

And Forgive Us Our Debts As We Also Have Forgiven Our Debtors

As we noted last week, the Lord's Prayer falls into two parts:

- the first looks to God and the establishing of his rule over all things;
- the second asks God to supply our most urgent and pressing needs (bread, forgiveness, help and strength when we are tempted).

In a sense, this division is artificial, because God's will aims for us to be well.

- The will of God is done and his rule is extended in the world when God helps us, sustains us and forgives our sins.
- The more one wants God's will to be done, the more keenly one feels one's own shortcomings; this in turn creates greater sympathy in us for others' failures ("forgive..as we also forgive").

Our sins—the wrongs we do by thought, word and deed against God and our neighbor—are described here as **debts**.

- A debt is an obligation we have toward another person which involves
 - something we should have done or given, but which
 - we did not do or give.
- As long as a debt remains unpaid, it involves liability and guilt; one is declared guilty of owing what one has not paid and now cannot pay and stands condemned.
 - "Sin is a debt—a shortcoming in the service due to God or a harm to fellow men that requires reparation. St. Paul gives vivid expression to the thought [in] Col. 2:14... 'the account standing against us.' It is contemplated as a thing left undone..." (A. Carr, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1890, 131).

On sins as debts, see Luke 13:4 ("that these were greater debtors [=sinners] than all the men who dwell in Jerusalem").

- Sins are also commonly pictured as debts in Rabbinic literature:
 - "What right do I have to tell the Creator not to collect his debt?" (Jer. Taanith, 4.66c)
- The word "debt" was also used in Aramaic translations of the Old Testament (Targums) in place of the Hebrew words for
 - sin (Gen. 20:9; Ex. 10:17; Ps. 25:18);
 - guilt (Gen. 26:10);
 - transgression (Gen. 31:36);
 - iniquity (Jer. 16:10).

Debts pose a problem and carry with them a danger. They must be dealt with before judgment comes.

- The verb that is used here (*aphienai*) means
 - to take away [a debt]=forgive [a debt or a sin] (cf. Mk. 3:29) or
 - to let a person go free from a charge or from penalties.

It is also used to describe the year of the jubilee (Lev. 25:31,40; 27:24), in which all debts were forgiven.

In continuity with earlier Jewish teaching, Jesus emphasizes that before one goes to God to seek forgiveness for oneself, one must

(1) seek forgiveness from those whom one has wronged

- Mt. 5:23-24: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

(2) forgive other people who have wronged one:

- Ecclesiasticus 28:2: “Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done you, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. One man cherishes hatred against another and does he seek healing from the Lord? He shows no mercy to a man like himself, and does he make supplication for his own sins? Being flesh himself, he nourishes wrath—who shall atone for his sins?”
- Mk. 11:25: “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your father also who is in heaven may forgive your trespasses.”
- Mt. 6:14-15: “For if you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their transgressions, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions.”
- Compare also the parable of the unforgiving servant in Mt. 18:23ff., especially Mt. 18:35: “So also my heavenly Father will do for you, unless each of you from your heart forgives his brother their transgressions.”
 - Compare the Rabbinic teaching in Yoma 8.9 (sins against one’s neighbor cannot be atoned for by the Day of Atonement unless a man has first been reconciled to his neighbor)

The Motive for Forgiving Those Who Have Wronged Us: Our Common Need, God’s Prior Action

- Because all have fallen away from God and are in the same position, standing in need of God’s forgiveness (Rom. 3:9,20).
 - Compare the prayer for forgiveness in the sixth of the Eighteen Benedictions (*Shemoneh Esreh*) in the *Amidah* prayer of the Jewish worship service:
 - “Forgive us, O our Father, for we have sinned; pardon us, O King, for we have transgressed, for you do pardon and forgive. Blessed are you, O Lord, who are gracious and do abundantly forgive.”
- Because having fallen away from God, we were forgiven by God, not because of something we did or some merit we had, but because of what Jesus did and the merit he had.
 - Eph. 4:32: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, *just as in Christ God forgave you.*”
 - Col.3:13: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. *Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*”

The word “as” in the Lord’s Prayer must be understood in the same way as pointing a past act/intention:

- “as”=I/we have forgiven or have intended to forgive those who have wronged me/us (“as we herewith forgive our debtors”)
- “It is not that we put forward our forgiveness of those who have done us an injury as the reason why God should be compelled to forgive us” (Klostermann), but our forgiveness of others should still precede one’s request for forgiveness before God.

Forgiveness Is to Be Extended Even to the Unrepentant and Those Who Have Not Sought To Be Reconciled to Us and Continue to Act Against Us

Mt. 5:44: “pray for those who persecute you”

Lk. 6:28: “bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you”

Rom. 12:14: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse”

- Compare Acts 9:4-5: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? ...I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.... [You] are my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles.’ Something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized.” Note that this occurs before Paul has asked for forgiveness and while he was still committed to opposing the Gospel and having Christians jailed and put to death.
 - Compare the Rabbinic teaching: “If A has injured B, B is bound to pray God to show compassion upon A, even though A has not asked B for his forgiveness. (Tos. Baba Kamma 9.29, p. 365 *fin.*)

Note also that in Mt. 18:22, Jesus tells Peter that one must forgive the brother who sins against one “not seven times, but seventy-seven (or seventy times seven) times”

- Note here that the person who continues to offend and sin against one does so because they continue to have an evil mind and to wish one harm. That is the assumption underlying Jesus’ teaching.

In all these cases,

- the person who is to be forgiven really has harmed one and sinned against one and it is only as a person who really has thought and done evil and caused harm that we can extend forgiveness to them.
 - There is no denying the evil/harm or stuffing the emotion or trying to tell oneself, “It is nothing”—all of these would deny the reality of the sin and make any forgiveness pointless.
- the person who is to be forgiven is still committed to a pattern of sin which tears down and destroys God’s creature—they remain dangerous and unsafe.

One should never underestimate how hard it is to forgive people who, in various ways, are committed to destroying one’s life.

- This became clear to me a few years ago when I was talking with a man who had been deeply hurt by his adopted daughter who had stolen money from him, taken his car, and run up huge charges on his credit card. He could remember and love the girl she had been as a child, but he said he could not love or ever forgive the woman she had become. I read several of the passages where Jesus taught on forgiveness and, without comment, asked this man what he thought they meant for his current situation. He was very open about his feelings and said that if his daughter

ceased every one of the hurtful activities she was doing and sincerely apologized (so that his relationship with his daughter went back to the way things had been when she was a child), then perhaps he could forgive her. Unless that happened, however, he did not think forgiveness was possible or would even be right, because it would encourage wrongdoing and trivialize all the harms he himself had suffered.

I sympathized with what this man had gone through, but when he talked about his relationship with his daughter, there was one thing he never talked about—God. It was as if the fact of God’s existence was simply not relevant to the power struggle he was having with his daughter and there was nothing God could do (no new possibilities God might create) that would be relevant to this situation.

In Forgiving Those Who Have Wronged Us, We Trust God to Act for the Other Person’s Good and Gradually to Overcome Their Evils

Ps. 145:9: “The Lord is good to all and his tender mercies are over all his works.”

From

- a desire to *strike back* and make another person *less* (or to *reduce and control* another person)

to

- a good hope for those who have wronged us—we ask God to change them and overcome the evils that are now in them.

We are not to humiliate those who have wronged us or to rejoice in their humiliation, losses, or sufferings or the fact that they have lost a good reputation and gained a bad reputation.

It is better for the person who has wronged us to be *changed*, rather than *lost*.

- “[God] desires not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live” (Prayer Book, citing Ezek. 33:11; compare also Ezek. 18:23,32: 33:14)
- Cf. the interpretation of Ps. 104:35 in *Berakoth* 10a; Midrash Psalms 104 (27), verse 35, 224b: The text of the Psalm says, “not ‘let *sinner*s be destroyed out of the earth,’ but ‘let *sins* be destroyed out of the earth,’ and then the wicked will be no more. So pray for them that they repent, and then they will be wicked no more.”