

Thoughts on the Lord's Prayer

7. "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors"

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FORGIVENESS is the greatest need we have. Sin and its consequences are the sole cause of all misery, disease and death. Forgiveness will not remove present consequences (though it may make them easier to endure) but it can certainly conquer death. Sins are styled "debts" in Matthew 6:12. When we consider that Jesus called Matthew when he was a publican, "sitting at the receipt of custom" (9:9), it is no wonder that he thinks in terms of debt and forgiveness.

The parable of the unmerciful servant, as recorded by Matthew in 18:23-35, ought to be considered alongside this portion of our Lord's prayer. One man owed the master 10,000 talents, and his fellow in turn owed him 100 pence. The forgiveness extended by the master was not reciprocated, which had the effect of cancelling the original mercy and reinstating the debt.

The debt of sin we owe to God is unpayable. We must ask for forgiveness or perish. Taking a penny (denarius) a day as the common wage for daily labourers (20:2), 100 pence is three months' wages—a considerable sum, but not unpayable. 10,000 talents is very different. There are 3,000 shekels in a talent, and four drachma to the shekel. Assuming the drachma and denarius have roughly equal value, a talent is 12,000 pence or thirty years' wages. 10,000 talents is 300,000 years' wages; an absolutely unpayable debt! We can never by ourselves pay God what we owe for sin. Compared with that, the small grievances our fellows cause us are minuscule. Our forgiveness is linked to the extent we forgive others, but not in a mathematical fashion, as we shall see later.

Jesus Christ is gently reminding us not to bother seeking forgiveness from God if we have not genuinely forgiven our fellow, for we will not be forgiven. The number of times this is repeated in the New Testament should make us think. It is evidently of critical importance. Our lack of forgiveness of others will deny us our greatest need, forgiveness for ourselves. Luke adds, "for we also forgive every one" (11:4). We cannot be selective and forgive our friends only; we must take the example of our Lord and pray for our enemies also (cf. Mt. 5:44). "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do", he said (Lk. 23:34).

Why should it be important that we forgive each other? We need to look at the basis of our own forgiveness. Implicit in asking for forgiveness is an acknowledgement of our own worthlessness and the righteous character of God, part of which is forgiveness. We cannot declare him to be right if we consistently deny this principle in our lives. We show God that we have comprehended the beauty of His character by striving to copy it. If in our lives we demonstrate that forgiveness is not needful (by not practising it), and therefore an unnecessary character trait, how shall we expect God to show us forgiveness?

Bound up in the forgiveness we ask for is the determination to overcome sin, to change or repent. In the words of the Apostle Peter, we need to "Repent . . . therefore, and be converted, that [our] sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). We see, then, the connection between change (towards godliness) and forgiveness.

Forgiveness is predicated upon repentance. Our forgiveness of our fellows is one of the more important markers of our understanding and acknowledgement of the rightness of God. Our forgiveness of each other shows that we have truly changed. That is why Jesus says we must "from [our] hearts" forgive each other (Mt. 18:35).

God, having forgiven, has totally erased all memory of sin, and reckons us as righteous people (Ps. 103:12; Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:12; 10:17). There is no reason why our forgiveness of each other should be any different. How often do we hear it said, "I can forgive but I can't forget"? What is actually being said is, "I have not forgiven". If we say that, we are declaring that we have not understood the righteousness of God and are not prepared to acknowledge it.

How can God forgive us when we, in effect, say that His qualities of character are of no importance? The expectation on the part of God is that we show our thankfulness for His forgiveness of our sins by forgiving others. If we are not prepared to develop a forgiving spirit then we are not prepared to develop a godly character, and hence we separate ourselves from God. The matter is as simple and as serious as that. When we pray "as we forgive", we endorse God's method.