

## INTRODUCTION (PRAY)

This morning we're continuing our studies of **The Lord's Prayer**, and in so doing we come now to the fifth petition...**Our Father in Heaven, forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.** Now in considering this petition I want us to read from two different passages in **The Gospel of Matthew...Matthew chapter 6 and verses 9-15** and then **Matthew chapter 18 and verses 21-35**. So beginning in **Matthew 6 and verse 9**. Let us now hear God's Word. **(READ)**

## THE BRIDGE

So far in our studies of The Lord's Prayer we've contemplated what it means to ask our Heavenly Father **to honor his name, establish his kingdom, accomplish his will** and **provide for our needs**, and not just our physical needs, but *our ultimate need*, which is our need for God himself. And central to our need for God is our need for God's forgiveness, for feasting on God goes hand in hand with receiving and resting in and reflecting God's forgiveness of us.

## THE BEAUTY OF FORGIVENESS

Now in considering this fifth petition, the place we must begin is with...**The Beauty of God's Forgiveness**. And in doing this, the first thing we need to recognize is that we, by virtue of creation, are God's debtors. The fact that *we are*, that we exist at all, is due to God's creational gift. For God brought humanity and all things into being, and he did so not because he needed something other than himself. No, God willed to create because there resides within God an infinite abundance of overflowing love, and it was out this abundance of love that God created all things. And specifically he created human beings, and he created them that they might participate his eternal and personal love, the very love that's always existed between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

God didn't create us because he needed us. No, he created us simply because he wanted us. Which means, our existence is the result of God's undeserved love, as a result of his sheer gratuity, and that alone puts us in his debt. In speaking about this, the theologian **Karl Barth** said...**We owe God, and we don't just owe him something, whether it be little or much. No, we owe, quite simply, our person in its totality; we owe him ourselves.** We owe God a creational debt, a debt that we could describe as a debt of gratitude and praise, a debt of love and loyalty, a debt of obedience. Put another way, we owe God a debt of dependence, of acknowledging that all things are *from him, through him and to him*. And (again) we owe this to God not because he stands in need of it, but because he made us to find our life and joy in him, in gratefully depending on him for all things.

Now in recognizing the pure gratuity of our existence, that our existence is completely undeserved, enables to begin to see the utter heinousness of our sin. For what is sin? Well, it's our failure to give God his rightful due. Sin is our refusal to pay our debt of dependence, of offering to God our praise and gratitude for our existence. Sin is the belief that we exist in and for ourselves rather than in and for God. Sin is our declaration of independence against God, of believing we can be self-sufficient apart from God. Sin's the belief that exist to honor our name and establish our kingdom, believing that life is found not in doing God's will, but in doing our own self-determined will.

In the beginning, humanity rebelled against God, and throughout history, humanity's continued this rebellion. That's why the Bible says...**For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God**, fallen short of acknowledging and depending on God's glory that alone gives true and lasting life. For every sin, no matter it's severity, is a failure to pay our creational debt to the God who made us for himself, to find our life in his life.

And what has sin brought us? Death – physical and spiritual death, and death, in the deepest sense of the word, is a return to nothingness, for we're nothing apart from the living God. And seen in this way, sin has compounded our debt. For as a result of sin, there's now added to our creational debt of dependence a debt of death in that we all deserve death for our declaration of independence against God. And sin has compounded our debt to such a degree that none of us can ever get out from under it. We're always in arrears. We're always in the red spiritually, and nothing we do – no amount of good works, no amount of religion, can change the fact that our debt to God is inordinate and unpayable. That's why the parable we read earlier presents the servant as owing such a large and unpayable amount...ten thousand talents, which is the equivalent of twenty years' worth of one's salary. Point being...we can't get ourselves out of the debt we've compounded through our rebellion.

And at some level, we all feel the burden of this debt. In what sense? Well, in the sense of guilt, of having a guilty conscience, of possessing and experiencing an intuition of guilt. And yes, this feeling of guilt may ebb and flow, but it can't be eradicated, for we all know something of guilt. That's why we're so self-defensive and self-justifying. We long to be in the right, but deep down we know we're not. We know there's something wrong with us, that we lack an abiding harmony and peace. But here's the thing...guilt isn't just a feeling. It's not simply a psychological condition imposed on us culturally. No, guilt is an objective reality. In other words, we feel guilty because we are guilty, guilty of not honoring God, of not loving him who loved us into being. We're guilty of not paying our debt of dependence, which has now put us in place of deserving death as our punishment.

Yet here's the marvel...that the same God who gave humanity an undeserved creation has also provided humanity with undeserved forgiveness. And we know God forgives because Jesus tells us to pray...**Father, forgive us our debts.**

But that raises a question...how can God forgive our debts? How can he remove our guilt? How can he cover over and cancel our wrongdoing? Well, he can only at great cost to himself. We could put it this way...if our unpaid debt requires the punishment of death then the only way God can forgive our debt is through death, through his own death. Yet that raises an even more profound question...How can the God, who himself is infinite life, die? Well, he can only if he takes a body, only if he becomes a human being. And my friends, that's exactly what he's done in Jesus. For Jesus, the man, is also God the Eternal Son, and as such he's the very embodiment of God, the God who came into this world to pay our debts so as to cancel and forgive our debts.

For the same eternal love that purposed to make us pursued us even after we'd fallen away. And the culmination of this continual pursuit of love was God's own Son putting on flesh for us that he might live the life we failed to live and die the death we certainly deserve for our sins. In Jesus, God paid our debts – the debt of dependence and obedience we owed and the debt of death we deserved. In Jesus, God's love put himself in the place of the sinner, and in so doing he was struck and slaughtered on the cross not for his sins, for he had none, but for our sins. Truly, it was our sin that put and the kept Jesus on the cross. For on the cross, Jesus revealed that God is the ultimate victim of our sin, of our hatred, of our evil, of our manifold failures of love. For the cross is the demonstration that humanity hates God, that we want him dead and gone, that we want to live independently. And yet, that same cross is the demonstration of God's love – his love that pursued us, that lived for us, and that willingly bled and died to forgive our sins and remove our guilt.

For the one on the cross, the victim of our sin showed himself to be the victor over our sin, who through his willingly death absorbed our sins so as to absolve us of our sins. He took the punishment our sins deserved that we might receive the divine forgiveness we didn't deserve. This is the beauty of God's forgiveness, that the true victim of our sins didn't lash out at us, the perpetrators. Rather, he willingly suffered because of us and for us in order to forgive us. Which means, that over the lives of all who admit their debt, who admit their sins, who confess their rejection of God, and who look to Jesus (over their lives) are written these words – PAID IN FULL. For in Jesus, the charges have been dropped. The debt's been paid, the guilt's been removed. For in Jesus there is divine forgiveness.

My friends, I have no better news to give you than this – That in Jesus you are forgiven by the One who matters most, and that is God your Creator. In Jesus and only because of Jesus, God's smile of forgiveness and acceptance rests upon you. For in Jesus alone there's true assurance that our Heavenly Father has forgiven us, not just some of our debts, but all of our debts. Do you believe this? Are you resting in this, resting in the Gospel-given knowledge that you're truly and fully forgiven by God?

### THE CULTIVATION OF FORGIVENESS

And one of the ways we know we've received God's forgiveness is that we, in turn, begin to reflect his forgiveness to others. For the response to God's forgiveness is...**The cultivation of forgiveness in our lives.** And what does this look like?

Well, it **first** looks like... **continually asking God for forgiveness.** And in saying this we have to address an apparent problem. And the problem is this...if God's fully forgiven us in Christ, then why do we need to continually ask for forgiveness? Well, the answer is that God's not only the Judge who's acquitted us, he's also the Father who's adopted us into his own family.

You see, the Lord's Prayer is a family prayer, in which we, the forgiven children of God, are to learn to live honestly before our Father. And living honestly doesn't mean ignoring or trying to hide our daily sins. Rather, it means openly confessing them. Yes, we've been forgiven, but we're also still on the way. We've not yet arrived. We're not yet perfect, which means that we still sin and at times we sin grievously. But this doesn't mean that when we sin we lose our relationship with God. No, our relationship with God in Christ remains intact, and yet *it is* the case that when we sin *the enjoyment* of our relationship with our Father suffers. It's affected. For when we harbor sin, when we don't acknowledge *the ways* and even *the whys* of our failure to honor God and give thanks to God then we lose a sense of the real enjoyment of his forgiveness and cleansing. For not confessing our sins is actually a betrayal of the reality that we've been forgiven. It's to live as an orphan, rather than as child of God. And that's why Jesus teaches us to acknowledge our sins and to ask God, on a daily basis, to forgive us our sins. For confession of sin isn't a one-time action. No, it's a repeated action. For the Christian Life is a life of continually confessing our sins to our Father as to rest more and more in his assurance that there is indeed forgiveness for all who confess their sins with their eyes fixed on Jesus.

**Secondly**, the cultivation of forgiveness means...**extending forgiveness to others.** For those who've been forgiven are called to forgive. And that's Jesus' point when he adds these words...**as we also have forgiven our debtors.** And his point here isn't one of saying that our forgiveness earns or establishes God's forgiveness. No, the Bible makes clear that the only ground for our forgiveness is Jesus. Rather, what he's teaching here, and what he goes on to teach in **verses 15-16 of chapter 6** as well as in the parable of **Matthew 18** is that one of the chief evidences of our being forgiven is the extension of forgiveness to others. Think about it...If God's forgiven you such an enormous debt, and who's done so at great cost to himself, how dare you (we) refuse forgive the much smaller debts of others.

You see, a refusal to forgive is the equivalent of cutting off the branch you're sitting on. For the entirety of your life as a Christian is founded on the reality that God's forgiven you and therefore when you refuse to forgive you're denying the reality that you yourself have been forgiven. And that's why the parable of the unforgiving servant paints an inconceivable picture. For it's inconceivable, from Jesus' perspective, that we who've been forgiven a debt so vast should ever refuse to forgive the small debt, in comparison, of another. For physically, we breathe in order to breathe out, and the same is true in relation to forgiveness. For we breathe in God's forgiveness of us that we might breathe out God's forgiveness on others. But if we refuse to forgive there stands the warning that we ourselves may not actually be forgiven by God in the first place. Hence the conclusion of the parable...**I forgave all your debt (which was enormous); therefore, should you not also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?** Mercy received is to lead to mercy given.

### FORGIVING OTHERS

Well as our time's coming to end, I want to give us some practical principles to help us cultivate a spirit of forgiveness in our relationships. And I've taken and adapted these principles from a little book by Tim Lane entitled, *Forgiving Others*.

Here's **the first principle...forgiveness is not mere forgetfulness**. You see, the Bible's realistic when it comes to forgiveness; and therefore it doesn't imply that when you forgive someone that you'll, in turn, forget their sin entirely. Forgiveness isn't mere forgetfulness. Rather, forgiveness is a promise *not* to treat another as their sins deserve. Isn't that the way God deals with us in Jesus? And in light of God's forgiveness of us, what we must learn to do, by help of the Holy Spirit, is to continually take remembered sins, sins that we've said we've forgiven, to the cross. And in so doing we must ask God to help us make **a three-fold commitment** that...

- **One...**refuses to bring up another's sin with them after we've told them we've forgiven them. We're not replay and rehash a sin we've said we've forgiven. We're not to dig it up, rather we're to leave it buried at the foot of the cross.
- **Second...**we must commit that we won't discuss another's sin with other people in way that maligns them, that makes others have a bad view of the one who's sinned against us. Now this doesn't mean that you don't look for good counsel to help you forgive, but it does mean refusing to bring it up in a gossipy and mean spirited sort of way that's neither helpful nor fruitful.
- And then **third...**we must commit to fight the urge to dwell on the offense of another. We must refuse to replay the sin over and over in our minds. Rather, when it pops into our memory we must commit to take it to Jesus who's forgiven us and who enables us to forgive.

**Second...forgiveness is an event and a process**. For when we forgive another, we say...I forgive you. I release you. That's the event. And yet, every time the sin is remembered we must continue to say to ourselves, I have forgiven that sin. And that's the process. As Lane says...**When you don't understand forgiveness as both an event and a process, discouragement can set in. This is because your decision to forgive may not immediately eradicate the hurt you have towards the person you've forgiven. But if you see forgiveness as both an event and a process, the discouragement and guilt are minimized. You know you've forgiven, even though you're also aware of your temptation to make the person pay for the offense. This awareness keeps you vigilant against the sin in your own heart. It leads you to God for his cleansing and strength when you struggle with your attitude towards the person.**

**Third...forgiveness is not peace at all costs.** In other words, forgiveness isn't simply sweeping another's sin under the rug and acting like it's no big deal. Forgiveness isn't saying...'Oh, don't worry about it.' And at the same time forgiveness doesn't mean that you have to become a doormat and let others walk all over you. No, true forgiveness includes loving confrontation and challenge of the one who's sinned against you. That's why Jesus says in **Matthew 18 and verse 15...if a brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. And if he listens to you, you've gained your brother.** You see, God forgives to establish peace. And we're called to do the same. We're called, as Paul tells us in **Romans chapter 12...to pursue peace with another as far as we're able.** But here again, the Bible's realistic. For it acknowledges that there are times when peace may not come. There are times when we must come to the place where all we can do is entrust the person who's sinned against us to God...praying that God will deal with the person in his way and in his time. And... that God would also continue to deal with us as well. For it's possible to forgive another even they don't want your forgiveness.

**Fourth...forgiveness given flows from forgiveness asked.** And by this I mean...if we're going to be a people who forgive, we must also be a people who are ready and willing to ask for forgiveness when we sin against another. We must be willing to go them, to go our spouse, our children, our parents, to our co-workers, neighbors and friends and acknowledge specifically how we've sinned against them. We must name the offense and then ask the other...Will you please forgive me?

And then **lastly...forgiveness given can only flow from grace received.** Meaning we must always keep in the forefront of our hearts and minds, that God's forgiven us. For only if God's forgiveness is rooted in us will be able to forgive another. Therefore, we must continually remind ourselves of God's Jesus-shaped forgiveness of us. And thankfully God, in his grace, has given us particular helps to remind us of his forgiveness. He's given us corporate worship. He's given us his Word. He's given us prayer, and he's given us other people in the church to encourage us in the way of forgiveness when we're struggling. We're surrounded by reminders of God's forgiving grace – grace that enables us to forgive from the heart because our own hearts and lives have been forgiven by God. Therefore, don't neglect God's reminders of his own forgiving grace.

## **CONCLUSION**

My brothers and sisters, forgiveness is never easy. It wasn't easy for God, for it required the death of his Son. And it won't be easy for us, for it requires us to die as well...to die to ourselves, to die to our supposed right of restitution, to die so that the forgiveness of God in Jesus might blossom in our lives to the glory of God and the good of others. For our forgiveness of another not only releases them, it also releases us from bitterness and resentment.

Father, forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. Let's pray...