

## **Forgive Us Our Debts**

**Matthew 6: 12, 14-15**

**Rev. Philip Parker**

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Polly was a smart parrot, but she had a nasty habit. She would say all kinds of unkind things about her owner, Harry. One day Harry decided to teach Polly a lesson. He picked her up and put her in the freezer compartment of his refrigerator. Polly squawked loudly for a few moments and then hushed up. Checking to see if she was all right, Bill opened the freezer door. Shivering and shaking, Polly said, "I'm sorry for offending you. I humbly ask for your forgiveness." Harry replied, "Ok, Polly I'll forgive you." Polly then said, "If you don't mind me asking, what did that chicken do?"

Forgiveness! It's a very important part of the Lord's Prayer and we need to take a serious look at what it means when we say, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Unlike the rest of the prayer, this is a conditional request. We cannot receive God's forgiveness, unless we are willing to forgive one another. That's precisely what Jesus was saying in those verses that immediately follow His model prayer. "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14-15). Furthermore, Jesus provided us with a vivid illustration of what happens when we possess an unforgiving spirit. The account is found in Matthew, chapter 18, verses 21-35. It's a parable that Jesus told in response to a question that Peter asked, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus responded, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven." Then He told Peter and I suspect the rest of the disciples this parable.

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who decided to look over the financial records of his servants. One of them was seriously in debt. He owed the king a vast sum of money. Because he was not able to pay, the king ordered that this servant, his entire family and everything he owned be sold into slavery to pay off the indebtedness. Falling to his knees, the servant begged for forgiveness, "Be patient with me and I will repay everything I owe you." The king had pity on his servant and cancelled the entire debt. He released him from the consequences of his mismanagement. Soon thereafter this servant met a fellow servant who owed him a few dollars. He grabbed the man by the throat and demanded that he repay every cent that he owed. The fellow servant begged for mercy, but his request was rebuffed. The servant was thrown into jail until he could repay the entire debt. Word got around as to what had happened and finally the king heard about what had taken place. Calling in the servant whom he had forgiven, the king said, "You wicked servant. I forgave you everything you owed me, but you were unwilling to forgive even a few dollars to a fellow servant. Away with you. You will be confined to a place of torture and suffering until every penny is repaid. Then Jesus concluded, "This is how your heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive one another from your heart."

This parable was lived out in the lives of two men that I knew years ago in the first church that I served after completing my pastoral care training. They were two brothers who adamantly refused to forgive one another. Neither of them would tell me what had happened. They each felt the offense to be so serious that they would not even speak about it. Their animosity towards one another had resulted in grievous consequences that impacted both them and their families. The first brother had become an addict to over the counter pain medicines. His addiction had a disastrous effect upon the emotional well-being of his wife and daughter. They were two of the saddest individuals that I had ever met. The second brother was afflicted by a severe case of rheumatoid arthritis. He could hardly move. As a result he and his family, which included a number of children, lived in abject poverty. I became convinced that both brothers and even their families were living tortured lives because they could not forgive one another. It was almost as if they had been thrown into a debtor's prison of their own making.

That's what can happen when we harbor an unforgiving spirit. It's not that God won't forgive us. He can't forgive us, because of our unwillingness to forgive others, indicates that we've never really experienced His forgiveness. We've never really appreciated the fact that we have a sin problem, that we have acquired a huge debt of grievances that we can never repay on our own. That's why we need to take a look at the whole idea of sin, or as identified in the Lord's Prayer, our debts. In today's world, sin has become a four letter word. We don't want to say it or even think about it unless it refers to someone else. Sins are the things that really bad people do, like killing or stealing. If a person lives a halfway decent life, he or she is a pretty good person. As far as that person is concerned, there's really not a great deal of sin that God needs to forgive. So that individual doesn't have to worry about holding grudges, or being resentful towards those who have done us wrong. In fact, he or she can almost feel justified in holding on to belligerent attitudes and emotions. Ever heard someone say, "I'll forgive you but I'll never forget what happened." That person is really saying, "I still have an unforgiving spirit and it's buried way down deep in my memories."

So let's take a look at this word "sin." That's what Luke uses in his version of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive our sins; for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us." In the New Testament there are five words for sin. I won't go into all the details, but here is a brief description of each of these Greek New Testament terms:

- Missing the mark like when you shoot an arrow at a target and miss the bull's eye, or in some cases the entire target. In other words we slack off and don't do our best.
- Stepping across the line with regards to what is right and wrong. That's probably where the idea of trespassing comes from. We have stepped across someone's boundary with the possible intention of doing them harm.
- Slipping like on an icy road. It was an unintentional mistake or transgression.
- Lawlessness. We knew what the right thing to do was, but we intentionally chose to do just the opposite.
- Being in debt. We owe someone an obligation, like a mortgage payment which we have not paid. This is the exact word which is used in Matthew's rendition of the Lord's Prayer.

Now, applying each of these words to our own lives, which of us can say that we're really A OK. There's nothing that we need to ask God to forgive us for, especially with regards to our relationships with others. We might claim to be pretty good people, even pretty good Christians. But when we measure our lives against the yardstick of these five descriptions of sin, which of us can truthfully say that we are without sin. If we're honest, we'll have to agree with Paul who said in his letter to the church in Rome, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Forgiveness of others, therefore, begins and ends when we realize that we too are sinners. Asking for God's forgiveness opens the door to a heartfelt desire to forgive others. Let me illustrate this spiritual truth with a story from the life of Corrie Ten Boom.

As you will probably remember from other sermons in which I have referred to her, the story of her life has meant a great deal to me and hopefully will come to mean a great deal to you as well. You will remember that she and her family were arrested for hiding Jewish people in their home during World War II. Her father was incarcerated and died. She and her sister were sent to a prison camp. Corrie was the only one who survived. After the war, she began a speaking tour throughout Europe, especially in those places where death and destruction had been the most severe. On one occasion she was in Germany speaking on the subject of forgiveness. She said, "When we confess our sins, God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a Scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says, 'No fishing allowed.'" \*

In the crowd listening to her was a man in a brown coat. After the service was over, he approached her. He said, "A fine message Fraulein. How good it is to know that as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea." Little did he know that Corrie recognized him. He had been one of the cruelest guards at Ravensbruck, the place where she had been imprisoned. He did not recognize her, but she remembered him. The man then said, "You mentioned Ravensbruck. I was a guard there, but since that time I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well," and then he reached out his hand asking, "Can you forgive me?" Corrie stood there paralyzed--unable to move, unable to shake his hand, unable to say the words, "I forgive you." Instead all she felt was a coldness clutching her heart. How could she forgive this man for the things he had done, for her suffering and the death of her sister in that horrid prison. Corrie knew what Jesus had said about forgiving others. She had even established a home in Holland for those who were victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able to rebuild their lives, no matter their physical and emotional scars. Those who nursed their bitterness became warped invalids.

What was she going to do? She made a decision. She cried out in her heart, "Jesus, help me! I can shake his hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling." So mechanically, woodenly, a sheer act of will power, she extended her hand and then something wonderful happened. A wave of healing warmth raced down her shoulder and sprang into their joined hands. It filled her entire being, bringing tears to her eyes. She cried out, "I forgive you brother with all of my heart." She said that she had never known God's love so intensely as she did in that moment. But she also knew that it was more than her love. It was God's love making itself known through her life. As Paul said, "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us" (Romans 5:5).

There's one final thing that I need to share with you. Does a Christian's unwillingness to forgive exclude that person from heaven? That almost seems to be what the Scriptures are saying. If so, I think there are going to be a lot of believers standing on the outside of the pearly gates. Hopefully, God will let these folks in if they have made a true profession of faith. But there are two consequences they will have to face here on earth and in the hereafter. First, that person's life here on earth will be miserable. An unforgiving spirit will twist and warp that person into a very misshapen human being. Second, a record book of our lives is kept in heaven. When we get there it will be opened and examined by the Lord Jesus Christ. Would anyone want to see these words inscribed upon it, "Forgiven but unforgiving."

Remember that old song about love and marriage being like a horse and carriage and that you can't have one without the other? The same is true about forgiveness. Being forgiven and forgiving is also like a horse and carriage. You can't have one without the other. Or as Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts and as we forgive our debtors."

\*Corrie Ten Boom, Tramp for the Lord, pages 55-57