

¹² Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

There's an old bumper sticker that says, "I owe. I owe. It's off to work I go." Debt is something that we have become very accustomed to. A friend of mine recently said, "We are getting nicked and dined to death." The only problem is that the nickels and dimes are now 50's and 100's; and that leads to debt. We don't like it, but we don't have much choice in the matter.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer we say, "**Forgive us our sins**" or our "**trespasses.**" Sin is a general classification for any breaking of God's law, but the word in Matthew 6 is "**debts.**" It's referring to what we owe God for a violation of His law - kind of like when you get fined for a speeding violation and you have to pay a ticket.

Some hate the very concept of God because they don't like the idea of "owing" God something. But we do owe God. Think of what we have our children recite in the explanation to the First Article.

I believe that God has made me and all that exists. And I believe that God still preserves me by richly and daily providing me with clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, spouse and children, land cattle and all that I own, and all that I need to keep my body and life. For all of this I ought to thank and praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true!

What do we owe God? Thank and praise. Is coming to church and singing praises to him for one hour - on behalf of seven days of blessings - too much? Has He given you none of this?

Think of a child that has received a wonderful gift for his birthday. Aunt Twila buys her nephew Ben a brand new bike. He can't wait to get outside and try it. He will get hours and hours of entertainment from that one bike. So little Ben goes up and down the driveway and down the road with frenzied excitement. But what do the parents say to the child? You need to write a thank you card to Aunt Twila. "Yes, yes, I'll do it." Three days later. "Did you write that card yet?" "No." "Well, get on it!" How does five minutes compare to a hundred dollar gift? If you were to ask the child to write Aunt Twila five minutes for the gift before they will receive it; the child would do that. But since the gift was already given; the child looks at thanks as a burden and a chore. Isn't that what God has to deal with every day? How hard is it to come and give him thanks?

What else do we owe God? Service and obedience. Think back to the bike. Imagine that Aunt Twila said to Ben, "Make sure you take care of this and enjoy it!" But what if Ben took the bike and ghost rode it down a huge hill and ran it into a wall? What if he left it in the middle of the street overnight? She would probably say to the boy, "What did you do that for?" And she would have every right to; for she paid for the bike. What do we owe God? Think about how you treat the gifts He has given to you. Does your spouse get a sense of love and compassion and attention from you that they need and want? Does your employer know that he can get a good days work out of you; that you can be dependable? Do you obediently listen to your parents and willingly clean your room or wash the dishes? Isn't this how God wants it to be? It is your duty to use the gifts as God calls on you to use them. We owe God these things.

Not only is there a debt in what we do. There also is a debt when we don't do it. There are consequences to dishonoring the name of God; being greedy and discontent. You end up in debt up to your ears. But that's not all. Paul writes, "**The wages of sin is death.**" Sinners die under the curse of sin that runs through their bodies and makes them sick and old and eventually die. But even that's not all! Jesus spoke of how it would be better to pluck out your eye than to be caught in adultery and end up in hell; an eternal lake of fire and darkness; where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. These are our debts that we owe to God.

But what does Jesus tell us to pray? **Forgive us our debts.** What does that mean? The word literally means to "send away." Psalm 103 describes forgiveness in this same way -

⁹ **He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;**

¹⁰ **he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.**

¹¹ **For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him;**

¹² **as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.**

But where does He remove them to? It has to be somewhere that they can't be found or dug up - like hidden evidence on a shelf - waiting to be found years later - on Judgment Day. And forgiveness doesn't mean that God just needs to ignore the evidence. One of the greatest things that can irritate someone is when evidence is obviously there but not used and forbidden to be used because of some mere technicality.

When Jesus tells us to pray for forgiveness, we know where God decided to send the sin. Isaiah writes in chapter 53,

⁵ **But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.** ⁶ **We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.**

Jesus knew that He was the answer to this prayer. Forgiveness meant that Jesus Himself was going to have to pay for sin and suffer for it on the cross. He would be God's way of taking all of sins darkness and exposing it to the world as His perfect Son hung there on the cross. It would have to be sent from US onto HIM. And so forgiveness meant pain for Jesus. It meant death. It meant hell. This is what forgiveness comes from and through in the Bible; through Jesus on the cross; paying the debt we owed. It is a far cry from forgetting sin or ignoring it. It is God becoming sin and dying under it. It is a prayer that God would be merciful on me by being ruthless with Jesus. It is a prayer that Jesus would pay the debt for me and for you; so that God wouldn't put me through the hell I've deserved a thousand times over.

This fifth petition of forgiveness is culmination and core what Christianity revolves around. It is how the Kingdom comes. It is the heart and soul and proof of God's good and gracious name. Any other religion involves making up for what you've done; earning what you've done; making sacrifices for what you did. But not Christianity. Jesus does it all and demands no payment from us or vengeance on us. It's what drops the jaws of the world; how freely and willingly God gives it. We don't have to earn it. We don't have to pay it back in order to get it. We pray for it first. Jesus gave it first. He knew exactly what we would owe Him. He knew every sin you've ever committed and ever will commit. He counted it all up. And He chose to suffer for it two thousand years ago; long before we were even born. He finished it, long before we ever even asked for it.

Through faith in Jesus we can say to God we owe Him nothing. On Judgment Day He won't bring up what you've done; for Jesus already brought it up and died under it. When you believe in Christ there is not one thing He will remember or bring to mind - not because He's forgotten it; but because He's already painfully paid for it. That is forgiveness in the truly Biblical sense.

Forgiveness is what makes the church breathe and do what it does. This is why we rush our infants to the font after birth; for free and full forgiveness. This is why we confess our sins at the opening of the service; for free and full forgiveness spoken from the mouth of His servant. This is why we come to the Supper on a weekly basis; to receive forgiveness through the body and blood that was used to pay for our sins. It's why we keep on meeting together; even though there have been people here that have irritated us and sinned against us; even though our sinful natures tell us we have important things to do; because of forgiveness is what we need more than anything else.

There are those who even as professing Christians still don't grasp what this forgiveness is. They think that someone forgiveness means that they must forget about what was done to them; grit their teeth; and do whether they like it or not. "Fine! I forgive you!" "Go and say you're sorry. 'I'm sorry.' Now say 'I forgive you.' 'I forgive you.' Others think that forgiveness means I'm supposed to just ignore what someone did to me or wave it off as no big deal. That's not forgiveness. It's not just words. It's not easy. It's not ignoring what someone did to you. It's suffering what they did to you, but not trying to exact revenge on them. It's suffering what they did to you, but wanting to take them to Christ and bringing them to Christ in spite of what they've done to you. It's something Jesus already did for them and for you. Jesus decided to suffer and die for what we did; to pay what we owed to God. That's forgiveness. So forgiveness involves painfully taking people to Christ and painfully going to Christ ourselves so we all can find forgiveness in Him.

Todd had a girl in high school that he was enamored with, but when he asked her out she only laughed at him. He thought about that laugh for a long time; how it hurt him. In the middle of the night he would wake up and it would strike him again years later. He wanted to yell at her and humiliate her. He wanted to tell her how it made him feel. He tried to forget it, but he just couldn't. And he felt guilty for his anger. He wondered, "How could God forgive me when I can't let go of this?"

What if Todd could have looked at that girl and see her bleeding and dying and being mocked for what she said to him? Isn't that what happened to her on the cross? What if Todd saw her going through the same thing; when He saw Jesus going through mockery and death for her? What if Todd listened all the more to Jesus words to him? What if he went back to his baptism and said, "I am Jesus' special child. I am His beloved. He isn't laughing at me. He hasn't rejected me." What if he said to himself, "Maybe this relationship would have been terrible for me. Maybe it taught me to look for something better in a girl than what I saw in her." What if he openly rebuked such thoughts and burst out loud, "God forgive her! God paid for her too!"

Part of living in a sinful world means you will get hurt by people you are even trying to help. Imagine finding your dog all tangled up in barb wire and in a frantic mess. You come to him and try to unravel it; knowing that it is hurting your dog. It nips at you and growls. But out of love for that dog, you suffer it because you want to free it. Isn't that how forgiveness works too? The only way Jesus could pay for our sins was by suffering under us as He was helping us. If it was painful for Jesus to forgive you, then won't it be painful to try and apply that forgiveness as well? You try to help someone out and they don't want to be helped. They get angry at you and

blame you for their problems. It hurts and it makes you angry; especially when you want them to know the love and joy of Christ. But if you then respond to their anger with your own anger and bitterness, are you giving them a picture of love and patience and forgiveness? Isn't this a part of why we pray, "**Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us?**" Aren't we the avenue through which God died for people who don't deserve it? But if you are only a picture of anger and bitterness, how will you do that? If you are afraid of getting hurt and aren't willing to suffer getting burned, then how will anyone see what forgiveness is all about?

Jesus used the story of an unmerciful servant. He owed his master some money - enough to get him locked up - and he was about to be thrown in jail. But he begged for mercy, and the man he owed the money to forgave his debt. But then when he came upon someone who owed him much less, he choked the man and refused to forgive him his debt. He showed no appreciation or thankfulness for what had happened to him. Instead of reflecting forgiveness he only showed an iron fist; even though the man showed sorrow and remorse for what he had done. Instead of living in thankfulness for a debt that was lifted from him, he lived in anger and bitterness. When the original master heard what that man had done, he changed his mind and decided to lock the unmerciful man up.

Does it does it fix anything to hold onto your anger? Does it make them change their mind? Does it pay for their sin? Has God called on you to exact vengeance on them through your hatred and spite? Does God remind Himself every day of your worst sins and stew over them? Or does Jesus instead mercifully plead to the Father for your defense?

So we pray this Fifth Petition. In some senses it is the most difficult of all of the petitions. First of all because we don't like to admit our own sins and confess them. Secondly because forgiveness isn't easy. It is much easier; and maybe a little more fun to get our own vengeance. Forgiveness is painful. It is difficult. Yet we need to remember that it wasn't easy or fun for Jesus to go to the cross because of us either. That's why He prayed prior to going to the cross in the Garden. He was strengthened to do what He needed to do to pay for our sins; to earn our forgiveness.

So it is because of our own sinful pride and fear that we need to pray this prayer all the more. We have to pray it because we need it so badly for all of our bitterness inside and our own difficulty to forgive. We need to pray it so we can remember where our forgiveness is found in Christ alone.

What an important petition it is. We need to live in forgiveness to stay spiritually alive. You might compare it to the way our bodies digest food. If you stop drinking of Christ you will die of thirst. If you keep on eating without using the bathroom, your body wouldn't be able to survive. The person who only wants to receive forgiveness from God without letting that same forgiveness flow through him; he will only die of selfish consumption. Forgiveness is meant to keep on coming to us and through us to others. Without forgiveness God's kingdom cannot come; God's will will not be done; His name will only be a Name of death and damnation. By God's grace it does keep coming to us daily and fully. And by His mercy we pray it will keep on flowing to us and through us to those we love; to those who don't deserve it in one bit; just like us. Amen.