

Forgive Us Our Debts

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Matthew 6:7-13

Sermon Series:
Pray Daily: Igniting
Our Passion for God

The fall of communism in Romania was an uprising led by people of prayer. So much for prayer as a devotional exercise!

Philip Yancey, in his book *Prayer*, tells the story about pastor Laszlo Tokes, who took over a small Reformed church to minister to his fellow Hungarians, an oppressed minority living in the Romanian city of Timisoara. His predecessor had openly supported the communist Romanian government, going so far as to wear a red star on his clerical robe. Tokes spoke out against injustice and protested government actions. Soon the sanctuary began filling each Sunday, bringing together worshipers and dissidents of both Romanian and Hungarian descent. Membership grew from forty persons to 5000. The growth was not only numerical. Thousands committed their lives to Jesus Christ and became his disciples.

This courageous new pastor also attracted the attention of the communist secret police. They suspended Tokes from his ministry, denied him a ration book to purchase food and personally attacked him. When the police arrived to deport him, the congregation formed a human shield around his apartment. Eventually, the police broke through their barricade to arrest Tokes. The protestors refused to disperse; instead, they marched downtown to the police station, and the crowd swelled to 200,000. The govern-

ment dispatched more troops, who, over the course of two days, opened fire on the crowd, killing 73 and wounding many more. Still, the people held their ground, refusing to disperse.

A local pastor stood to address the protestors at the police station. "Let us pray," he said. In one spontaneous motion, everyone fell to his knees and recited The Lord's Prayer. It was a corporate act of obedience to God and civil disobedience to the state. Within days, the protest spread to Bucharest. A short time later, the government that had ruled Romania with an open fist toppled to the ground.

The fall of communism in Romania was an uprising led by people of prayer. So much for prayer as a devotional exercise! In these 90 days of prayer, we are portraying prayer as a catalyst for igniting our passion for God.

We are so accustomed to the words of The Lord's Prayer that we take them for granted. But consider its subversive nature in the streets of Timisoari. God's name, not dictator Ceausecu, will be hallowed. God's kingdom, not godless communism, will come. God's will, not corrupt government, will prevail.

The Lord's Prayer is not benign and innocuous. Each petition issues a challenge. Consider the 5th petition, "Forgive us our debts as

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we forgive our debtors.” In a day when revenge rules, forgiveness is altogether radical!

Forgiveness is indispensable to Jesus’ ministry. If we don’t understand forgiveness, the cross will be incomprehensible to us. Forgiveness is absolutely crucial to physical, emotional and spiritual health.

When we pray this Lord’s Prayer in church, many of us pause before the 5th petition. Should we say debts or trespasses? Some of us learned the prayer as debts and debtors; others of us were schooled with trespasses and those who trespass against us. Do you know why there is a division of the house?

In Matthew’s version of The Lord’s Prayer, Jesus uses the word “debt” (6:12). Yet, in the commentary that follows the prayer in verses 14-15, Jesus employs the word “trespass” to elaborate on the meaning of a debt. Jesus leads us in praying for our debts and debtors in the body of the prayer, yet switches to trespasses in the explanation that follows the prayer.

A debt is something owed to someone, a trespass is something done to someone. A trespass is something I do, a debt is something I fail to do. A debt represents the sin of omission, a trespass constitutes the sin of commission.

Luke’s version of this prayer circumvents this debt-trespass conundrum altogether (11:1-4). This prayer, which Jesus likely recites on more than one occasion, contains the words, “Forgive us

our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

We can become so absorbed in what to pray that we miss the point of the prayer. We will never really know how to forgive anyone else until we discover what it’s like to be forgiven by God.

Forgiveness isn’t dependent on the worthiness of the person who has wronged us. Forgiveness centers on God. We forgive, because God has forgiven us (Colossians 3:13; Ephesians 4:32). Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, speaks of forgiveness this way: “I am more flawed and sinful than I ever dared to believe, but I am also more loved and accepted than I ever dared hope.”

Jesus amplifies this forgiveness principle in a parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18. Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone. Jewish law held to a three-strikes-and-you’re-out limit to forgiveness. Peter must imagine himself to be magnanimous when he offers forgiveness seven times. Jesus answers, “I tell you not seven times, but 77 times” (18:22). In other words, forgiveness should be extended indefinitely.

Jesus proceeded to tell a parable about a servant who owes his king an exorbitant debt, equating to millions of dollars. The servant can’t hope to repay this debt over his lifetime, so he pleads clemency before the king. The king takes pity on him and cancels his debt entirely. The servant then

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demands repayment from a fellow servant who owes him a trifling amount of money.

Jesus' point is rather obvious. Can we not forgive people of insignificant debts when God has forgiven us of such an enormous debt?

The end of this 5th petition is rather perplexing. Everything hinges on the little conjunction "as." "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Does this conjunction set a condition on God's forgiveness? "Forgive us our debts as (or to the same extent as) we forgive our debtors." The prayer seems to suggest that if I don't forgive other people, God won't forgive me. Is God's forgiveness really contingent on my forgiveness? Since I cannot perfectly forgive other people, does that mean God will withhold forgiveness from me?

Scripture declares God's forgiveness to be complete. I am totally forgiven by Christ's death on the cross. There are no conditions attached to God's forgiveness. So let's reread the sentence by starting at the end and working toward the beginning. If I don't forgive other people, I will never fully experience God's forgiveness. An unforgiving spirit will prevent me from experiencing the totality of forgiveness that God offers me in Jesus Christ.

This verse demonstrates that our relationship with God is inextricably linked to our relationship with people. I can't be right with God and be wrong with people. I

cannot accept God's forgiveness, yet withhold it from others.

Forgiveness is not merely a nice idea. C. S. Lewis writes, "Everybody says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have someone to forgive."

Forgiveness is not merely a nice idea; it correlates to real life in at least four different ways.

First, forgiveness is hard! Let's just tell it like it is—forgiveness is really hard. There is something in us that delights in getting even with people.

Although forgiveness is hard, revenge is harder. You see, there's no end to revenge. I do something against you, you retaliate, and the whole wretched cycle goes on forever until someone has strength enough to forgive. Gandhi said, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong."

Second, forgiveness places a premium on restoring relationships.

Forgiveness doesn't ultimately concern itself with who is in the right. It cares more about restoring the relationship than with the infraction.

Forgiveness doesn't condone what happened. It doesn't act as though the infraction never occurred. We acknowledge the act to be wrong. If it weren't so, forgiveness wouldn't be needed. But we choose not to dwell on it or harbor it.

I hear people say, "I'll never be able to forgive what that person did to me." Sooner or later, you're going to need someone else's forgive-

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ness. General Oglethorpe once said to John Wesley, "I never forgive," to which Wesley responded, "Then sir, I hope you never sin."

Third, forgiveness surrenders the right to get even. When it comes to forgiveness, we must be willing to give up the right to strike back and retaliate.

Corrie Ten Boom was one of the few survivors of Ravensbruck, the Nazi concentration camp where 96,000 women died, including her sister. Her book *The Hiding Place* recalls her experience after she returned to Germany in 1947 to preach forgiveness. One night in a Munich church, she met one of her former prison guards. She was overwhelmed with this man's cruelty. The guard approached Corrie, thrust out his hand and asked for forgiveness. She stood frozen, unable to lift her hand; her words about forgiveness suddenly seemed hollow in her ears. Then, as she wrote in her book, "I prayed silently. 'I can lift my hand. I can do that much.' And so, woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did...healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother!'... For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then."

Fourth, forgiveness sets us free.

If we don't forgive, we let bitterness continue its devilish work in us. Bitterness is like holding a lit match. It only burns the

one holding it. When we persist in bitterness, we let the person who hurt us hurt us again. We remain bound to those who have wronged us. But when we forgive, we release ourselves from people who have harmed us. It is only by forgiving that we can put the past behind us. Forgiveness sets us free to use the energy spent on bitterness toward living full, abundant lives.

Today, we are forgiven sinners. God offers us a full and gracious pardon. We are also forgiving sinners. We forgive, as we have been forgiven.

I suspect people have come to mind who have wronged you or you have wronged. You may be locked in a feud with someone that has been years in the making. Maybe it's time to declare a cease-fire and forgive our debtors in the same way we have been forgiven.

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