

Teach Us To Pray: Forgive Us Our Debts...

Jason Abbott

If you believe the political discourse of today then you think every evangelical is a political conservative. You'd assume that the beliefs of "born again" Christians are roughly synonymous with the Republican platform. That's at least the stereotype circulated by many in today's news media. And, if we in the church have perpetuated or embraced such a view, then shame on us.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not lobbying against one political party and for another. I'm simply making a biblical observation. Our allegiances cannot, in any way, be summed up by a human political platform. The Christian's citizenship is in heaven. Our views are to be kingdom views. Our wills are to be transformed by and conformed to Jesus' will. And, this will make us strange, indeed, when it comes to politics. This should make us almost impossible to pigeonhole.

Sometimes our beliefs will seem ultra conservative to those whom we meet; they'll wonder if we weren't beamed here from 1950s middle America. Other times, however, our views should seem unforgivably radical to the people we get to know, like we were born and raised in some leftist commune.

Our heavenly citizenship should make us a confusing lot. And, of all our ways, of all our strange characteristics, none of them should confuse those we meet more than the one we're going to look at this morning. It is, perhaps, the most otherworldly and radical of all Christian teaching; it is Christlike forgiveness.

Let's recite the Lord's prayer as we get ready to study Christian forgiveness.

Matthew 6:9-13

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 **And 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.

[For, yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]

Just last Sunday, I was privileged to have a conversation with Ruby Adams. Ruby is a real encourager; however, she's also a "call-it-like-you-see-it" kind of gal. And, she basically shared her perspective on what constitutes my pastoral ministry. Essentially, she said that all I really do is ask questions each and every Sunday and, then, go on to answer my own questions. In the future, Ruby advised me to go ahead and ask the questions but to allow you (the congregation) to answer them.

I like that idea. I've got all kinds of questions I'd like you to answer.

Nevertheless, this morning I'll keep asking and answering my own questions. I'm not going to give you all a pop quiz. Yet, in all seriousness, I wanted to let you know that the elders and I plan to begin having a regular question and answer time where you can dialogue with me about the sermon and/or any question which relates to the Christian faith. It'll be mainly for those investigating the claims of Christianity but, also, for Christians with questions about God or Christian living.

So, look for more on that opportunity in the future.

Well, now back to more of my questions and answers. Sorry, Ruby!

As we look at the fourth movement of the Lord's prayer—*forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*—we'll want to ask ourselves: (1st) What does praying this confirm about us? and (2nd) What does praying this do to us? In short, what does it tell us about ourselves, and how does it change us? So let's look at each of these questions in turn.

1. What does praying this confirm about us?

This is a very offensive thing to teach someone to pray. When Jesus tells us to pray like this, he confronts us with our guilt. In fact, he's telling *us* to confront it. He's commanding *us* to deal with our sin. I mean, throw away the usual sales pitch. This isn't the typical way that you attract people to join your volunteer organization;

is it?! *Hey, I'm starting a movement. You look pretty crummy. Not too much going for you! In fact, you're a complete offense to God and need to ask for forgiveness from him...as well as other people; so come follow me.*

Imagine a fraternity or sorority operating this way? *It would fold!*

Yet, friends, this is the very reason that Jesus came to earth in the first place. This is the very reason the church exists. If humans weren't arrogant and rebellious and sinful, we wouldn't need to gather to work for humility and civility and holiness in our own lives or the world around us. We wouldn't constantly offend one another or take what's not ours. If we didn't need forgiveness from our God and from others, then we wouldn't need Jesus or the church.

Have you ever noticed that churches tend to focus on the holiness we receive, through faith in Jesus, when choosing a name? They tend to focus on the positives—All Saints Church or Abundant Life Christian Fellowship or perhaps my favorite one is right here in Chicago just off Peterson—Winners Chapel. Who doesn't want to go to a church called Winners? Seriously, you're a champion the very moment you walk through the door on Sunday.

On the other hand, there's a church in Denver which must've been meditating on this movement in the prayer when it picked its name—Scum of the Earth Church. No Joke! It's a real church. And, from what I can tell, a good one at that.

You see, until you recognize your sin, until you know you need forgiveness, you'll never see your need for the gospel. You'll never embrace your personal need for a Savior. You'll never ask God for forgiveness or be willing to extend forgiveness to those who've offended you. Recognizing our own sin and need for forgiveness is, without a doubt, the first step toward salvation.

Jesus, therefore, teaches us to pray for forgiveness from our heavenly Father and to extend forgiveness to others. He's teaching us the way of salvation.

The story is told of John Wesley (the great 18th century evangelist and founder of the Methodist movement) and James Oglethorpe (the great English Military hero and founder of the Georgia colony); the two worked together in settling the territory of present day Georgia. They, however, became enmeshed in a personal argument and couldn't come to terms over the matter.

At one point, as the two wrangled back and forth about it, General Oglethorpe, who was known to be an unrelenting man, reportedly told Wesley: “I never forgive!” to which Wesley replied: “Then I hope sir, you never sin.”¹

Friends, there is nothing more dangerous than treasuring an unforgiving heart. We must recognize that we’re sinners. We must own this about ourselves and others. You’re not perfect and neither am I—nor is anyone else. Thus, Jesus doesn’t simply teach us to pray for our own forgiveness but also tells us to be quick to forgive those who have offended us.

This part of the prayer tells us something else about ourselves. It teaches us that we often maximize the sins of others while simultaneously minimizing our own. It teaches us that we’re natural born hypocrites—holding onto the wrongs committed against us, while expecting quick forgiveness for our own wrongs.

Don’t you hate it when people pull out across oncoming traffic to make a turn? You know, they block everyone going in one direction so that they can make a turn in the opposite direction. From my desk, which looks north upon Ashland Avenue, I see people making these turns all the time. I see long lines of vehicles backing-up (*sometimes almost rear-ending one another!*) simply because somebody didn’t want to wait to make a turn.

I hate it when people do that to me. I honk and tell my kids how discourteous and self-centered doing that is. I mumble under my breath and, then, judge the driver in my mind. This is how I think about it every time...unless, of course, I’m the one who’s late and needing to turn left on a busy street. At such times, I convince myself that the other drivers should understand and chillout. After all, it’s really no big deal. I’m not being rude or self-centered.

I’ll bet most of you know exactly what I’m talking about.

Friends, when Jesus teaches us to ask our heavenly Father to forgive our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors, he’s confirming that each one of us are people who need the Lord’s forgiveness generally and also need his forgiveness specifically for being bad forgivers.

Can you relate? Do you recognize this in yourselves? I do.

¹ I first heard this in a sermon preached by Kent Hughes, *The Lord’s Prayer—Forgive Us*: October 28, 1984.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit in us and through faith in Jesus Christ, we're called to be people who are:

...kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:32).

Do you see the impetus there. We must be forgivers because God, in Christ, forgave us. Friends, this is the real power or force that drives Christian forgiveness. And, it's the solitary reason we get to pray for our own forgiveness.

I really like what N. T. Wright says about this. He explains:

...having received God's forgiveness...[believers are] to practice it amongst themselves. Not to do so [means you haven't] grasped what [is] going on.... It [is] cutting off the branch you [are] sitting on.... [It is] denying the very basis of your own existence.²

One of the hazards of being a teaching pastor is that, when you've got to teach on a topic like forgiveness, God often gives you experiences so as to help you learn about that topic. This week was no exception. (Share the story of the boot, our fault, and the abusive way we were treated.)

Friends, when you pray this prayer seriously, you learn a lot about your need for forgiveness and how difficult it is to be a good forgiver.

Well, let's answer our second and final question.

2. What does praying this do to us?

I mentioned Scum of the Earth Church earlier. Do you know where their name comes from? It comes right out of the Bible. They get it from 1 Corinthians 4:11-13. Here's what the apostle Paul writes there. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he says:

To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.

² N. T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 54.

Paul is speaking here about his apostleship—about what he endures in service to the Lord. He's not saying he truly is the scum of the earth or garbage of the world but that he's willing to be treated as such for the sake of Christ and for God's gospel. He's willing to bless when cursed, to endure persecution, to answer slander kindly. And so, here's the question: Why does he act like this? How's he able to endure this? What drives this in him?

Friends, the answer is: praying this prayer. Not in a detached, rote kind of way but intimately and reflectively! Think about Paul. Of all the apostles, Paul truly felt and grieved his sins. He had persecuted Jesus—seeing disciples thrown in prison, searching out and persecuting believers wherever he found them, and even standing over the execution of Stephen. Paul knew his guilt before God.

Yet, despite all of his sins, Jesus intervened; the Lord forgave and saved Paul. The cross of Christ was for him. God's expensive mercy was given freely to him. And every time he prayed this prayer, Paul would have been graciously confronted by that glorious truth, afresh.

Paul was a man who knew how much he'd been forgiven; thus, consequently, he had the joyous capacity to love and to endure and to forgive much (Luke 7:47). And, this is what intimately praying this movement of the prayer will do for you too. It will administer the gospel to your soul.

- It will change you.
- It will remind you of the grace you have through faith in Jesus Christ.
- And, it will make you quick to lavish that grace upon others.

Friends, this movement of the prayer finds its supreme fulfillment at the cross. That's where Jesus ultimately purchased and modeled such forgiveness for our sake. It was his crucifixion and resurrection that threw open the gates of God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others.

These lines of prayer make no sense at all apart from Christ's atoning sacrifice at Calvary. And, even as he was teaching his disciples to pray—forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors—he must have been thinking about that reality, that painful and expensive and necessary reality.

How can we pray this prayer without thinking of it too?

Friends, praying this prayer, as we reflect on the gospel that made it possible, will transform us. God will transform us. The Holy Spirit will convict us of any area of unforgiveness we need to address, and empower us to address it. The Lord Jesus will go with us and teach us to seek forgiveness, even as he sought ours on the cross, when he prayed that his Father would forgive us (Luke 22:34). Amen.