

Give Us This Day: 4. Forgive us...
Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Ephesians 4:32
October 4, 2020
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In 1986, we purchased our first home on Nicollet Avenue in Bloomington. When we moved into the house it was a moment of freedom – no longer was it necessary to ask someone for permission to paint a wall or make a repair. The house was barely 900 square feet for the four of us, but it was ours. The first night, I remember waking up in a panic, wondering “what have we done?” We still had a landlord. It was a mortgage company, and we owed them \$85,000. Even though we had 30 years to pay it with interest, on what I was being paid at the time, it seemed an impossibility.

John Ortberg says the reason debt causes us fear is because in our world there is a very simple rule: **You owe – You pay**. If you doubt that, stop making your house payment or car payment or college loan. Quit sending checks to the credit card company and see what happens. First there’s a late fee added to the next bill. Ignore that and your privilege of using the card is cut off. Keep withholding payment on your debts and you may end up in court. And your wages may be garnished. Debtors don’t like it when debtors cease to obey the “You owe - You pay” rule. In fact, there is a name for people on the street who lend money and are determined to get it back. They are called Loan Sharks – not puppies or teddy bears, but sharks. If you’ve got a debt to pay, don’t mess around with sharks. You owe – You pay!

What happens today, also happened 2000 years ago. Jesus used that image to help us understand an important principle of prayer. We know the prayer, but do we understand the principle? Here’s how it’s translated in the New International Version: **Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.** (Matthew 6:12)

So far we have covered four of the six petitions from the prayer that Jesus taught. Today we turn to the one that may be the hardest one to pray and at the same time the one we need the most. Forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors. It asks God to do something for us, then it promises that we will do something for others.

Forgive us our debts...

First, what we are asking God to do for us is forgive us. Before forgiving anyone else, before any consideration of the ways we have been hurt or how we have suffered at the hands of others, Jesus tells us to consider the wrong God has suffered through us. When I look in the mirror, it’s not what I want to see – and sometimes it’s why I don’t want to look in the mirror. I am a sinner. We all are sinners. Here’s what John, one of the disciples, learned from Jesus: **If we claim, “We don’t have any sin,” we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.** (1 John 1:8)

Today we add our voices to two billion Christians around the world who pray this prayer in hundreds of different languages. It is one of the things that unites us, even though we cannot agree on the same words. Is it debts, sins or trespasses? Even Matthew and Luke do not agree. Matthew uses the Greek word, *opheilemata*, which means debts. Matthew was writing to Jews who equated sin with debt. When you sin you are placing yourself in debt to God. Every time you sin, you increase your debt until you run up a debt you cannot pay. Luke was writing to Gentiles, and uses the Greek word *hamartia* – sin – an archery term that means to miss the mark. Gentiles did not make the debt comparison with sin. Then in 1525, William Tyndale translated the Bible into English, and he used the word trespasses. Which one did Jesus use?

Debts, trespasses, sins – all three are talking about the same thing: those things we do that we should not do and those things we fail to do that we should do. And the only people who need to pray – forgive us our sins are sinners.

In Luke 18, Jesus told a parable. Let me tell the parable as if Jesus were telling it today. Two people came to Messiah Church to worship. One – call him, Steve – stood up and delivered a beautifully written and theologically sound prayer and when he finished and went back to his chair, he thought, “that prayer was a home run!” And by the heads that nodded and the smiles on people’s faces, the congregation agreed. Meanwhile, someone entered the sanctuary late. It was her first time here. She did not know anything about this church and how it functions – when to sit and when to stand. She arrived late and sat in the back row. She came here because her life was falling apart and needed something/anything to find peace and hope and some reason to keep getting out of the bed in the morning. Those seated around her could tell by the smell that she had been drinking. In fact, she usually needed a drink just to leave home. And during the pastoral prayer, those around her heard her mutter – “God, if you are out there, please forgive me. Please help me.” And Jesus said, of the two only one went home in a right relationship with God. And here’s the punch line: God forgives the sins of people who ask.

If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from everything we’ve done wrong. (1 John 1:9) Cleansed. Let me ask our parents: Do you have children who disobeyed? Maybe a child who at some point showed disrespect? When they did this, did you disown them? Did you hire an attorney and have your name removed from their birth certificate? Maybe you were tempted! But you didn’t do it. You hoped they would confess and apologize and until they did maybe it was a little quiet around the house – or there was a kind of chill in the air. The relationship wasn’t quite right. Similar with God. When we sin God does not disown us. We are still God’s children, but the relationship suffers. Confession clears the air – it cleans the heart. “Forgive us our debts...”

...as we also have forgiven our debtors.

We are skeptical, aren’t we? We are not sure that we want to let some people off the hook. Much of the world does not believe in forgiveness. Not forgiveness but vengeance. They owe – They pay!

A few years ago, my nephew was in a car accident. It was July 4th. He asked his parents if he could drive to Wisconsin to get some fireworks. He took his best friend with him. Driving from southern Minnesota to Hudson Wisconsin and just outside Shakopee there was an accident. The details are not clear, but he swerved to avoid hitting another car. He lost control. The car rolled over in the ditch. His best friend thrown from the car – and a few days later he died. The highway patrol called it an accident but get close to the people involved and it is hard to call that an accident. That day, the lives of two families were shattered – one family lost their only child, the other still had their child but he would never be the same again. Get close to the families and forgiveness is not an easy thing. How do they get whole again? **Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.** (James 5:16)

Read the Gospels and you will find that Jesus is always forgiving people. They ask to be healed, he forgives them. They ask for an explanation of his teaching, he forgives them. His critics challenge him: “Who is this who forgives sins?” And he forgives them. Nailed to a cross by an angry mob, he even forgives them. It is God’s nature to forgive, not because sin doesn’t matter but relationships matter. 2000 years ago, the God of the universe bundled up all of the guilt and sin and hatred and nasty murderous intentions and placed it all on the back of his own son. It was a moment so awful that the universe could not look on and we are told that the sky

turned black and the earth shook. And in that moment God was doing something, we could not and cannot do for ourselves. Pay the debt – the debt that we can never repay. There are some things that we can never make better but God can, if you will let God.

So what are we to do?

Forgiveness is one of the most potent powers on earth. It can change lives in an instant. God has given each of us the power. Take a look: [video]

The apostle Paul wrote: **Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other** not because it's easy but because **God forgave you in Christ**. My nephew was taken to court. The driver of the other car involved wanted vengeance, something in addition to the insurance for the property damage that he suffered. At the trial, the father of boy who was killed testified that he had forgiven my nephew – and hoped to maintain a relationship with him. As a result of that testimony, the lawsuit was withdrawn. If the loss of a life could result in forgiveness, then surely the same was possible with the loss of property.

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Every day until the day, we reach the tipping point and “thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of October 4, 2020

Weekly Prayer: “Our Father, who art in heaven,” this week we ask you to “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” You came in person to live out forgiveness and to teach us this prayer. But you also tell us to forgive. Teach us again this week. Draw our hearts to the peace and power of your far-reaching forgiveness, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Monday, October 5

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-14; 1 John 1:8-9

Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

If we claim, “We don't have any sin,” we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from everything we've done wrong.

Observation: Jesus, the King who reigned from a cross, prayed for those who crucified him, “Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing” (Luke 23:34). His followers live forgiven and forgiving because Jesus is the lord of their lives. In his commentary, N. T. Wright asks: “Have you ever tried to let Christ's peace, Christ's word, Christ's name be the reality around which you order your life? If you have, you'll know it's not easy. It takes serious prayer and real moral effort...King Jesus is to be the decider in all your deliberations...whatever you do or say must be able to stand having these words written above it: ‘In the name of the Lord Jesus’.”

Application: “As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other.” Sound simple? C. S. Lewis learned that it isn't: “I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me...I am asking Him not

to forgive me but to excuse me...Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances...that [real forgiveness] we can always have from God if we ask for it." How have you learned to recognize the difference between saying, "It was no big deal" and truly forgiving the part of any action that had no good excuse?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give me clarity about my strengths and about my failings. And give me clarity, too, about my daily need for your forgiving, empowering grace to nurture and grow me. Amen.

Tuesday, October 6

Scripture: Psalm 103:9-13; Isaiah 55:6-9

God won't always play the judge; he won't be angry forever. He doesn't deal with us according to our sin or repay us according to our wrongdoing, because as high as heaven is above the earth, that's how large God's faithful love is for those who honor him. As far as east is from west—that's how far God has removed our sin from us. Like a parent feels compassion for their children—that's how the LORD feels compassion for those who honor him.

Seek the LORD when he can still be found; call him while he is yet near. Let the wicked abandon their ways and the sinful their schemes. Let them return to the LORD so that he may have mercy on them, to our God, because he is generous with forgiveness. My plans aren't your plans, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my plans than your plans.

Observation: People sometimes wrongly think the idea of "forgiveness" only arose in the New Testament. Today's readings are not the only passages that show the Hebrew Scriptures also focusing on God's forgiveness (read also Jeremiah 31:33-34). Isaiah 55 told readers that God's superbly merciful acts are very different from our usual human patterns. As we choose to respond to God's mercy, we join in a cosmic celebration full of peace, joy and beauty.

Application: How does Isaiah's description of the gap between God's mercy and our usual human ways of relating speak to your heart? Sometimes when we read Isaiah's words, or Jesus' teaching about forgiving others, we might think, "Sounds nice—but it would never work." Do you believe God's ways are indeed higher than ours? Do you believe God's way is only naïve idealism, or the only real path to peace and good?

Prayer: Lord God, sometimes I think of your forgiveness abstractly, but my bad choices and actions still haunt me. Keep teaching me that you take those things as far away from me as possible when you forgive. Amen.

Wednesday, October 7

Scripture: Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Luke 11:4

Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you, just as we also forgive those who have wronged us.

"If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don't forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your sins.

Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who has wronged us. And don't lead us into temptation."

Observation: In addition to *hamartia* (which meant “missing the mark”), Greek used other words for “sin.” Luke 11:4 used *hamartia* about our sins, but it used a form of *opheleima*, which meant “a debt owed to someone,” about what we forgive in others. Matthew 6:12 also used *opheleima*, while Matthew 6:14-15 used a form of *paraptoma*, which meant a lapse or slip-up. As in English, sometimes writers used synonyms simply to give variety and life to their writing—but it’s also possible that the different words used give insight into nuances of Jesus’ meaning.

Application: For Jesus, forgiveness was a fundamental Kingdom reality. If God did not forgive, no fallible human could have hope. But Jesus also knew that it’s simply not credible to claim God’s forgiveness for ourselves if we aren’t willing to forgive others. Do your background and temperament make it easier or harder for you to believe that God truly forgives you, and for you to extend that forgiveness to others? To be forgiven we must forgive, and that is a condition of forgiveness which only the power of Christ can enable us to fulfill. Who do you need to forgive?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, all the Greek words apply to me—I have sins, debts and lapses aplenty toward you and others. Forgive me—and strengthen me to forgive others. Amen.

Thursday, October 8

Scripture: Psalm 32:1-7; Luke 18:9-14

The one whose wrongdoing is forgiven, whose sin is covered over, is truly happy! The one the LORD doesn’t consider guilty—in whose spirit there is no dishonesty—that one is truly happy! When I kept quiet, my bones wore out; I was groaning all day long—every day, every night!—because your hand was heavy upon me. My energy was sapped as if in a summer drought. *Selah* So I admitted my sin to you; I didn’t conceal my guilt. “I’ll confess my sins to the LORD,” is what I said. Then you removed the guilt of my sin. *Selah* That’s why all the faithful should pray to you during troubled times, so that a great flood of water won’t reach them. You are my secret hideout! You protect me from trouble. You surround me with songs of rescue! *Selah*

Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: “Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn’t even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, ‘God, show mercy to me, a sinner.’ I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.”

Observation: Asking God or others for forgiveness, and accepting it, starts with being honest. Often our first challenge is to be honest with ourselves. Most of us are expert at rationalizing even our biggest failings. But we repeatedly see in the lives of public figures that even if we know we’ve missed the mark, we think we can hide that from others, even from God. The psalmist wrote that keeping silent, trying to hide the truth, drained him of energy and life.

Application: The choice is yours. You can continue to carry the burden of your sins, or you can allow God to take it from you and set you free. The process begins with acknowledgment and sorrow. Do you find it hard to acknowledge to yourself, others or God that certain things you did were wrong? How can you open your heart to allow God to give you the courage to be honest?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, show mercy to me, a sinner. Forgive me and grow me beyond both the sin of contempt for others and the sin of self-contempt. Let me live in the atmosphere of your forgiving grace. Amen.

Friday, October 9

Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35; Ephesians 4:31-32

Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?” Jesus said, “Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold. Because the servant didn’t have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment. But the servant fell down, knelt before him, and said, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan. “When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins. He grabbed him around the throat and said, ‘Pay me back what you owe me.’ “Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt. “When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. His master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt. “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.

Observation: Most of Jesus’ themes in his teaching grew out of the Hebrew Scriptures. That was certainly true of this parable about a king who showed almost unimaginable mercy (earlier this week we read Psalm 103:9-13 and Isaiah 55:6-9). When we serve a king as merciful as God, then our gratitude toward the king and our mercy toward others will be signs that we truly value and wish to live by the kingdom’s values.

Application: Jesus’ story made the debt owed to the king absurdly large—as if he said the man owed “a gazillion dollars.” Was Jesus right in his picture of the debt we owe God, to show us how badly we need a Savior? Seventy times seven does not really mean exactly 490. It is a way of saying “Never hold grudges.” How can taking in God’s vast forgiveness transform you over time to be able to forgive others as God forgives you? Before you scold someone, send that acid email response or yell at your spouse or kids, ask, “Am I being ‘kind, compassionate, and forgiving’? Can I picture Jesus acting this way?”

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you gave up so much to reach me with your forgiveness. Help me to accept and value that gift, and to be more forgiving toward myself and others in my life. Amen.

Saturday, October 10

Scripture: Luke 15:17-24; Romans 5:6-11

When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough food, but I'm starving to death! I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.'" So he got up and went to his father. "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

While we were still weak, at the right moment, Christ died for ungodly people. It isn't often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person. But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us. So, now that we have been made righteous by his blood, we can be even more certain that we will be saved from God's wrath through him. If we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son while we were still enemies, now that we have been reconciled, how much more certain is it that we will be saved by his life? And not only that: we even take pride in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, the one through whom we now have a restored relationship with God.

Observation: In Jesus' day, patriarchs did NOT run—it was unseemly. But as the long-absent son in Jesus' story took the road home, his father ran to greet him. Jesus said God is thrilled when you turn toward home. When we look at Jesus, the Messiah, we are looking at the one who embodies God's own love, God's love-in-action. In Romans 5:8, Paul says, "God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us." This makes no sense unless Jesus, in his life and death, was the very incarnation (which means "enfleshment") of the living, loving God. After all, it doesn't make sense if I say to you, "I see you're in a real mess! Now, I love you so much that I'm going to send someone else to help you out of it." If the death of the Messiah shows how much God loves us, that can only be because the Messiah is the fully human being (how much more human can you get than being crucified?) in whom the living God is fully present.

Application: In Jesus' story, the once cocky son had hit bottom. He had no demands. He only hoped for a meal in the servants' quarters. What does it say to your heart to picture God racing down the road to embrace you, even if you are dragging yourself home to God? The son sadly said, "I no longer deserve to be called your son." The father wasn't worried about "deserving," just as the God who gave himself on the cross was not concerned about whether you "deserved" that sacrifice. If being part of God's family is not mainly about deserving, then what is it about? If it is not about deserving, then what moves you to change your life in positive ways when you are welcomed into the family?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as the old hymn put it, I have a "wandering heart." But I want to keep turning back toward home. And I rejoice to know that you are always eager to welcome me, even when I've wandered. Amen.