

Matthew 6:5-15

Forgiveness

Forgive us our debts...v. 12

Of all the petitions we find in the Lord's prayer, I can think of none that so provoke gratitude and praise and humility as the petition of our text – *And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*. Aren't you glad that the Lord Jesus saw fit to include such a petition as this in the prayer He gives us for a model prayer? Such a petition certainly displays the wisdom of God to us in terms of His knowledge of our needs for here is something that we not only need – but we desperately need it. Where are we apart from this petition?

We're lost apart from this petition being prayed and being answered. We certainly can't call God our Father which art in heaven apart from a favorable response from God to this petition. Nor can we hallow His name except in our damnation apart from this petition. His Kingdom must advance by taking us out of the way – apart from this petition and we cannot expect our daily bread to be granted us apart from this petition. I can think of no other petition, therefore, that so magnifies the grace of God and humbles the pride of man as this petition.

It answers to a deep need, it answers to a desperate need and it answers to a constant need, as we'll see in due course. I think it's good to call to mind again the purpose of Christ in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount. He's calling for a marked contrast between the outward show of Pharisaical religion which is that kind of religion that strives to put on a show to be seen of others – the Lord is calling in contrast to that kind of religion for consistency between the inward knowledge of the heart with the outward actions of the subjects of His Kingdom.

He calls for this contrast in the realm of our giving. He calls for this contrast in the realm of our praying and as we'll see later in our studies – He calls for this contrast in the realm of our fasting. We've been studying this contrast in the realm of our praying and we've been noting that the Lord's prayer in contrast to putting on a show for men – instead shuts us in to that inner chamber with God.

The contrast between outward show as it relates to prayer and a sense of inward reality is magnified in another portion of Luke's gospel. You're familiar, I'm sure, with Christ's parable of the publican and the Pharisee in Luke 18. The Pharisee, we're told, didn't really pray to God at all but prayed with himself when he thanked God that he was not like other men. The publican, by way of contrast, could not even raise his eyes to heaven but smote upon his breast and pleaded with God to be merciful to him, the sinner. That contrast between the Pharisee and the publican paints the picture for us of our text – *and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*.

And so we need to view this petition this morning, not only in the terms of the tremendous benefit that's gained by it – but we need to see it also in terms of the lasting

effect it should have on our spiritual lives. I dare say that the proper understanding and practice of this petition will go a long way in enabling us to walk in a way that is pleasing to God and avoid the kind of pride that is being emphatically denounced by Christ in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount.

And Forgive us Our Debts, as We Forgive Our Debtors

Let's think of this petition, first of all in terms of:

I. The Constancy of Our Need

We've been noting throughout our studies of the Sermon on the Mount that the standard of God's law is very high – certainly higher than the Pharisees estimate of it. Not only does the law of God measure the deeds of men – but it also weighs the thoughts and intents of the heart. It weighs motives as well as thoughts and words and actions.

We saw this standard magnified by Christ back in chp. 5 under the formula: *ye have heard...but I say unto you*. Six times that formula occurred and so 6 times the Lord Jesus emphasized the truth that the law does not merely apply to outward actions but to inward thoughts as well – so that unjust anger makes a man guilty of murder and looking on a woman with lust makes a man guilty of adultery.

When we view the law this way, the way it's meant to be viewed then we can't help but conclude that our transgressions of the law defy calculation. And when you add to the formula the truth that the essence of the law is to love the Lord with all your mind and heart and soul and strength then it becomes equally plain that not only do we transgress more times than we can calculate – but we also constantly fail to measure up to the law's demands by our best efforts.

It's interesting, isn't it, that the Lord expresses our sins in this petition using the term *debt*. *Forgive us our debts*. I was speaking with a man a couple of weeks ago about the subject of the national debt. Whenever you think of the subject of debt it's hard to come up with a debt that is greater than our national debt. It's right around 9.5 trillion right now and is projected to hit 10 trillion about this time next year.

You've probably heard illustrations along the way about how much money a million and a billion and a trillion dollars amounts to. I don't recall the precise use of such illustrations – about how high a billion dollars would stretch by placing one dollar on top of another. You went end up with a stack of bills that could reach to the moon or something like that. The thing I found striking in my conversation with this man a couple of weeks ago was his remark that the interest owed on the national debt accumulates to the tune of a million dollars per minute.

That is certainly a debt that defies comprehension if not calculation and it can certainly serve to illustrate to us a debt that is even greater – which is our sin debt. We know, of course, that in the practical realm of household economics debt is often the thing that

drives families into despair. Debt is what ruins homes. The strain of debt is what often times creates tremendous tension between husbands and wives. It's debt that drives companies out of business. As strenuous as these debts become, however, they amount to little in terms of the debt that we owe to God's law on account of our sin.

Here's a debt that calls for our death and condemnation. Here's a debt that we cannot even begin to pay. One of the reasons that hell is everlasting is because we cannot pay the debt of sin. The sinner's suffering in hell will not suffice to make payment toward his debt. Indeed, even while the sinner burns in hell he continues to add to his debt because he continues to sin – and so the sinner in hell will never be out of debt to the broken law of God.

The only way for this debt to be erased is for God, in His sovereign grace, to erase it. And so we're taught to pray *forgive us our debts* because this is the only way a debt of such magnitude can be covered. And when you came to Christ, seeing yourself as a sinner, responding to Christ's invitation to come to Him for salvation – you dealt with what would have to be considered by far your greatest debt.

But even in salvation you continue to accumulate debt. So long as you continue to possess a sin nature you will continue to accumulate debt. This is why the heading of this point is *the constancy of our need*. Forgiveness was your greatest need previous to salvation and it continues to be your greatest need subsequent to salvation.

It's interesting, isn't it, that the Lord Jesus, when He gave us this prayer, He did not say *and once in a while when you pray include this petition – forgive us our debts*. The emphasis, rather, is on *when ye pray*. *When thou prayest – v. 5; when thou prayest – v. 6; But when ye pray – v. 7*. And in Luke's account of the Lord's prayer we read in Lk. 11:2 *when ye pray, say, our Father which art in heaven*.

The point being that each time you pray you have need to utilize this petition *forgive us our debts*. Now I don't know what kind of prayer habits you maintain. Maybe you pray once a day – I hope you do at least that. Maybe you follow the practice of Daniel who opened his window toward Jerusalem 3 times a day. I think this was the common practice of the Jews in Old Testament times. So we read in Ps 55:17 *Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice*.

The thing I want you to see is that in between your prayer times, at whatever interval those prayer times take place – you again accrue debt to the law of God and you stand in need of forgiveness. Only by lowering the standard of the law can you harbor the notion that your debt accruing rate is any lower. The Lord Jesus said – *when ye pray* – He didn't say *every other time you pray use this petition* – or *once in a while you may find yourself in need of this petition*. The Lord recognized rather the constancy of the Christian's need and for that reason He taught that you're to pray for forgiveness whenever you pray – however often you pray.

And don't you know in your experience that the more you grow in grace the more you see this to be the case. The apostle Paul would see himself as the least of the apostles and

less than the least of all saints – but before he was through he would see himself as the chief of sinners. This is why I say that this petition is valuable not only in terms of what it gains but in terms of the humility or the humbleness of soul that it will produce. We'll discover as we grow in grace and as we endeavor to hallow the name of God that we'll need this petition more and not less.

And so we must view this petition in terms of the constancy of our need. But would you see with me next that we must also view this petition in terms of:

II. The Constancy of God's Grace

This is the big reason that I love this petition – it shows me the willingness of God to forgive. You hear me say it often, I know – but I have to say it again with specific reference to this petition. In order to have confidence that you're praying in the will of God you need to utilize the prayers of the Bible. And if Christ saw fit to teach this prayer to His disciples and to inscripturate this prayer in order to preserve it for succeeding generations then it must be Christ's intention to answer this prayer every time a child of God prays it.

This means that Christ is willing to forgive all manner of sin. He says so Himself in Mt. 12:31. *Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: I know that if you look up that passage you'll see what it's famously noted for. It speaks about the sin against the Holy Ghost. All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men but the blasphemy [against] the [Holy] Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.* And the thing that our attention is riveted to, then, becomes this sin against the Holy Ghost. What is that sin? Have I committed that sin?

{Illus. Dr. Paisley's story of the young lady who prayed for the Holy Spirit to depart}.

Here was a young lady, then, that had no real interest at all in the forgiveness of any of her sins. The thing I want you to see from the verse, however, is Christ's emphasis on the truth that *all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men.* With only a highly unusual exception it can be said that there is no sin beyond the realm of God's willingness to forgive. From the little white lie that we count to be practically nothing to the worst sin conceivable to man's depraved imagination – all come within the realm of what God can and will forgive.

Think for a moment on the sins of David in the Old Testament. Here was a man that was called *a man after God's own heart.* And we are, of course, impressed with the devotional life of David. We love the psalms of the sweet singer of Israel because those psalms show us the spiritual vitality of a man who walked with God from his youth. We admire his devotion – we admire his courage – we admire his submission to God.

But we can't escape the notice of his sins. Here's a man who committed sin that I hope you never have to deal with. He committed adultery – and if that's not bad enough – he committed this sin by taking another man's wife. And if that wasn't bad enough – he tried to cover up his sin by creating a scenario that would lead Bathsheba's husband into

thinking that the child she bore was the husband's child rather than David's child. And when the scheme failed because of Uriah's unswerving loyalty to David – a loyalty that kept him from going home to his wife – how was his loyalty rewarded? David wrote a letter to Joab instructing him to put Uriah in the front of the battle so the Philistines would be sure to kill him. Can you imagine handing a letter which amounted to a death warrant to this devoted subject of his kingdom and then seeing the man go off to his death?

This is sin of the deepest dye. This is sin that I say I hope you'll never come close to committing. And yet for all the heinousness that characterized this sin – for all the deceit and theft and adultery and murder and treachery of this sin – it was not beyond the realm of God's forgiveness.

And let's not forget that this wasn't a sin that David was forthright in dealing with. This sin remained covered by David until the prophet Nathan exposed it before David – still David found forgiveness. You might say that Psalm 51 is an extended form of the petition of our text – *Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.*

We know from the New Testament also that God has seen fit to forgive sin of every kind and shape. In 1Cor. 6:9 Paul writes *Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.*

Do you see how these things use to characterize the saints at Corinth? They were unrighteous – they were fornicators, idolaters and adulterers. It appears that were sodomites among them – and yet they were forgiven and their lives were transformed by their forgiveness. This is why I say that with only one high unusual exception – there is no sin or no set of sins that God, for Christ's sake is not willing to forgive.

Some might wonder why God would be so willing to forgive. It would seem from the example of David and from the heinous sins of those at Corinth – it might seem that forgiveness would be out of character for God. Does He not care about the heinous nature of these sins? Is He unconcerned about His own holy nature being impugned by these sins? Is it right for God to set aside these matters that are repugnant even by the low standards of depraved reprobates by issuing forgiveness?

The answer is, of course, that God does not minister forgiveness in a moral vacuum and God would never simply overlook sin. When God descended in the Mount and stood by Moses and proclaimed His name to Moses when He revealed His glory He said: *The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and*

that will by no means clear the guilty. Have you ever wondered about those phrases that occur right next to each other – God forgives iniquity and transgression and sin but on the other hand He doesn't clear the guilty. Doesn't the latter statement seem to nullify the earlier statement?

The solution, of course, is found in Christ. God forgives and we can be confident that God will never fail to forgive – God will always be willing to forgive because He hasn't cleared the guilty – He instead joined the guilty to His Son and then He condemned His Son in their place. Forgiveness does not come at the expense of justice – forgiveness comes rather through the fulfillment of justice in Christ. Remember again the earlier words of Christ in this sermon – *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets* – to think that God would simply overlook sin by forgiving it without any basis would be to destroy the law and the prophets – *think not that I am come to destroy, but to fulfil.*

This is how we gain assurance that God will always forgive – that God will never fail to forgive. There is a just basis upon which God can and will forgive – that just basis is the atoning death of His Son. This is why John could write in his first epistle that *if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* The constancy of His forgiveness is rooted in the truth that it is in keeping with His faithfulness and justice that He forgives.

And so we can be confident that this petition that we're taught to pray will never be denied. You can be and you will be forgiven your sins when you pray. To deny you forgiveness would be for God to deny Himself and we know that He will never deny Himself nor will God the Father deny His Son.

And so we see this petition – *forgive us our debts* from the perspective of our need – our constant need – and we see it from the perspective of Christ – He is always willing to hear and answer this prayer. It remains for us to consider finally and briefly that we must view this petition from:

III. The Effect God's Grace Will Have Upon Us

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors – our text reads. We must, of course, be very careful that we don't interpret this latter part of the verse in such a way that denies the gospel. It does go contrary to the entire teaching of the gospel to suggest that God's forgiveness in any way depends on the forgiveness we give to others. God's forgiveness, as we just saw, is grounded in Christ. So we must be careful not to deny grace altogether by our interpretation of this verse.

I do believe that this statement by Christ *as we forgive our debtors* is a very important statement. It's interesting that when this prayer is completed it is this idea of forgiveness that is immediately brought up again. *For if ye forgive men* Christ says in v. 14 *your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

The point Christ is making comes across even more fully and clearly in Mt. 18 where Christ tells the parable of the unforgiving servant. You may recall, if you know that parable, that a certain servant was called upon to give an account to his king. The servant owed the king ten thousand talents but had no means for paying the debt. *But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.*

This servant, in turn, goes out to collect from those who owed him and when they made the same plea that this servant had made before his lord, he was unmoved by the same compassion his lord had been moved by and consequently had his debtors committed to prison. In the end the unforgiving servant found his own forgiveness nullified and he was delivered to the tormentors.

In drawing the lesson from that parable Christ said in Mt. 18:35 *So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.*

The point to the parable and to Christ's teachings throughout the gospels is that forgiveness received must lead to forgiveness given. You cannot truly receive such gracious forgiveness from God on account of Christ and be unchanged by it. I think you could say that the very first principle of Christ-likeness is the principle of being able to forgive. There are other areas in our sanctification in which we may be slower to develop. Some are slow to develop good spiritual habits – some are slow to overcome bad habits. But the inability to forgive becomes such a denial of gospel power that it indicates that an unforgiving servant has really had no clue about his own need or about the gracious and costly provision of God to meet that need.

There may be times when forgiveness seems hard. You may have been so thoroughly wronged by a man or a woman or even a brother in Christ that you can't even think on it without the fire of rage flaring up in your soul. And there's no denying the rightness of your cause or the blatant wrongness of the one who so mistreated you.

Think for a moment about Christ's pain while hanging on that cross. The nails have been driven into His hands and His feet and the weight of His body hangs on those nails. His bones are out of joint – He's been stripped and flogged and mocked and despised – and none of it was right – none of it was what He deserved.

In the midst of that excruciating physical and emotional pain – nevertheless, the first words from His lips while suspended between heaven and earth on a cross were *Father forgive them for they know not what they do* (Lk. 23:34). Is it any wonder, then, that Christ expects us to forgive others? We can't possibly face a situation in which we've been more wronged than Christ, in which we're feeling more pain than Christ – and still Christ could forgive.

We see then in this petition great value in terms of what we gain and how our lives are effected. Our need is constant – thank God that His grace is constant. This petition reminds me in some ways of the medication that some people with physical infirmities must take all the time. One who is diabetic is in constant need of insulin. Without that insulin he would be in grave danger. Certain forms of depression require constant doses of medication. Without that medication the one suffering from such a malady loses the power to keep his composure and his stability. Some people with allergies require certain medications in order to be able to function day by day. Without that medication they suffer greatly and might not be able to even breathe.

In the spiritual realm this petition *forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors* serves to maintain our spiritual health. You might call it a spiritual form of medication in that we are reminded of our constant need of forgiveness – and this ministers humility to our souls and insulates us from pride. Or you might view the petition as a vitamin to keep our spiritual vitality strong because we also find in this petition strong assurance that God can and will grant us forgiveness. Christ has the authority to grant that forgiveness and Christ has laid the foundation for that forgiveness to be ministered to us.

Needless to say – this is a petition that, like the others, we must make continual use of. May the Lord help us not to be negligent, therefore, in the use of this petition. Only by lowering the standards of God’s law or by becoming puffed up with pride can we fail to see our need of this petition. And only by looking away from Christ can we ever lose our assurance that God will answer this petition.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors – may the Lord see fit to stamp all the ramifications of this petition upon every heart.