

⁹ "This, then, is how you should pray: "'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'

We are spending this month diving deep into prayer as a church family, and especially into learning how Jesus taught us to pray in what is called the Lord's Prayer. Three weeks ago we looked at the first line, and learned that prayer is communication with God that involves both intimacy and deference, with the purpose of bringing our perspective and priorities in line with His. Two weeks ago we looked at line 2: "Give us today our daily bread," and how it encourages us to pray with dependence, boldness, and trust. Today we will look at "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

In order to understand what this means, I want to go to another passage where Jesus explained forgiveness.

Matthew 18:21-35 - *Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

The question Peter asks Jesus is how many times he should forgive someone. Seven was customary in those days, and seemed generous. Jesus says seventy-seven. Seven is the number of perfection. By saying seventy-seven, Jesus is telling Peter to keep forgiving and to not keep track. Then he goes on to explain why God expects us to extend that kind of forgiveness to others:

²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶ "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. ²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' ³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³² "Then

the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.'³³ 'Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'³⁴ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Remember what Jesus taught us to pray: Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. In this parable, Jesus uses the same monetary analogy – debt – to explain forgiveness. In the parable, a servant of the king owes him ten thousand talents. In those days, a day's wage was called a denarius. 6000 denarii make up one talent. So, ten thousand talents means 60 million days of work. At \$20/hour, or \$160/day, that would be 9.6 billion dollars. Jesus uses such an insanely high debt to make his point clear: this servant owes a debt that could never be repaid in his lifetime. And in Roman times, debtors were thrown into prison until their family could pay it off.

It would have been laughable to Jesus' listeners to think that he could ever pay it back. But nevertheless, the servant begs the king to be patient, telling him that he will pay him back. And what does Jesus say?

²⁷ *The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.*

Now, in those days, the money was the king's. This servant has mismanaged and squandered 9.6 billion dollars of the king's money. There is a debt, and someone needs to bear the cost. But the king, instead of making the servant pay it back, takes pity on him, cancels the debt, and lets him go free. The King eats the cost of the 9.6 billion dollars and lets the servant go free.

Once again, in the context, this is not meant to be a story about business practices. Jesus is using the analogy of a debt to help us understand our relationship with God. This passage tells us four things in particular about forgiveness and our relationship with God:

1) The great moral debt we owe

Matthew 5:21-22 - *"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'*²² *But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again,*

anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca, 'is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Matthew 5:27-30 - *"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.*

Matthew 5:48 - *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

James 2:8-10 - *If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right.⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of **breaking all** of it.*

There will be no weighing of the scales when you die to see if your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds. That is not a Biblical concept. According to the Bible, we owe a moral debt that we could never repay.

2) The punishment we deserve

God is perfect, and no sin will enter heaven.

Romans 6:23 - *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Revelation 21:27 - *Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

The bar is set at perfection, and we owe a great moral debt.

Now, maybe you don't believe in sin, or feel guilty. What if you killed a man but didn't feel guilty? Does that make you not guilty? No – you are still guilty. It is objective, not subjective. Sin is transgression of God's law. God is the judge, and He will judge us according to His perfect standard.

3) Our inability to repay the debt

Romans 3:20 - *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become **conscious** of sin.*

Galatians 2:15-16 - *"We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' ¹⁶ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.*

No amount of effort on our part can repay the debt.

4) The King's merciful cancellation of our debt

John 3:16-18 - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

Romans 5:6-10 - *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, when we were God's **enemies**, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*

2 Corinthians 5:21 - *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Romans 8:1-2 - *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.*

God has offered us forgiveness of sins through Jesus' perfect life and sacrificial death on the cross in our place. Our great debt has been cancelled by the King, who bore the debt himself on the cross.

In that context, Jesus tells us to come to the Father praying "Forgive us our debts." We come not saying "look at my good deeds and treat me accordingly" but "I am guilty, and in need of your mercy."

Maybe you ask, if God has cancelled my debt once for all in Jesus' death, why do I need to keep asking for forgiveness? It is not because you lose your salvation every time you sin. It is because our sin distances us from God. When we sin, we turn our back on Him to be our own god, to follow our own will. And so forgiveness and repentance is to be a regular part of our prayer time, so that He might restore us to a right relationship with Him. It is no different than a parent-child relationship. I will never cast them out of my family, but when they sin or rebel against me, they break the peace of the relationship, and there is a need for confession, repentance, and forgiveness so that a right relationship might be restored.

1 John 1:9 - If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Forgive us our debts. Because of Jesus' death, cancel our debt. And because of your mercy, restore us to a right relationship with you. Purify our hearts from all unrighteousness.

Now what about the second part of the prayer? Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors? For some of you, this is not an issue. Maybe you have not experienced abuse or betrayal or pain to the point where it has been hard to forgive. Or maybe you are just by nature an easygoing person who is quick to let go of offenses. But I would imagine for many of you, there is someone who comes to mind when you hear this prayer, someone whom you have a hard time forgiving. Like the servant in the parable, you hold others' debts against them. And listening to a sermon on forgiveness is not easy for you. In fact, I was very conscious as I prepared this sermon that I did not want to heap on to any abuse and mistreatment you have suffered by blaming or shaming you.

So what does it mean to forgive, and how do we go about doing that?

- 1) Decide to cancel the debt.

When someone sins against you, there is a debt that is created, just like there was for the king. Someone needs to bear the cost. Someone needs to pay. You have two options. Choice A is to make the offender pay down the debt. This is our natural response. We might be aggressive: Abuse. Gossip. Slander. Or we might be passive aggressive: The cold shoulder. Withdrawing friendship. And maybe that works – over time, the debt is lessened and you no longer feel the need for revenge. But more than likely, what will happen is that in the process of making them pay, you will have been twisted into a more bitter and spiteful person. Or what happens is that revenge becomes a back and forth cycle – they hurt you, so you hurt them, and then they hurt you back.

Choice B is to forgive. To pay the debt down yourself. To essentially choose to suffer twice – once by the initial injury, and then again by accepting the pain and choosing not to punish the other person for their sin.

It's a process, but that process begins with a decision. What I'm doing isn't working. I've felt the fullness of my anger, and I'm deciding to forgive, to bear the debt myself instead of making them pay it down. What does it mean to forgive? First of all, what does it not mean?

Forgiveness is not:

Condoning or excusing – putting up with the abuse by suffering in silence, or convincing ourselves that we deserved the abuse. It's not just accepting what happened or saying it was okay

Forgetting – we won't forget, but forgiving will change the way we remember the past

Dropping consequences – there may be consequences

Calming down – it's not just ceasing to be angry

Reconciliation – Reconciliation can't happen without forgiveness, but forgiving someone does not require getting back together with them or rebuilding a relationship.

One step – It's a process. Maybe today all you can do is decide you won't kill the person who hurt you. And that's okay.

The same as the offender being forgiven - Lastly, should we forgive someone who will not repent or apologize? And what if they are dead and will never apologize? Consider the words of the theologian Miroslav Volf:

“We can forgive, but it is not received until there is repentance. “If they imitate the forgiving God, forgivers will keep forgiving, whether the offenders repent or not. Forgivers’ forgiving is not conditioned by repentance. The offenders’ being forgiven, however, is conditioned by repentance... Without repentance, the forgivers will keep forgiving but the offenders will remain unforgiven, in that they are untouched by that forgiveness. Why? Because they refuse to be forgiven.”

Forgiveness is choosing to treat your offender as God has treated you. To pay down the debt yourself and let them go free. Ken Sande, in *The Peacemaker* shares what he calls “The four promises of forgiveness”:

“I will not dwell on this incident” – don’t rehash the past and keep focusing on what someone did to you.

“I will not bring up this incident and use it against you” - *1 Corinthians 13:5* - *Love keeps no record of wrongs.*

“I will not talk to others about this incident” – You don’t malign their reputation to others

“I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship” – you are kind to them. You pray for them

Matthew 5:43-45 - *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

To pray for someone is to wish God’s blessing on them.

When you pay the debt down yourself, it feels like death. But in the end, it leads to resurrection and rebirth. And you are free of the pain. Forgiveness is choosing to pay the debt down yourself.

2) **Take pity on them**

To take pity on someone is to seek to understand the offender, to have compassion on them. **To take pity is to be moved with compassion for another person's misery.** You know what a caricature is? What happens when you are offended? You blow the person's faults out of proportion. He is insensitive. She is a betrayer. He is a liar. She is disrespectful. I'm complex, a mixture of good and bad. But they are just jerks. Taking pity is to be moved with compassion, to recognize that they are human as well, that they were sinned against and sinned against you. In order to forgive and to be able to see someone with kindness, it takes working on understanding their story, their complexity. We don't condone, but we understand.

Luke 23:32-34 - *Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.* ³³ *When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals-- one on his right, the other on his left.* ³⁴ *Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*

In his moment of greatest hurt and wrong, he is interested in forgiveness. He was moved with concern for their misery instead of focusing on his own hurt.

3) Let them go

To forgive and let them go is an act of trust in God. It is trusting in God as judge, and trusting that God is redeemer, working all things together for good.

God is judge. We have a hard time forgiving because someone has violated our sense of justice, and we demand accountability. We think they need to be punished in my way and in my timetable. The parable shows that when we take vengeance or when we are unforgiving, we are like a servant who thinks they are a king. At some level, unforgiveness is about your relationship with God – you do not believe that He is a wise and good judge, and so you need to do the job for Him. We are saying “God, I don't like the way you are doing your job, so get out of the judgment seat.”

Romans 12:17-21 - *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.* ¹⁸ *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.* ¹⁹ *Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.* ²⁰ *On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."* ²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

He will judge. You love, forgive, overcome evil with good.

1 Peter 2:20-24 - But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. ²¹ To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

Jesus entrusted himself to him who judges justly. When we are wronged, we need to entrust the person to God, who judges justly. This person belongs to YOU, not to me. You can deal with them, care for them, judge justly. Lord, YOU are the judge, and I trust you to judge wisely. You alone have the proper perspective, and the right to judge.

And finally, when we forgive, we are trusting God as redeemer. We are choosing to believe that there is meaning in the suffering, that God can bring good out of the worst things people do to us. Consider these two verses:

Romans 8:28 - And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Genesis 50:20 - You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives

Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. Your willingness to forgive others may be a function of your understanding of the debt you have been forgiven. You have been forgiven the moral equivalent of 9.6 billion dollars. May God give you the strength and perspective you need to go and forgive those who have sinned against you.