

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Part 5: "Forgive Us Our Debts"

Matthew 6:9-13

By David A. Ritchie

Sunday, February 7, 2021

Scripture Reading

"Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil'" (Mt 6:9-13).

Father, I thank you for the gift of your Holy Word and the gospel of amazing grace that it reveals. Thank you that you love us when we are unlovely and that your love makes us new. May your Spirit shine your grace onto our hearts that we may radiate that same grace through our lives! We pray this in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

After I graduated high school, I had the unique opportunity to take a course on art history. It wasn't just any art history course. It was a traveling summer course wherein my class slowly worked our way through the greatest architectural marvels and art museums in Europe. We started in Rome and ended our journey in London. For our final night, as we prepared to go home, my professor surprised our class by generously buying tickets for us to see a theater production. I had never been to a professional, high-end theater performance before, but I was excited to experience my first one. Thankfully, it was a really good one, which happened to be called *Les Misérables*.

At the outset, *Les Misérables* seems to be just a story set in revolutionary France about a former criminal trying to elude detection by law enforcement. But it is also one of the most moving stories of grace within the canon of world literature.

The character in *Les Misérables* who most embodies the transforming power of grace is a man named Jean Valjean. He is a former convict who, after being released from prison, cannot find a job. So he decides to embrace the identity and the lifestyle of a criminal. One night he lodges within the church of an old bishop who graciously gives him food and shelter. That very night Jean Valjean attempts to rob the bishop by stealing his silverware. When the police capture Valjean and prepare to lock him up for the rest of his life, the bishop intervenes to tell law enforcement that he actually intends to give the ex-convict even more silver than he took. The bishop not only forgives Jean Valjean, he, in effect, also gives him the financial and motivational means to start a new life. When the former prisoner asks the bishop why he was forgiven, the bishop responds by telling him that his life is to now be given to God. This one profound gracious act breaks the cycle of crime for Jean Valjean. It devastates him. But it also changes his life. He assumes a new identity. And he determines to use the wealth that he did not earn to then be an emissary of grace.

But there is another character in *Les Misérables*. His name is Javert. He is a former prison guard where Jean Valjean used to be a prisoner. Now he is a police inspector. In the same way that Valjean

embodies grace and a life changed by grace, Javert embodies the exact opposite of grace. He is a cruel and severe man. He wants strict justice and consequences, no matter the circumstances. Later in the story, Javert sees and recognizes Jean Valjean, who has now become a very wealthy and respected man. Javert cannot abide the thought that this former prisoner broke parole, assumed a new identity, and lives a life of freedom and prosperity. He begins to hunt the ex-convict so that he might bring him to justice.

At the end of the story, after decades of a cat and mouse game, Jean Valjean finally has an opportunity to kill his ruthless enemy Javert. But Valjean spares his life. Now, Javert, too, has a devastating personal encounter with the power of grace. But, unlike Valjean, Javert cannot reconcile the mercy of his enemy with his unforgiving understanding of justice. The only solution he finds is to end his own life in despair, hatred, and humiliation. Jean Valjean, on the other hand, dies as a man with a legacy of love.

Les Misérables is great literature, not just for its entertainment value. Its greatness lies within its ability to speak to one of the deepest spiritual truths. For in stark contrast, *Les Misérables* lays before us a life defined by the power of grace, as well as the dark alternative of a life that can neither give nor receive grace.

Exposition

Today, I want to explore that same theme of grace as we continue our study of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, particularly verse 12: "...and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Mt. 6:12). From this verse, I want to talk about three realities of grace that Jesus would want us to immerse in our prayer life: 1.) *The Need for Grace*, 2.) *The Demand of Grace*, and 3.) *The God of Grace*.

1.) The Need for Grace.

The phrase "*forgive us our debts*" assumes something that we cannot afford to miss – we come to our relationship with God with debt, and we need that debt to be forgiven and canceled. This debt is not a financial debt like a mortgage payment that we gradually repay to a bank for a home loan. Rather, this debt is a moral and spiritual debt.

Now, we have to stop and talk about this for a bit, because already Scripture has pushed us well beyond the bounds of our cultural worldview. In general, we tend to believe that most people are naturally nice and good and that it is only the weirdoes like Hitler and ISIS that are evil. Evil might be out there, and evil things might happen. But *we* are good guys. And if the good guys can create enough education or implement enough good policies, then we can make the bad guys go away. Or so we think.

But Scripture confronts us with an inconvenient truth. Apart from the intervention of God, you and I are naturally oriented toward a love of self that supersedes all other commitments. We view ourselves, our desires, and our needs as non-negotiable and ultimate. And we often pursue this love of self even when it hurts others. That love of self may start small. But it can quickly grow into greed, deceit, theft, sexual abuse, murder, and war; all perpetrated by people who view themselves as good, nice guys.

Bible gives this bent orientation towards a love of self a name – that name is *sin*. And we are all marked by sin. As the Apostle John writes, "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*" (1 Jn 1:8). When we fail to acknowledge that we are marked by sin, we are living in

what John Calvin called the “unreality” of our own pretension.¹ Thus, by our nature, we are a people in need of grace.

Moreover, this awareness of our need for grace needs to be an ongoing aspect of our relationship with God. It is something that the Lord’s Prayer teaches us to be aware of every day. In Matthew 6:9, Jesus begins his teaching of the Lord’s Prayer with a command: “*Pray then like this.*” One of the things that is very clear in the Greek rendering of this verse that is not near as clear in the English translations is that this command implies continued duration. In other words, Jesus wasn’t telling his disciples to pray according to the Lord’s Prayer as a one-time event. Rather, in the Lord’s Prayer Jesus is teaching his disciples how to pray as a regular rhythm of their spiritual lives.

To say it another way, in teaching us to pray, “*forgive us our debts,*” Jesus is teaching us to make confession a regular aspect of our prayer life. Now, “confession” is a tricky word that for many of us immediately conjures this notion of legalistic, religious self-loathing. We might even think that daily confession is essentially bathing in self-condemnation.

But the biblical concept of confession derives from the Greek word “*homologeō*” (ὁμολογέω), which means to come into agreement with that which is true.² In confession, we are acknowledging the truth of God’s holiness and goodness. In confession, we are acknowledging the truth of our debt, as well as the truth of how he has provided for that debt.

In our worship services, before we partake in the Lord’s Supper, we will usually read part of a Psalm together as a time of confession. Other, more traditional, services may have more scripted prayers that acknowledge how we have sinned against God by what we have done and by what we have not done.³ But whatever that rhythm might look like, confession is a counter-cultural moment of thoughtful self-examination should simultaneously cultivate spiritual humility and gratitude as it deconstructs a mentality of entitlement and pride.

But you might ask the understandable questions: if Christ paid the penalty once and all for our sins, why do we need to talk about sin at all? And why in the world would Jesus himself teach us to confess our sins daily?

To answer that question, I would say, while the doctrine of sin is not popular, it is utterly necessary to understand. For if we do not understand the gravity of our need, we will not be amazed at the grandeur of God’s grace to meet that need.

The habit of confession, then, isn’t meant to point us toward self-hatred or condemnation. Rather, it is specifically designed for the purpose of washing ourselves with the truth of the gospel so that the new life of the Spirit would be made more and more manifest through us. Thus, confession isn’t just the way we acknowledge our need – it is also the way that we are to receive and rest in grace every day.

But there is another element involved in receiving the gift of grace, and that leads us to the next point.

2.) The Demand of Grace.

Jesus doesn’t just teach us to pray: “*forgive us our debts.*” He teaches us to pray: “*forgive us our*

¹ Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*. (Dutton: New York, 2014), 100.

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Revised and Edited by Frederick William Danker. 3rd Ed. (BDAG). (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957, 1979, 2000), 708.

³ J.I. Packer, *Praying the Lord’s Prayer*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 78.

debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,” which is a far more terrifying prayer to pray honestly.⁴

He is teaching us that we must be givers of grace to be receivers of grace. We must be conduits of grace, not merely containers of grace. *Grace is a gift that can only be enjoyed with open hands, not with clenched fists.* This is why even here in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus immediately follows the words of the Lord’s Prayer with this commentary: *“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses”* (Mt 6:14-15).

Now at one level, Jesus is definitely giving us a stern warning. When we habitually hold onto grudges and bitterness, we are setting ourselves in opposition to God – and God is a formidable opponent (cf. Mt 18:23-34).⁵ Simply said, a bitter Christian is a hypocritical Christian because it is by grace that we have been saved (cf. Eph 2:8).

However, I think Jesus is also doing something more. He is engaging us at the heart level. He is offering us liberty from the spiritual tyranny of bitterness and unforgiveness.

As a pastor, one of the most common things that I have to walk people through is not just the pain caused by the sins they commit, but rather the pain that is caused by sins committed against them. And one of the most important steps in the process of healing is to help people to truly forgive those who have hurt them.

I often have to say that when you truly forgive someone, you are not saying that what that person did was right. You are not acting like it never happened. Nor are you required to the person who hurt you or expose yourself to them hurting you again. What you are saying is, “I will stop drinking this poison of hatred and acting like it is hurting someone else.” What you are saying is, “I am choosing to no longer to try to create my justice by harboring bitterness. Instead, I entrust my justice to the true and perfect judge.”

In fact, I would argue, our ability to totally forgive derives, in part, from trusting in God’s perfect justice. If you think about it, when we hold onto bitterness and un-forgiveness, we do so because we desire justice, we desire vindication, and we think we have to get justice for ourselves. But God invites us to let go of the poison of our bitterness. Why? Because he is the judge who is perfectly wise, perfectly good, perfectly merciful, and perfectly just. He is the God who has experienced the worst that this evil world has to offer, and he is the God who will one day bring all evil to an end. You can entrust your pain to him. You can rest in him. Psalm 37 tells us, *“Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday”* (Ps 37:5–6). *Jesus will be your vindication. Grace will be your freedom.*

As we seek to build a culture of prayer in our walks with God and in our church, here is a prayer that I encourage you to pray in the coming week: *“God, help me to acknowledge and repent of my sin on a daily basis so that I can receive the gift of your grace on a daily basis. Help me to give grace as freely as you have given me grace.”*

This leads us to our final point.

3.) The God of Grace.

The reason Jesus teaches us to pray for forgiveness is first and foremost because God is a God who

⁴ R.C. Sproul, *The Prayer of the Lord*. (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2009), 84.

⁵ Sproul, 82.

forgives. He is a God of grace.

We cannot allow this thought to be common to us. Grace is an idea that is arguably Christianity's greatest gift to an aching world.⁶ But we cannot miss the fact that grace is by its very nature also a scandal.

In fact, one of the most scandalous things Jesus ever did was forgive people. The gospels tell the story of an instance when Jesus was teaching in a house in the seaside town of Capernaum (Mt 9:2-8; Mk 2:1-12; Lk 5:17-26). The house was so crammed full that people were spilling out of the doorway. But a group of men were desperate to get one of their friends, a paralytic, into the presence of Jesus that he might be healed. So instead of trying to wait their turn or muscle through the crowd, they climbed onto the roof and removed enough ceiling tiles to create an opening. They interrupt Jesus's sermon and lower their friend on a gurney until he is right in front of Jesus. Already this is an unexpected turn of events. But then things get even stranger.

People are wondering what is going to happen next. "Is Jesus going to heal this man? Will he be frustrated they interrupted him?" And Jesus did heal him, but before he did, he said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." This statement seemed to shock people more than the healing of the paralyzed man!

From a Jewish point of view, this was scandalous. You couldn't just say that someone was forgiven of all of his or her sins. Our culture might not think that sin is a big deal, but Jewish culture did. In order to be forgiven, you had to approach the temple in Jerusalem and make a sacrifice that would atone for your sins up until that point.⁷ Then when you sinned again, you had to go make another sacrifice and shed more blood to be forgiven again. Such was the costliness of grace.

So why is it that Jesus is able to pronounce forgiveness upon those he heals? And why does he teach us to pray for forgiveness and assume that we will receive it? The only answer is the cross. At the cross, the infinite justice of God collides with the infinite love of God. At the cross the ultimate sacrifice was made once and for all. At the cross, Jesus the lamb of God took upon himself the pain and punishment and power of sins we have committed as well as the sins committed against us. And it was at the cross, while Jesus himself bore the weight of our judgment, Jesus prayed, "*Father, forgive them*" (Lk 23:43).

Thus, when we pray "*Father, forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,*" we are immersing ourselves not just with the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, we are coming into agreement with the prayer Jesus prayed over us!

In Jesus's death, the power of sin was deflected. In his resurrection, the power of sin is broken. By faith, the freedom from sin can be experienced and rested in every day – this is amazing grace.

As theologian. N.T. Wright says, "*It is our birthright, as the followers of Jesus, to breathe in true divine forgiveness day by day, as the cool, clean air which our spiritual lungs need instead of the grimy, germ-laden air that is pumped at us from all sides. And, once we start inhaling God's fresh air, there is a good chance we will start breathing it out, too. As we learn what it is like to be forgiven, we begin to discover that it is possible, and indeed joyful, to forgive others.*"⁸

May we understand our need for this grace, may we be eager to give grace, and may we rest in this grace now and for all eternity! AMEN.

⁶ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 30.

⁷ N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 38.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

Discussion starters for Gospel Communities:

- 1.) *The Lord's Prayer compares being forgiven of sin to being forgiven of a debt (Mt 6:12). In what way is sin to be understood as a moral debt?*
- 2.) *Why is it important to acknowledge our sins in prayer (see 1 Jn:8-9)?*
- 3.) *Why do you think Jesus connects our ability to be forgiven with our ability to forgive?*
- 4.) *What are the spiritual and practical dangers of bitterness, and what are the keys to truly forgiving our enemies?*
- 5.) *Why can Christians pray for grace and forgiveness with the absolute assurance that they will receive it? What does it mean to receive and rest in God's grace on a daily basis?*