, and releasing us for new life in the grace of God.

The term "forgive" literally has to do with "release." That's God's purpose for us in Christ, to release us from our bondage to and participation in sin, and to liberate us for our future as his people. The God of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is a forgiving God. This is fundamental to who God is and how God relates to us and to the world he has made. In the biblical understanding, forgiveness is the removal of barriers between God and humanity. This is rooted in God's creation of his people Israel and his covenant relationship with them. And from God's people comes the Messiah, our Lord Jesus, whose ministry was the manifestation of divine mercy, extending God's forgiveness to all, summoning us to repentance and faith.

In today's call to worship, the author of Psalm 103 counted up the blessings for which his soul should bless God. Forgiveness of sins was placed first on the list. Further along, in Psalm 130, we hear that God's readiness to forgive is a reason for awe. "If you, O Lord,

kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared" (vv. 3-4). At the same time, this celebration of God's forgiving nature doesn't mean that God is benignly tolerant of our rebellion and disobedience. Forgiveness isn't God's way of saying, "No harm, no foul" or "Let bygones be bygones" or "No big deal." Actually, the pervasiveness of sin, and the way that we all offend against God, is a big deal. The severity of the problem is revealed in the scope of God's solution. The death of the Son is how God reconciles us to himself. Our redemption is costly. Look at the cross, and you'll see the depth of God's desire to pardon. You'll see what it took to release you from your debt.

This unmerited mercy of God, this forgiveness that sets free, is a gift, a gift to be received by faith. But faith isn't something that you and I generate on our own, which then obligates God to hand over the forgiveness. No, in Christ, God reaches out to give even before we're ready to receive. And faith is simply the humble opening of your hands to receive the bread of deliverance that God has prepared for you in his Son. In receiving what only God can give, you receive Christ himself, and the new life that he brings.

And this new life takes shape in the way that you forgive others. Remember that we pray, "Forgive us our sins *as we forgive those who sin against us.*" God's giving of himself through the death of his Son reconciles us to God and to one another. As Gordon Smith says, "There is no experience of the forgiveness of God that is not tied to our forgiveness of one another."² This link between God's forgiveness and our forgiveness is reinforced in the verses that immediately follow the Lord's Prayer in Matthew: "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (6:14-15).

At first glance, these verses seem to indicate that God's forgiveness is conditional. In other words, God only forgives us when we forgive others. But this would change God's forgiveness from a gift into a payment, something that we draw out of God by showing mercy to others. And we've already seen that God's unmerited forgiveness is something to be received by faith. So is Jesus now walking back the priority of divine grace. Is God's forgiveness actually something we earn? Do we cause God to forgive us by our forgiveness toward others?

Later in Matthew, Jesus tells a parable that may help us get a better handle on these things. A king forgave a servant who owed him a debt that amounted to an enormous fortune. The servant, released from this massive burden, then turned right around and threw into prison a fellow servant who owed him a measly amount, basically a day's wage. When the king got word of what the servant had done, he called the servant in and said, "You wicked servant, 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?" (18:32-33). He then had the servant put back in jail "until he should pay back all he owed" (18:34).

If we press the details of this story too hard, we could take it to mean that God might take back his forgiveness if we ourselves are unforgiving. But that's probably taking the illustration too literally. The heart of the matter is that God's forgiveness and our forgiveness are linked. They go hand in hand. Being forgiving toward others is a sign of the extent to which you have genuinely experienced God's forgiveness. On the other hand, withholding forgiveness from others, and keeping accounts of their relational indebtedness to you, should give you pause to consider where you are in your own reconciliation with God. How can we fully appreciate and experience the mercy of God if we're being unmerciful toward others? If we're harboring resentment, nursing anger, and carrying grudges, how can we expect to grow in the grace of Christ and have it flow through us to others?

Author Leslie Leyland Fields has written about the pain and struggles of her relationship with her father, especially near the end of his life. There was much hurt and a deep sadness about what could have been, but never was, in his relationship with his children. And yet, Fields writes:

I *had* forgiven my father. That alone was miraculous. Two years before his death, I felt a piercing, insistent tug back toward the man I had run from decades ago. I had no good memories to lure me back. It was the Holy Spirit convicting me through the prayer I had uttered for decades without a thought: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."...

I was enabled to release my father from the debts he could not pay. Indeed, I came to see that no matter how hard I pressed or prayed, my father could not pay back what he owed me or anyone in my family. The choice before me was clear: to continue to demand payment from someone who was himself bankrupt, deepening my own sense of anger and loss, or to forgive—to release him from those debts and offer to him the same mercy that God gave to me.³

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Reciting this prayer is one thing. Having God use it to form you into a more merciful person is another. When we ask for the coming of God's kingdom, and the doing of God's will, on earth as in heaven, we need to remember that the route to that future passes through forgiveness. Restoration is inseparable from reconciliation, with God and with one another. God's forgiveness is designed to be received *and* passed on. Otherwise, our hardheartedness and impenitence blocks the flow of divine mercy that creates the newness we need.

Biblical scholar N. T. Wright compares forgiveness to the dynamics of breathing. He says,

It is our birthright as the followers of Jesus to breath in true divine forgiveness day by day as the cool clear air which our spiritual lungs need, instead of the grimy germ-laden air that is pumped at us from all sides. And once we start inhaling God's fresh air there is a good chance that we will start to breath it out too. As we learn what it is like to be forgiven, we begin to discover that it is possible, and indeed joyful, to forgive others.⁴

This doesn't mean that forgiving those who've wronged us is simple or easy. It's often not a single moment but a process, a deep and difficult process that involves dying to the desire to disconnect or relinquishing the impulse to retaliate. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." In order to receive and extend forgiveness, we have to keep coming back to what Jesus teaches us to pray. We have to keep coming back to the place where God meets us with mercy, the cross. As Fields says of forgiveness, "It isn't easy, and we will do it imperfectly, but someone has shown us the way: a man staked to a tree, who in his last breath forgave the very ones who hung him there."⁵

Today we come back again to our Lord's Prayer. We come back again to our Lord's cross. We come back again to our Lord's table, as a sign of mercy given, mercy received, and mercy shared.

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 142.

² Gordon T. Smith, *Teach Us to Pray* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2018) 69.

³ Leslie Leyland Fields, "Forgiving Our Fathers and Mothers." *Christianity Today* website. September 24, 2014. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/september-web-only/forgiving-our-fathers-and-mothers.html> (November 4, 2021).

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*. Narrated by Derek Perkins, Christian Audio, 2016. Audiobook.

⁵ Fields, "Forgiving Our Fathers and Mothers."