

Forgive Us Our Debts

Psalm 51:1-12, Matthew 6:1-18

November 7, 1999

When I was a little boy in the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, Tennessee, I learned how to pray the Lord's Prayer even as our children here have already learned to pray the Lord's Prayer. Looking back it occurs to me that I may have learned that more by the sounds than I did by the words; I'm quite sure I did not get all the sounds correct. It was large and beautiful sanctuary, very similar to this one. The woodwork was a little bit darker and the windows it seems to my memory were slightly narrower but a very similar sanctuary. We sat in a pew with a little brass plate on it that said James E. Bailey, which I knew was my grandfather's name, and only later came to learn was actually his father's name. And as I thought I heard the prayer so did I pray it in earnest. Right down to that most curious phrase of all, "Deliver us from eagles."

Now I had never seen an eagle. And I had certainly never seen an eagle pursue people. But I knew I did not want to see an eagle pursuing and attacking people. So it seemed to me to be a most appropriate prayer. "Deliver us from eagles." And I prayed it with great earnestness until sometime later on I came to learn and realize that the prayer referred to an even more dreaded enemy of evil.

It was many years after that when I came across another phrase in the prayer that I learned to fear even more. A much more frightening and much more difficult part of the prayer where Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." I would much rather he had said something else at that place, but he did not. I would much rather he had said the first half by itself and let it stand alone. "Forgive us our debts"—that I can pray earnestly. I am well convinced of my sinfulness. I know my need for prayer. I am grateful for the privilege of forgiveness and eager to pray for it. I wish that could have stood alone. But it does not.

I could even wish that the two clauses had been reversed. It would have made a lot more sense to me. And more than that, it would have been a lot more comfortable. I would that Jesus had said, "Teach us to forgive other people just as you have forgiven us." I could live with that. But that's not what it says. Perhaps we should back up to the introduction to the Lord's Prayer where Jesus assures us that our Father in heaven already knows what we need. And one would think that the next line would be "Therefore you don't need to pray at all." But that's not what he says. Your Father already knows what you need; the implication is that he knows a lot better than you do. Sometimes we ask for the wrong things. He knows what we

need and what we ought to be asking for, therefore pray like this. And there it stands. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. I find that terrifying. I find it terrifying because I'm not very good at forgiving my debtors. I would much rather hang on to that. Keep that score. Nurse that grudge. Remember that hurt. And carry that with me for a long time.

I'm not very good at forgiving my debtors because I really don't want to forgive them. Therefore the prayer terrifies me. I live in the hope that the one who forgives me is a lot better at forgiving others. And here I am taught that my being forgiven is limited by my being forgiving, I am in a lot more trouble than I thought, which is too much already.

What can this phrase, this small part of the Lord's Prayer, possibly mean? First of all, it does mean that God does forgive our debts. Surely that is the point of at least the first half of this phrase, "Forgive us our debts."

It does acknowledge that we have run up a tremendous bill. We have been unbelieving. We have failed in our love for God and other. There has been a shortage of worship in our lives. We have exhibited many misbehaviors. The fact is, that Jesus taught us to pray for the forgiveness of our sins and for that I am profoundly grateful. More than I can say. This does communicate to us that good news that God does forgive. And apart from that the prayer would make no sense at all.

Now the second half of this is that the prayer also teaches us that God expects us to forgive others. And at this point many of us think the preacher has quit preaching and gone to meddling. The Christian faith has direct personal, practical, day-to-day consequences, realities, purposes, reasons, and results. And at least one of the reasons, though not of course the only reason, for our forgiveness is for us to forgive others. This prayer acknowledges that others have wronged us. This prayer also expects us to forgive. It brings us to certain real life, this worldly consequences.

The Christian faith is not content only to contemplate that life which is yet to come. Reinhold Niebuhr was a theologian and a pastor earlier in this century and the first church he served was either in or just outside of Detroit. He wrote an autobiography of his time there. He titled it *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. Some have objected that he was neither cynical nor ever tamed, but nevertheless, that is the title that he gave it. And one of these short writings tells of a time that he was preaching at a nearby church. It sounded like a kind of revival service where he was the guest minister. And he preached about forgiveness.

Later he learned that a mother and her daughter, who had been angry at each other and had not spoken for five years, were there and forgave each other. They became reconciled. Niebuhr told how that filled his heart with courage to learn the

power of the gospel in terms of real life consequences in this world. This prayer teaches us that God and Jesus Christ expect us to forgive others.

So there are two things we learn here. First is that God forgives us our debts. Second is that God expects us to forgive others. And the third is that the two are related in a surprising way. We want to say of course our forgiving others flows out of our being forgiven. There is no other way we could learn what forgiveness is. This is what we are taught in the whole rest of the Bible and that will not be overturned by this one verse. Of course we are saved by the free and unmerited grace of God alone, and God's initiative not as a reward for any good works of our own including even the good work of forgiving others.

So what does this strange form mean? I think in at least part of what it means can be determined if run it backward and let it say that it teaches us this. If we are not forgiving of other people, that in and of itself is a sure sign that we do not have a clue as to what it means to be forgiven. Because if we did, we would be different people. The measure of the mercy given is the measure of the mercy received. It may not be a prerequisite, nevertheless, it is an awfully good indicator of the reality and the extent and the appropriation of forgiveness. If we are unforgiving toward others, we have not yet learned the mercy and the forgiveness of God. Having heard of that gospel, having seen that gift, having received that mercy, there is no way we could hold back in our dealings with other people. This prayer teaches us that we receive and appropriate forgiveness as real, and true, and good, and effective precisely and only to the extent that we are truly forgiving of others.

So how does this work itself out in our lives? How first does God forgive us? Well, Jesus Christ comes to us. He comes to live with us and among us as one of us and this we will celebrate soon especially at Christmas. Jesus Christ dies for us on the cross and from this we see that the forgiveness of our sin is something terribly and horribly expensive. It costs Christ his life. The forgiveness of our sin is not merely the canceling of a debt, the writing off of a debt, the acting as if it had never been there. It is inside the absorbing of that loss, that pain, that suffering, into oneself. In this case into Jesus Christ and into God. And in a few moments we will share the Lord's Supper. There the elements of bread and wine are given to us by Jesus Christ as reminder of his self-sacrifice to give of his body and blood for us. This act of forgiveness on the part of God toward us stands over and against our massive sins of disbelief in God and in his Christ. In betrayal of Jesus Christ. Of rejection of the very one who not only made us but also redeemed us and it is by the word of Jesus Christ on the cross that our debt is canceled. Our bill is paid. Our sin is forgiven. Our sentence is served.

Remember that for any debt that others owe to us pales into insignificance by comparison with what we owe to God. How dare we withhold forgiveness? For the

real or perceived hurts that we have received, yes, of course, as we are forgiven so can we forgive. And it is also true at the same time that the extent of our forgiveness of others or the lack thereof marks the limits of the forgiveness we know. And so we pray, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

Yes, there is a prayer for forgiveness, and yes, there is a prayer for us to be forgiving. That is what we really need. Not because the first is lacking but because only in the second do we know the first. So God help us. God help us to forgive one another all our debts, puny as they are, large as they appear. God help us to help each other so that we might begin to realize, comprehend, know, and appreciate the infinite forgiveness that God has given us.

Somehow those screaming eagles now seem tame by comparison not so much with the debt that others owe me as with the hardness of heart within that does not want to forgive. We might be able to take on the eagles on our own, but God help us to be forgiving of each other.

To God be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org