

## **The Lord's Prayer: Forgive Us Our Debts As We Forgive Our Debtors**

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
August 15, 2010*

*Matthew 18:21-35, Psalm 103*

Today we pick up where we left off three Sundays ago with my summer sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. On that Sunday, you may remember, we looked together at the petition Give us this day our daily bread and noted at that point in the prayer, the emphasis moved from a focus on God - Your name be hallowed, Your kingdom come, Your will be done - to a very human focus on the daily need for physical sustenance – the need for food. In asking God to give us this day our daily bread, we acknowledge that God is the giver, and in praying give **us** this day **our** daily bread, we move beyond individual concerns to a concern for a community - which I maintained was inclusive of and connected us to the larger world.

As we move today to reflecting on the petition Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, it is worth noting a few things at the outset. Number one - although in many traditions this petition is rendered “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”, the word for trespass is not used in either Matthew's or Luke's version of the prayer. Matthew's version uses the Greek word for debt (but with the clear implication that the indebtedness for which we seek forgiveness is our moral and spiritual shortcomings in God's sight. Luke's version addresses that better as it reads, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

The second thing to say is just as when we pray “give us this day our daily bread,” we assert that **God** is the **Giver** of material sustenance. When we pray forgive us our debts, we are asserting that **God** is the **Forgiver** of our spiritual shortcomings. Giving and forgiving begin in and with God. God is both Giver and Forgiver. The ancient Hebrews often proclaimed that message in the Psalms - their prayer book. Psalm 103, the first part of which we use every Sunday as a response in worship, affirms God's giving and forgiving nature. While the Psalm in its effervescent praise may overstate, or at least raise questions for us about God's power - we have all prayed for healing for people who didn't get cured of certain diseases and for mercy and fairness to be extended to people who remained mired in oppressive circumstances - it centers life in God. And while the Psalmist speaks of God's anger, a topic we shy away from in the mainline church, he also claims that God's anger is short-lived, trumped by love and mercy. Listen now for God's word in Psalm 103, the first fourteen verses. *Read Psalm here.*

As we move to our Gospel reading from Matthew 18, we should keep the psalmist's sense of God's forgiving nature firmly in our minds. Jesus, who in Matthew 6 taught his disciples to pray “*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*” - and then at the conclusion of the prayer went on to tell them, “*if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you, if you don't forgive others their trespasses neither will your father forgive yours*” - now illustrates the point with a parable.

The parable is about a man who is forgiven a great debt - ten thousand talents. A talent was equivalent to fifteen years wages for a daily laborer, so ten thousand talents would be 150,000 years

wages. Somebody maxed out more than one credit card! This is a parable about a man who is forgiven an enormous debt and does not forgive a small one to a neighbor. Jesus tells the parable in response to a question from Peter about how often one should forgive a person who has sinned against him or her. Listen to how Jesus drives home the point that those who are forgiven much should also forgive much. *Read Matthew 18:21-35.*

*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.* For a number of reasons, this is the part of the Lord's Prayer where many of us tend to get a little "hung up." The first is simply in terms of praying it in unison. There are at least three different renderings of the petition in fairly common usage. Some churches opt for Luke's version of the prayer, saying, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Then there are a large number of Christians, notably Roman Catholics and United Methodists, who pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Yesterday, I officiated at Katie Swift's wedding to Francis McGarey. Knowing as I did that there would be a large number of non-Presbyterians in attendance at the wedding, I told the wedding party at the rehearsal that when we came to the Lord's Prayer, I would slow down to let the trespassers catch up with the debtors. One of the groomsmen came to me later, a little puzzled by what I had said, and I had to explain to him that there is more than one version of the prayer, and this is where the versions diverge.

The economic metaphor of forgiving debts and debtors tends to catch in a number of our throats, as well. More than one person over the course of my ministry has told me that this language leaves them cold. I am not entirely sure why, but I imagine it has something to do with making forgiveness seem like some sort of financial transaction. As if forgiving is writing something off, or paying something in order to receive something else.

Perhaps we may also be a little uncomfortable with the language of debts and debtors because of what taking them literally might mean. It is one thing to forgive a slight or a larger injury done to us by someone who is morally indebted to us. It is quite another to suggest that we ought to be about the business of forgiving financial debt as individuals or as a nation. We know that forgive us our debts is about moral indebtedness, that it is a metaphor, but it is unsettling indeed to think about taking that economic language literally. Several years ago the World Council of Churches proposed having a Year of Jubilee and forgiving the debts of debtor nations. There was a resource put out about this, and I shared it with the Session of my church in North Carolina. One of the elders came to me and we had a "chat" about that. "I think you want to stay away from politics," he said. And so I did.

Another reason we tend to be a little hesitant when we get to this part of the prayer is because of the way it points out - forgive us our debts *as we forgive* our debtors - that God's forgiveness of us has implications for how we treat others in need of our forgiveness - and vice versa. Our forgiveness of others, the prayer suggests, has implications for how God might treat us.

Whether you like the debts and debtors language or not, you should know that Matthew's gospel has Jesus use the word debts in his version of the prayer advisedly. In part, I think, to set up the telling of that parable of the unforgiving debtor 12 chapters later.

The first thing that the parable, and for that matter, the prayer, tells us is that forgiveness begins with God. God is the ultimate forgiver and that we stand in enormous debt to God. The unforgiving servant in the parable owes the master 10,000 talents, which given that a talent was fifteen years wages for a common laborer, meant that the servant was "in the hole" 150,000 years wages. As I said earlier, somebody maxed out more than one credit card.

The point the parable wants to make is that the servant is eternally indebted to the master. Now, because we are pretty good people (ostensibly we are not engaged in major sins, like murder – it is always

the ones we don't commit that we consider major...), well, most of us don't like to think about being that indebted to God, morally. But that is what Jesus wants to say.

None of us ever really gets it right all the time. We are all doomed to miss the mark when it comes to living out what it means to be a child of God. We are all doomed to miss the mark when it comes to embodying God's love perfectly. In comparison to God's ideal, we all fall short. So we are dependent upon God's grace with regard to our sins.

But we are also indebted to God for so much else: the air we breathe, the food we eat, the relationships we enjoy, to name just a few things. Yesterday at Katie Swift's wedding I talked about God's timing in bringing her and Francis together. They had friends and common acquaintances and could have really begun to see each other ten years before or any time in those intervening years. But Katie just happened to go to the gym and run into Francis on a particular day in March of 2009. It was God's timing, I suggested. And I believe that to be true. We are so indebted to God. There is so much for which we owe God a debt of gratitude, not the least of which is God meeting and loving us where we are.

One of the great things about the corporate prayer of confession we have here every Sunday is that it ties us together as sinners in common need of grace. It humbles us, reminds us that we all stand in need at the foot of the cross. Humility, by the way, comes from the word *humus*, or dirt - the same word from which we get human. We are "dirt people", people made of the mud of creation in God's hands. We all come from the same "stuff." To pray "Forgive *us our* debts" is to acknowledge that we are all in this humanity thing together and that not one of us gets it right all the time.

Because we are all in this together, none of us can finally claim to be above judgment or reproach. So we pray forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. We pray recognizing that God's forgiveness of us, as the parable implies, should have a bearing on how we forgive others.

Here is where it might be helpful to engage in a word study on what the Greek word translated as forgiveness actually means. As a way into that, I looked at the word translated forgive and the way it is used throughout the Gospel of Matthew. The word is *aphes*. It is used like this, for instance: *the disciples apheres-ed their nets and went and followed Jesus*. Or, in the Garden of Gethsemane, *the disciples apheres-ed him and fled*. There are numerous other examples of the disciples or others letting something go, just surrendering it, not holding on to something. That is what forgiveness is finally about: letting go of an injury or a wrong and not holding on to it forever.

Of course, that is much easier to talk about than it is to do. And it is easier to extend forgiveness when it comes to smaller slights than with larger hurts - but it is a challenge before us all. When we have been injured, when we have been wounded in some way by someone else's actions, can we *aphes* it? Can we let it go?

On our vacation, Judith, my daughters and I traveled from North Carolina (where we were with Judith's family and had a great time), up to Chicago, Illinois (where we went to museums and ate deep dish pizza and saw the Cubs play and looked down on the city from the top floor of the John Hancock Building). But for me, one of the highlights of the vacation was going to Harvard, Illinois, a little town on the border with Wisconsin, near Lake Geneva.

Harvard, Illinois is where my parents grew up. One of the reasons I wanted to go there was to show the kids their grandparents' homes: the farm on which my mom grew up, the house in town where my dad lived. My grandparents are no longer alive. So went to the cemetery, and I showed my daughters and Judith grave after grave of my relatives. At every grave, there were stories to tell. Some of them were stories of healing and reconciliation and some were not.

Tom Long, that marvelous Presbyterian preacher, shared a story in a sermon I heard him preach<sup>1</sup> about a similar visit to a graveyard. He was taking his father to visit his mother's grave. She had died some years before, and on the headstone were two names - his mother's, with a date of birth and a date of death, and his father's, with the date of birth but no date of death to that point. Tom looked at the grave and said that this was a headstone that spoke to faithfulness, joy, loyalty and commitment.

The next row over, he told us, I saw another grave that brought back a memory. It was the grave of a young girl who was tragically killed in a traffic accident. The person who killed her was a member of her church. And he told us, "I remember the day when we laid that little girl to rest." The girl's mother got up, when she noticed that the man who had been driving the car was there at the service, and she said, "You killed my baby. I will never forgive you as long as I live."

Forgiveness is not easy. But it is essential.

In Jesus' name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

---

<sup>1</sup> This comes from my memory of Tom's sermon, preached at one of the Festivals of Homiletics I've attended over the past eight years.