

**“The Lord’s Prayer Part 4:
Forgive Us Our Sins as We Forgive Those Who Sin Against Us”**
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Based upon Neh. 5:1-13; Matt. 18:21-35

Forgiveness. According to medical professionals at esteemed hospitals like Johns Hopkins and the Mayo Clinic, it’s more than a nice thing to offer, it is actually an essential practice for good health.¹ “There is an enormous physical burden to being hurt and disappointed,” says Karen Swartz, M.D., director of the Mood Disorders Adult Consultation Clinic at Hopkins. “Chronic anger puts you into a fight-or-flight mode, which results in numerous changes in heart rate, blood pressure and immune response. Those changes, then, increase the risk of depression, heart disease and diabetes, among other conditions. Forgiveness...calms stress levels, leading to improved health.”² If you want to be well and happy, you have to learn how to let go. This doesn’t mean forgetting what happened or condoning the behavior that hurt you. It simply means letting go of the anger, sadness, and resentment caused by another person’s actions or a situation, so that you aren’t imprisoned by them or the desire for vengeance anymore.

Forgiveness is also essential to maintaining healthy relationships. As *Proverbs* wisely observes, “Love prospers when a fault is forgiven, but dwelling on it separates close friends.” (Prov. 17:9) You cannot have a lasting good marriage, or deep friendships, or live peacefully in a diverse community without forgiveness because human beings are imperfect. We make mistakes, wound, and upset others all the time, both intentionally and unintentionally. The only options therefore are either to live alone, confident in your rightness and cut off from the world, or to learn how to forgive others. Forgiveness is the path which leads us to health, connection, and love.

Knowing this, it is not surprising that the 5th petition in the Lord’s Prayer is about forgiveness. We want to be healthy, connected to God and our neighbors, and loved. So, after we pray for enough food to meet our needs today and tomorrow, we then turn our attention to our need for God’s merciful forgiveness. “Forgive us,” we pray, “as we forgive;” then we move on quickly hoping that God won’t really do what we just said. If God actually forgave *only* “as we forgive” others, or as *Luke* says, because “we ourselves have forgiven everyone,” then we would be in big trouble because human beings aren’t nearly as good at forgiving as God is, particularly in this age of so called “cancel culture.” We hold grudges and nurse wounds. We categorize people as good or bad, not allowing for the fact that they can be both. We say that many things are simply unforgivable, confusing both excusing and forgetting with forgiving. We cut ourselves off from others without giving them a chance, and hold onto bitterness weeks, months, and even years longer than we should.

¹ “*Forgiveness: Letting go of grudges and bitterness*”, the Mayo Clinic, Mayoclinic.org, posted Nov. 13, 2020; retrieved March 9, 2021 from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/forgiveness/art-20047692?p=1>

² “*Forgiveness: Your Health Depends on It*,” Johns Hopkins Medicine; retrieved March 9, 2021 from <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/forgiveness-your-health-depends-on-it>

If we are honest about all of this, then praying “as we forgive” is more than a little difficult to do, particularly after hearing scary parables like the one we just heard about the unforgiving servant. After the servant was handed over to be tortured for refusing to be as merciful to his debtor as his king had been merciful to him, the story ends with the chilling line, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” (Matt. 18:35). This parable really makes it seem as if God’s mercy is conditional on our forgiving others. Several other passages in the Bible affirm this too. That’s why it is such good news that Jesus provided an alternative perspective. Jesus forgave everyone on the cross, including his murderers, who had been unwilling to forgive him for threatening their power with his teachings. (Luke 23:34). He forgives us too. But even if God’s forgiveness is not conditional on our behavior, as both the hyperbole in the parable and the reciprocity in the prayer illustrate, there *should be* a link in our minds and hearts between what God does for us and what we do for others; otherwise, we cheapen God’s grace. As God is merciful, so we are called to be merciful. As God forgives us, so we are called to forgive others. This is the way we show our gratitude for what God has done, and the way that we strive to follow God’s way in Christ. We may not do this perfectly, but every time we pray “as we forgive,” we are pledging to try, with God’s help, to do what the unforgiving servant failed to do; we are pledging to pass on the amazing undeserved mercy that we have been given ourselves to others.

That’s something worth thinking about. But let’s face it, the question that this part of the Lord’s Prayer usually raises in most people’s minds is not “How can possibly say and mean this?” but “Oh no! What am I supposed to say next?” I suspect almost everyone listening to me today has had the experience of going to a church for the first time, maybe for a wedding or funeral, maybe because you are church shopping. All is well until the Lord’s Prayer starts, and then you start to sweat. “What do people say in this church?” your mind starts to wonder: “debts, sins, or trespasses?” I always pause on the line and join in a beat behind so that I know which words to say. But inevitably there are people who choose boldly to pray whatever they know regardless of what everyone else is doing. That’s when you get that awkward moment created by the fact that it takes less time to say, “as we forgive our debtors” than it does to say, “as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

If we turn to Scripture for guidance on what the words should be, we quickly see how these different versions came to be. *Matthew* says “debts” in his version of the Lord’s Prayer, but then immediately follows with the line “for if you forgive others their trespasses” just to muddy the waters. Luke’s version of the prayer uses “sins” for the first part, as in “forgive us our sins,” but then continues, “for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” (Luke 11:4). Technically, that means that all of the versions have biblical grounding. But Bible scholar Ken Bailey, who knew all kind of ancient Middle Eastern languages including the Aramaic in which Jesus would have originally spoken the prayer, argued that since all of these Greek translations probably came from the single Aramaic word “*khoba*,” which was used to describe both actual debts and spiritual sins, those meanings probably get closer to the heart of what Jesus wanted us to think about than “trespasses.”³

³ Hansen, Gary Neal, “*Okay, Why ‘Trespasses,’ ‘Debts’ and ‘Sins’? (Heidelberg Catechism Q119)*”, Gary Neal Hansen Blog, Sept. 25, 3014, Comment by Father Dustin citing Ken Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p. 126; retrieved March 9, 2021 from <https://garynealhansen.com/okay-why-trespasses-debts-and-sins-heidelberg-catechism-q119>.

Debts and debtors were the words that were used for more than a thousand years in the Church because of this. The popular “trespass” translation wasn’t created until the 16th Century, when a man named William Tyndale produced an English translation of the Bible to compete with the Latin Vulgate of the Roman Catholic Church. Although he was executed for the offense of presuming to translate the word of God, his version ultimately took hold of the Anglican church, probably because trespassing was huge issue in his day. Wealthy aristocrats had taken the land of poor farmers, forcing many to poach game from their old land in order to survive. The aristocrats’ failure to forgive the trespasses of the people they were oppressing presented a good illustration for many pastors in those days of what not to do, given what we pray.⁴

But Tyndale’s use of a real economic crisis to inform his teachings about the prayer and forgiveness should still give us food for thought as we think about the debts and sins we are called to forgive because from the very beginning, the term “debt” was meant to be taken both financially and non-financially. As Pastor Tim Kumfer observed: “Smack dab in the middle of the Lord’s Prayer, obscured by old translations and otherworldly assumptions, is a radical cry for Jubilee justice... Jesus saw that debt was (and is) a primary mechanism of social and even spiritual control; one which must be broken if his hearers were to live into the freedom for which God had called them. He invited his followers to return to the Jubilee wisdom of the Law of Moses, practicing an economy characterized by community and forgiveness, not competition and retribution.”⁵ The Jubilee wisdom he was referring to is recorded in *Leviticus 25*, which records the Lord’s command that every 50 years Israelites were to have a total socio-economic reset of their culture in order to ensure that they were following God’s ways and not the world’s. One of the things they were commanded to do was to forgive all debts and free all slaves. In that way they would remember that everything is really God’s property and ensure that a ruling class of wealthy folks would not dominate the poor forever.

There is no evidence that Israel ever practiced Jubilee. They liked their stuff as much as we do and weren’t inclined to give it back. But as we heard from today’s lesson from *Nehemiah*, God’s spokespersons never stopped linking debt-forgiveness and liberation with faithfulness. Nehemiah was the governor of Judah during the restoration period after the people came back from exile in Babylon. When the people came back there was a famine; everyone was scrambling for food. Many of the working farmers had to mortgage their farms to the wealthy in order to pay their taxes and eat. Some even had to sell their children into slavery to make ends meet. Instead of doing what they could to help, those who had wealth and land saw the crisis as an opportunity to get even richer and started charging exorbitant interest rates on loans. Nehemiah considered this outrageously unfaithful to God’s covenant. “What are you doing?” he cried. “We are trying to rebuild a kingdom in such a way that it will be more faithful to God than the last one, and yet you newly-liberated rich folks are immediately re-enslaving the poor folks

⁴ “Forgive Us Our What? Three Ways We Say the Lord’s Prayer,” DesiringGod.org; retrieved Mar. 9, 2021 from <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/forgive-us-our-what>; Pally, Marcia, “Opinion ‘Forgive us our debts’: The economics of the Lord’s Prayer”, ABC Religion & Ethics, Posted Tues. Jul. 16, 2019; updated Mon. Oct. 19, 2020; retrieved Mar. 9, 2021 from <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/forgive-our-debts-the-economics-of-the-lords-prayer/11314116>

⁵ *Animating Illustrations*, “cf: forgiveness”, HOMILETICSONLINE.COM; retrieved Mar. 25, 2019 from <https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration...> citing Tim Kumfer, “What does it mean to ‘Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?’” Sojo.net, July 6, 2011.

only weeks after their liberation. Stop this gross taking of interest immediately,” he insisted. “Restore to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine and oil...” The message was clear: they could not be faithful while they were exploiting their neighbors.

Imagine what might change in the way our world now runs if, when Christians prayed “as we forgive our debtors,” we thought about actual debts in addition to relational and spiritual debts. During the Reformation, John Calvin took this petition very literally, and would not allow any Christians to take Communion if they were charging their neighbors exorbitant interest rates.⁶ Imagine if we still saw such a direct connection between economic equity and faithfulness? There are still many people who like to think that the United States was or is a Christian nation. But our economy speaks otherwise. Think of all the people in Texas who were stuck with bankrupting \$9,000 monthly electric bills simply because they were “lucky” enough not to lose power when so many others did in the last big storm. The company didn’t eat the losses, it stuck it to its customers instead. Think about all of the people who right now are only surviving the pandemic because legislation temporarily prevented them from being evicted for being behind on rent, mortgage payments, or student loans. What will become of these people when they lose that protection? Given that the pandemic was outside of everyone’s control, wouldn’t it be amazing if we as a nation just decided that all pandemic-caused debts from 2020 will simply be forgiven? Impractical? Maybe, maybe not. But faithful, absolutely.

The reason that we Christians should at least entertain such thoughts, as today’s New Testament lessons illustrate, is because God has forgiven us an even greater debt. Here is where the financial imagery blurs with the spiritual, and debts with sins. After the disciples had been arguing with each other for a while over who was the greatest, Peter, clearly irritated with some of the disciples, asked Jesus a simple question about the forgiveness of sins. “How often do we have to forgive them?” he asked, suggesting 7 times to show his generosity. At that point the Law only required forgiving 3 times. But Jesus said “You must forgive 77 times, (or 70 times 7 depending on which manuscript you use). 77 was the number of times someone named Lamech, mentioned in *Genesis* Chapter 4, pledged he would seek vengeance against anyone who wronged him. (Gen. 4:24). So, Jesus may have been symbolically undoing that, or he may, by saying 490, been trying to suggest a big enough number to make it clear to Peter that if he was busy counting, he wasn’t busy forgiving. But whatever the number, the justification for it was illustrated with the parable of the unforgiving servant. The debt that the king forgives in the beginning is unbelievably huge. It would have taken more than 150,000 years for anyone in Jesus’ day to pay it off. The debt that the forgiven servant then refuses to forgive is very modest by comparison, about 100 days’ worth of wages in Jesus’ day. This is why the servant gets in trouble in the end. To receive so much and still refuse to give so little was an outrageous display of ingratitude.

We are supposed to see ourselves as the servant in the story. God has forgiven us way more than 490 times for so many things. God has forgiven humanity for sins— for failing to do what we are supposed to do again and again and again since the beginning of time. God has

⁶ *Ibid*, Marcia Pally, *Opinion: Forgive us our Debts...*

forgiven us for trespasses, for all the things that we have done that we shouldn't have done, and God has forgiven us for debts, for all that we owe God in light of all that God has given us and all we have promised but failed to deliver in return. If we truly understand this, then we cannot help but extend mercy to others. Even though it is hard to do that sometimes, it doesn't feel right not to do that. It's offensively ungrateful.

Still, reaching that point of understanding takes daily work because forgiveness is not instinctive to human beings. It's a divine attribute far more than a human one. So, we have to work to let go of our sense of entitlement and recognize how much we are blessed. We have to work to let go of our sense of justification and recognize that although we are quick to excuse our own behavior because of extenuating circumstances, we are equally quick to dismiss the relevance of those circumstances when they apply to others. We have to let go of our passionate devotion to thinking about what others "owe" us – whether it's respect, kindness, love, money, or support of other kinds, and train ourselves to think instead about what we owe God and others out of gratitude for our lives. And in those situations when the offense against us truly inexcusable because the crime was so horrendous or the person was unrepentant or both, then we have to remind ourselves that forgiving is not the same as forgetting or excusing. It is not saying that evil isn't real or that helping the bad matters more to God than healing the good. In those situations, we forgive because doing so ensures that the person cannot, in addition to everything else, rob us of the grace and peace God wants to give us. We don't have to reach the point of wanting to reconcile. We just have to strive for the point when we can acquiesce to leaving the fate of the offender in God's hands so that we can move on.

"Forgive us our debts, our sins, our trespasses, as we try to do the same," we pray. Like the other petitions in the Lord's Prayer, this one is a corporate prayer, designed to help us live in relationship with God and one another in faith and love, enjoying together God's economy of abundance. May God help us not just to have the faith to pray these words individually and together, but also to mean them, for the good of all our relationships and the glory of the God, who has blessed us and forgiven us all beyond measure. Amen.