

The Lord's Prayer: Forgive Us Our Debts

Letter to a Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down column in a local newspaper.

A very big thumbs down to the person or persons who invaded our privacy on September 18, in the early hours of the morning. Thieves are not welcome in our house. Not only did they invade our privacy but they stole a cream nightie from the washing line. I wish only bad karma to you and hope that the bear which is on the front of my nightie, urinates all over you in your sleep. One day someone will steal from you and then you will know just how it feels.

Unforgiveness is such a big issue in our world.

This is the fourth message in our series on The Lord's Prayer.

And I've entitled this message: Forgive Us Our Debts.

Matthew 6:9-13

In this manner, therefore, pray: 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 forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

1. We have a debt

This is the only part of this prayer where Jesus added an explanatory note.

Matthew 6:14-15

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

So we see the conditional nature of asking God for forgiveness.

If you forgive others, God will forgive you.

If you don't forgive others, God won't forgive you.

You say, "But Jesus died for my sins. If I ask for forgiveness, He'll forgive me."

Let's take a look at a story Jesus told.

Matthew 18:23-35

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.

The king in this story is God, and the servants are us.

In today's terms, 10,000 talents would be over \$1billion.

That's a colossal amount of money to owe.

Notice that in the prayer, Jesus said, "Forgive us our debts."

And this debt, as Jesus shows in His parable, represents our debt towards God.

So how did we end up with this debt?

Simple.

God created us for a purpose.

Every individual that has ever lived was meant to fulfil God's purpose.

God has provided for all our needs.

And yet, as a race, we have rejected His rulership, and our thinking, our words, and our behaviour, have all fallen far short of His requirements.

That's our debt, and every day it gets bigger.

2. The debt is unpayable

Jesus goes on in His story:

But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'

So notice some things here.

1. The debt was impossible to pay.

How in the world could he raise \$1billion?

That's our debt to God, an impossible one.

But notice also that when he discovered that there were consequences for not paying his debt, he went into self-denial.

He said, "Just give me time, and I'll pay it all."

What a foolish claim.

But that's the same claim as every human being who thinks they can somehow pay their debt towards God.

Honest, God, I'll pay my debt.

And when You weigh my good deeds against my bad deeds, I'm sure I'll be good enough.

God doesn't work like that.

Nor does any country.

Imagine this: You're arrested for armed robbery, and you're in court.

And you say, "Listen Judge, I know I committed armed robbery. But I also gave \$100 to charity, helped a little old lady cross the road, and mowed my Aunt Bertha's lawn."

And the judge says, "Okay, three good deeds, one bad deed. You're free to go."

That would never happen in a court of law, so why would we expect God to operate like that?

The debt is unpayable.

Which is why the king in Jesus' story had to take the initiative.

Jesus continues: Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

That's what God has done for us.

Recognising our plight, and the impossibility of paying back our \$1billion plus debt, He forgave us.

That's what the cross is all about.

God's taking the initiative, Jesus' dying on the cross and paying our debt.

As one old song says: He paid a debt He did not owe; I owed a debt I could not pay; I needed someone who could wash my sins away.

That someone is Jesus.

The \$1 billion debt has been paid, and we are forgiven.

3. We must pass it on

It's our responsibility to pass on the forgiveness we received to others.

Jesus said, "Freely you have received, freely give."

But this is where it becomes problematic.

People are happy to receive forgiveness from God, but not always quite as willing to forgive others.

Jesus continues His story:

But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

There was no way this guy was going to let his fellow servant off the hook.

Why is that?

Why do people refuse to forgive others?

Let's take a look at some common excuses for unforgiveness.

1. They hurt me so badly.

This is another way of saying: their debt is so big.

The problem is that the debt that others owe us always seems so big.

And we so often think that what we're going through is unique to us.

My mother is a good example: she was 13 years old at the end of WW2 in Wales.

At that point, she had to leave school to look after her four younger siblings.

My father had a girlfriend, which is why we came to Australia to get away from all that.

Only to find that his girlfriend followed us out.

Four years later, my dad was killed when a car mounted the footpath.

Back in those days, a single mother couldn't get a loan from a bank to buy a house.

So she was forced to borrow from a hire purchase company at a much higher rate.

So picture this: raised during war conditions, uneducated, unfaithful husband, widowed at the age of 36, in a foreign land, two children, working her socks off to pay a steep mortgage.

And people would sit next to her on the bus, pour out their problems to her, and then say, "Well, you probably wouldn't understand. You look like you've had an easy life."

Friend, you can't tell by looking at someone what they've been through.

And don't assume that what you're going through is unique.

1 Corinthians 10:13

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

If someone has hurt you, what you're going through is common to humanity.

It may not feel like it, and it may not be exactly the same circumstances, but the test and the temptation are common.

So let's put what happened here into perspective.

100 denarii is about 20 weeks' wages.

That's a lot of money that he was owed, but there's absolutely no comparison between that and \$1bill+.

It may feel like the most horrible thing, but what you're suffering is common.

Another common reason people won't forgive: they don't deserve my forgiveness.

What they did was so bad, they don't deserve forgiveness.

The problem with that is that nobody ever deserves forgiveness; that's the nature of forgiveness.

Every time a person grants forgiveness, they are extending grace.

In other words, they are giving something the other person doesn't deserve, no matter how big or small the debt.

4. Why you should forgive others

So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.

I am convinced, after more than thirty years as a pastor, and more than forty years in church leadership, the number one reason people drop out of church life is to do with unforgiveness.

Now we can couch it in other terms like: they were hurt, they had a tough time, people didn't treat them well.

But we can't escape the fact that the bottom line is unforgiveness.

Let me repeat what the Bible says: No temptation (testing) has overtaken you except such as is common to man..."

So let me give you some reasons you should forgive others, no matter what.

The person who gains the most from forgiving others is the forgiver, not the forgivee.

If you refuse to forgive someone, you lose more than they do.

Someone once said that refusing to forgive someone is like drinking poison and expecting the other guy to die.

Notice that in Jesus' story, the king threw the unforgiving servant into prison.

That's what happens when we don't forgive; we end up in a self-made prison.

Forgiving them releases us from that prison.

If you think of the pain when someone hurts you, if you refuse to forgive, you relive that every time you think about it.

That means that the person who hurt you has ongoing power to continue hurting you.

Power that you've given them.

That's like getting robbed, then every night you leave the front door open so that you can be robbed again - repeatedly.

How does that make any sense?

So, for your own sake, forgive.

There's no revenge as complete as forgiveness.

5. How to forgive others

There are three levels of forgiveness.

1. Beginning level: make a choice.

This is entry level.

This is where you make a cold, hard choice to forgive.

You won't feel like it, but you just say, "Yes, Lord, I choose to forgive."

If you've got this far, and many don't, congratulations; you're on your way.

This is the beginning point of your journey to complete healing.

Level 2: Get your thoughts under control.

You'll win or lose this battle in your mind.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

We have to bring our thoughts into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

That's spiritual warfare.

This means refusing to relive the scene in your mind.

And you know what I'm talking about.

You replay the scene in your mind and this time you win the argument or the fight.

Don't do it.

You might win the imaginary fight in your mind, but you'll lose the real fight with the enemy.

Don't think about it; don't talk about it, except with a counsellor or trusted confidant.

That's a big fight; the enemy doesn't like losing ground.

Step 3: from the heart.

So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.

This is no surface forgiveness.

From the heart means exactly that.

You'll know when you get to this stage.

You'll no longer want revenge; there will be no more feelings of anger or hostility.

Quite the opposite, you'll genuinely be able to wish them well and pray for God's blessing on them.

Without gritting your teeth.

You've now reached the place of freedom.

I want to finish with a story.

But first let me say: if you want plenty of practice at forgiving, get married.

Colossians 3:19

Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter towards them.

And that's a two-way street.

Marriage is such an intimate relationship, there is a high probability of hurting one another.

Proverbs 12:18

There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword...

How easy it is to hurt the ones we most love.

A lady in our church went through a bitter divorce as her husband left her for another woman.

She came to Australia with her children and gave her life to the Lord.

Years later, her husband wanted to come and see the kids.

She not only agree, she invited him and his new wife to stay with her and come to church.

She'd forgiven from the heart.

There's a maths branch called probabilities: If you took a coin and flipped it 100 times and 100 times in a row it turned up heads (not a trick coin), what are the chances that it will turn up heads the next time too?

Some people think: Wow, one in a gazillion.

But the probability is still one in two.

Do you know why?

Because the coin can't remember what it did last time.

The coin's future is not determined by its past.

When I get to this part of the Lord's Prayer, I don't focus on receiving forgiveness for my own sins.

I deal with those things as they arise.

I concentrate on asking the Lord to help me forgive others and help me to be a quick forgiver.

I don't want my future to be determined by my past.