

“Pray Like This: Forgive Us”

Matthew 18:21-35

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • June 14, 2015

We are getting close to the end of our study of the Lord’s Prayer and today we come to the petition that says, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Like every other line in this prayer, this one is packed with meaning. But before we get to that, I want to go ahead and address the question that some of you really want answered: why do we say debts and debtors and some other churches say trespasses.

We could simply say that we say debts and debtors because that’s what Jesus said. But it’s a little more complicated than that. The short answer is this – in the 16th century during the English Reformation, Thomas Cranmer wrote the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* based on an English translation of the Bible that mistranslated the word for debts as trespasses. The words in Greek are very similar and in Matthew 6, right after Jesus gives us the Lord’s Prayer, he says, “if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” Jesus clearly meant them to be somewhat interchangeable.

Today many churches have tried to modernize the language of the prayer and as part of that they have changed debts or trespasses to sins. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” That certainly captures the essence of what Jesus was trying to tell us, but there’s a good theological reason to use the word debt.

I think it’s safe to say that we understand the idea of debt. The average household in the United States today has \$156,000 in mortgage debt on their home, \$15,000 in credit card debt, and get this, \$32,000 in student loans. 69% of people graduating college this year have student loans and they owe an average of \$28 thousand dollars. That adds up to 1.2 trillion dollars owed on student loans. Nearly half of all Americans carry a balance on their credit cards and all together we owe nearly twelve trillion dollars! That explains why there are over a million personal bankruptcies filed every year. Maybe

you’ve seen the bumper sticker that says, “I owe, I owe, it’s off to work I go.”

When we think of sins or trespasses we think of specific things we have done wrong that we need forgiveness for. But our problem is bigger than just wrong actions. When Jesus wants us to understand the broken nature of our relationship with God, he tells us to pray, “forgive us our debts.” Debts are something we owe that must be paid back. We understand debt.

Later on, Peter, who is sometimes a little slow, asks Jesus, “So how many times, exactly, do I have to forgive my brother? Like as many as seven?” So Jesus tells him this story. There was a king. And he wanted to settle his accounts with his servants. One of them owed him a lot of money. How much? Ten thousand talents. Does that shock you? It should. Let’s put it in perspective. That’s about 9 million ounces of gold. The man owed the king a little over ten billion dollars. That’s billion with a “b.” Jesus doesn’t tell us how he racked up such a large debt. Maybe it was student loans. Or maybe it’s late fees on the movie he forgot to return to Red Box. Remember, this is a parable. It’s not a true story. It’s an illustration to make a point. The point Jesus is trying to make is that the man owed way more than he could ever dream of paying back. He’s in big trouble.

When we think of debts we usually think of money but a debt can be more than just money. We sometimes talk about having a debt of gratitude. If someone were to save your life, particularly if he risked his own life to do it, you would feel a debt to him. You and I owe God a very large debt. When Jesus was asked which of the commandments was the greatest he said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” He’s quoting Deuteronomy 6. The point is that we owe God perfect obedience all the time. How are you doing with that?

Anything less than loving God with ALL of our heart, mind, soul and strength is put on your tab. It's a debt. If you want to earn your way into heaven you are going to have to repay that. But it's impossible. You can't repay it because every moment of every day you owe God 100%. The only ability you have on your own is to add to that debt. You can never pay any of it back.

I love how the servant responds. He says, "Please give me more time. I promise I'll pay it all back." How often do you and I do the same thing? We go to God and try to make a deal. We bargain with God about our sin. We try to compare ourselves with other people. "Well, I'm not nearly as bad as *some* people. In fact, in comparison I'm really pretty good, right God?" This is why I think the idea of debt is so valuable to us. It doesn't matter what someone else owes God. You can't pay *your* bill.

Jesus tells us that out of pity for the man, the king forgave the entire debt. He took that ten billion dollar IOU and tore it up. Imagine if you called your bank to ask for an extension on your mortgage and they answered, "You've been a good customer. You don't have to pay us any more. Your debt is erased." You would be pretty happy. At least I would hope so.

Immediately after being forgiven billions of dollars of debt the man runs into someone that owes him money, a hundred denarii. That's about 4 months wages. It's also a lot of money but not compared to the amount he's just been forgiven. But he demands that his fellow servant pay him immediately. When the king hears what the man has done he calls him back in and says, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" And the king has him thrown in jail. Then, to make sure you get the point, Jesus says, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive

your brother from your heart." In some way *our* experience of forgiveness from God is tied to the way we forgive others. I don't know about you, but I find that a little scary. Now we know that we can't earn God's forgiveness, not even by forgiving other people. So that can't be what Jesus means. But what does he mean?

The word for "forgive" literally means to send away or to let go. One writer says, "forgiveness means surrendering my right to hurt you for hurting me." Here's another way to look at it: forgiveness is giving up the hope or desire for a better yesterday. I think there are two parts to the concept of forgiveness as it relates to our relationship with God.

First, if you are a follower of Christ, if you have put your faith and trust in him as your Lord and savior, then God has wiped out your huge debt. In Jesus Christ you are forgiven. Jesus has done for you what you could never do for yourself. Once you understand what that means you will be able to forgive others. As followers of Christ we should be known as forgiving people. I like to say we're in the forgiveness business. More importantly, your willingness to forgive other people is evidence that you really are converted to Christ and an unwillingness to forgive should concern you.

And second, if you are not willing to forgive someone who has wronged you, it's *you* that carries that burden. It's like a huge weight you have to carry around. If you don't let go of the hurts, if you don't forgive in your heart, you end up like the unforgiving servant. You end up imprisoned by your past. But when you accept God's forgiveness and then forgive others who have hurt you in the past, you are set free from that prison and you can begin to really live in the Kingdom of Heaven, right here, right now. So what about you? Who can you forgive today?

Amen