

Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> May 2018  
'Forgive us our debts'

We are looking at the six petitions which comprise the Lord's Prayer. This is the model of prayer taught by Jesus to His disciples, and in its six short phrases, He lays out for us everything which is required for an authentic and happy Christian life! If ever we were presented with an example of Divine wisdom, this is it. Jesus says so much in so few words, and after two thousand years of Christians studying it and doing it, we have still not come to the end of its depths, and its flow of grace has never diminished.

It is important to say again that this is the disciple's prayer. Those who are attending to the character as outlined in the Beatitudes are the people who will pray like this. Those who are seeking to grow more like Christ begin doing so by realizing in increasing measure their poverty of spirit. As Christian character grows, so will our desire and sense of need to pray increase. As we increase our understanding and practice of prayer, we will grow in Christian character. These two things always go together in a cycle, as it were.

We come now to the fifth petition. 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.' This petition is all about the welfare of our souls. Many people struggle with burdens in relationships, and from things that have happened to them. Many people's lives are defined by past and ongoing hostilities. Many, many conflicts and wars are fueled by unforgiveness of past offences, real or imagined.

1. Firstly some things that are not forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not the 'forgive and forget' attitude that we are told by onlookers that we must adopt. Forgive, yes, but to forget would rob us of a most important learning opportunity.

Forgiveness is not saying that a wrong done does not matter because I am a 'nobody,' or the response of a flabby, easy going personality.

Forgiveness is not holding back a reaction until a better case can be constructed against the offender, nor is it holding back to an opportune time to get revenge, equal, or worse than the offence! They say 'revenge is a dish best served cold.' The colder our revenge is, the more horrible a sin it is!

What then is forgiveness? It is the response that comes from a heart which decides to give someone a gift they don't deserve. We do not exact the cost or take the revenge which would be due to them, but set them free from the debt they owe us. It does not depend on the offender being sorry. We forgive others, and God does us good! If the offender also repents of the wrong, then God will do good to them also.

This does not mean that a criminal offence is let go of. We forgive the person who has offended us, but if they have also offended against the Law, then we let the Law do what is required. This in effect excludes the validity of the vigilantly.

This is not something which we can do on our own. We need God's grace to really forgive such that we do not bring the offence up at a later date!

## 2. Why is forgiveness important?

It is important because if we do not receive forgiveness from God, we will get wrath and punishment, and hell after death. It is a very serious issue, a life and death issue. Forgiveness is ours by faith in Christ. When Jesus died on the Cross and His blood was shed, He was suffering for our sin, and His blood was shed as an atonement for our wrongs. The possibility of us being forgiven cost Jesus His life, so it is a most valuable commodity!

From our standpoint, why is forgiveness so important?

It is important because it is only by being forgiven that we can have a relationship with God, and peace from God and hence peace with ourselves. Forgiveness received from God is the most valuable thing for our mental well-being. So many of us live with crippling guilt, low self-esteem, and a haunting fear that we are just not measuring up. Forgiveness from God is the first step towards mental wholeness, and receiving continual forgiveness is the way on and the way to deeper soundness of mind, and hence body.

## 3. We are firstly to ask God to forgive us.

We will never know how sinful we are. Even at our best we are full of pride and mixed motives. We ask God to forgive us for our sins. Sin creates a debt before God. We owe Him our existence and life. He is the source of all provision and so He is due our gratitude, love, trust, thanks and complete loyalty and obedience. What do we give Him? Half-heartedness, complaining, we are ungrateful, disobedient, proud and hostile to God. This is how we are. Over the course of recorded history, mankind has changed its toys and the names it gives to sins, but we still see genocides, wars, cruelty, greed, immorality, violence. If you were to read a modern translation of the Old Testament, and did not know that it was an ancient writing, you might think that it was the text of a news summary! If humankind has not progressed beyond slavery and murder and selfishness and greed in the last 4000 years, what makes us think that we can cure ourselves! We need God.

4. It is important to remember that in this prayer, Jesus is not seeking to give the final word of teaching on forgiveness, and how He accomplishes the grounds of it. The Gospels tell the history of Jesus coming to earth, life and death and resurrection. The Epistles are the unpacking of the marvelous details of what God has done through the Cross of Christ. Hence it is important to remind us again that we use Scripture to interpret Scripture.

At first glance, and with a superficial reading, some people think that the grounds for being forgiven is that we forgive. If we forgive others, they say, then God will forgive us. However this is not how the rest of Scripture explains the matter. If this were the way it worked, then forgiveness would be earned, and grace would not be grace!

The parable that Jesus teaches of the unforgiving servant helps us understand what Jesus is wanting us to focus on. The people that Jesus is addressing in this passage on prayer are already Christians. They have believed on Christ and are in a close relationship with Him, they have been forgiven.

Matthew 18.21-35.

The story is a marvel. Somehow, a slave has run up a huge debt. It is many times his annual pay, and is so great that even if he were to divert all his income to pay off the debt, he would not live long enough to do so. It is not important how the debt accrued, that has no bearing on the story. He is about to be thrown into prison for ever, but cries out for mercy, for forgiveness as it were. In pity. The master excuses him his debt. In other words, the master takes the financial hit, covers the cost, and loses out in the transaction. The outcome is that the master suffers loss, and the slave goes free, just as if he does not owe a penny!

However, the slave misses the point. He goes out thinking that he will do something to repay the debt. He goes to some poor underling who owes him a trifling amount, and ends up throwing him in prison. The poor soul had asked for mercy, but was refused.

How could this happen? That is what the other servants think too, and tell the master what has happened. The response is that the debt of the first servant remains and he gets sent to prison!

This may look as if the servant had his debt reinstated because he had not forgiven his debtor, but that is not so. It is one thing for Christ to have died on the Cross so that we may be forgiven, but it is another thing for us to open our hand to receive the gift of the writ of discharge of our debt from Christ. Closed hands cannot receive.

What then is Jesus telling us in this parable? It is not all that complicated, but is very important. How can we be sure that God has actually forgiven us? Simple, it is because we find the disposition worked in our hearts to forgive others. The way this works is this. We realise that we owe God squillions, and that in Christ He has had mercy on us and has discharged our debt. Having received this mercy, when someone owes us a debt, which will never approach the debt we owed God, we forgive as we have been forgiven. We cancel the debt, we forgive, and we take the financial hit, as it were, because Jesus paid the greater price for us. Having been forgiven by God, and then forgiving someone else may still be costly to us!

The proof that we have been forgiven is that we have a new heart and disposition to freely forgive others, because God has freely forgiven us a huge debt. It all begins with God, but it ends in visible fruit, in evidence. This is why the Beatitudes are so important, because without this Christ-like character growing in us, without this life of Christ working in our souls, we will never know forgiveness and hence never extend it to others.

The other side of the coin in all this is that if we find ourselves saying things like, 'I will never forgive you for this or that,' then it is a sure sign that we ourselves have not received forgiveness from God. If we find ourselves to be in this position, then God is not our Father, but our judge. If we are like this, then we must first come to God and ask Him to save us, to come into our lives and rescue us from our sin.

I lived in Belfast in some of the worst of the 'Troubles,' and now and then would hear people say in response to this, Well, you don't know what they did to me.' 'If you had that done to you, you would not forgive them either.' I looked into some of these situations, and do you know what, some of the so called perpetrators of serious wrongs had no idea that the wronged person either existed or had anything against them! In other words, it is very possible that the person we find it so hard to forgive has a totally clear conscience towards us, and it is we who are continuing to be hurt by carrying the burden of un-forgiveness! The person we feel is our debtor is carrying no burden over the real or imagined debt! How sad to spend our lives carrying a hurt and offence when we are the only ones suffering!

But you may say, all trust has been broken, all is lost and so on. I do not for a moment mean to imply that forgiving someone a great injury is easy. The place to begin is thinking about the great debt God has forgiven us, or offers to forgive if we are not yet a believer. This gives us perspective over the debts other owe us. When we receive forgiveness from God, it begins a process where God gives us the ability to forgive from our hearts. This sometimes happens as a one off event, but more often it happens progressively as if we were peeling layers off an onion until it all goes.

Someone told me of a sad situation they had suffered, where they said to themselves that they would forgive this, but not that. A bit later, they had grown in God and now were able to forgive the next thing, and the next, until all was forgiven. The outcome was that this person was no longer in fear of the one who had sinned against them, and they were free!

I speak from experience, personal and from the lives of others, that even the most hurtful things can be forgiven. Sadly not all things can be totally fixed, but people can go separate ways without hatred and the burden of unforgiven sin. One situation of this to illustrate is of someone who ruined their own health by abusing alcohol. This had also a severe effect on the family and the other social relationships in these people's lives. The gentleman was reconciled to God and from this a heart-felt sorrow expressed to the family. Forgiveness was asked for firstly from God, then from the family. The family were reconciled, but the gentleman still died soon after from severe liver disease.

He died in peace, and the family were able to fondly and sadly mourn their double loss. They lost the presence of a father by death, and they were able to mourn the losses that came during their life with an alcoholic. It was very sad, but even if several years were bad, it ended well.

Forgiveness is one of the sweetest and choicest graces God gives. Seek it with all our hearts and we will receive it free to us, costly to God and Christ.

No matter what our condition, no matter what sin we have committed, no matter what offence has been committed against us, there is hope of receiving forgiveness and extending forgiveness because of the Cross of Christ.