

"FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for Sermon: Matthew 6:12, 14-15

Introduction:

Last year we reflected on our great debt of sin against God. This week we find out we all have debts with each other. Not only are we in debt with others but others have debts with us.

In the providence of God, we come to this text two weeks before we take communion, the sign of our forgiveness with God and each other.

This particular petition of the Lord's Prayer stands out from the rest in two ways. *First*, it's the only petition with an addendum, with a promise attached. *Second*, it's the only petition Jesus expands on immediately after the prayer in verses 14-15. There is something serious at stake here.

This is a matter of special importance. In fact it lies at the center of the gospel and at the center of our heart's greatest need. When Martin Luther wrote the 95 Theses, the very first one says the entire life of a Christian is a life of repentance. This is how you become and stay a Christian.

We are dealing here with one of the most practical and relevant matters to face us in Scripture. This text as much as any in Scripture affects us and our life together as a community. In fact our very existence as a church depends on this. If we can't forgive then we can't stay in fellowship.

If we can't treat each other the way God treats us then something is seriously amiss here.

If we can't forgive one another then we need to go out front and scratch off some words on our sign, words like Christian and church and even Reformed. If we can't forgive, we are not reformed according to the Word, we are not Christian according to the example of Christ and we are not Church according to our calling to be a community of believers who have been called out of the world into a fellowship of the forgiven to be salt and light in a fallen world. The world will know we are Christians

by our love and where does love shine more than when we freely forgive each other our sins.

For two thousand years the Church has prayed this prayer, two thousand years, sometimes every week, some even every day, and then it is forgotten and not done. We ask God to forgive us as we forgive others, and then we don't forgive others.

Instead we keep track of others sins and failures. We are judgmental, quick to point out others debts, but are unaware of our own. When was the last time spouses, parents, friends, co-workers, church members offered or received forgiveness?

Remember when Peter asked Jesus how often shall my brother sin against me and I have to forgive him? As many as seven times!?! Do you remember Jesus' answer?

Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

Jesus addressed by telling the well-known story of The Parable of The Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18:21-35.

There are three scenes. In the first scene a servant is called before a king and ordered to pay his debt of ten thousand talents, an impossible sum. The servant begs for mercy and the king in a surprising show of great mercy forgives the entire debt.

(By the way, I read in a footnote the Jewish historian Josephus, a contemporary with Jesus, recorded that the taxes collected by the Romans for all of Palestine were about 8,000 talents. This servant's debt was greater than the entire national tax revenue. It would be like owing more than the IRS collects in a year. Just to give a bit of perspective in 2022 the IRS collected somewhere around \$5 Trillion dollars.)

In the second scene this forgiven servant goes up to a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii and demands payment. The fellow servant also begs mercy but receives none and is put in jail.

In the third scene the king hears of the forgiven servant's actions:

Matthew 18:32-35 His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly

Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother *from your heart.*”

God’s forgiveness is meant to leave a lasting impression on us, a life changing impression. The servant acted as if forgiveness didn’t exist or as if the first forgiveness had never taken place. The parable exposes his hypocrisy, insincerity, or lack of genuineness.

This parable gives a sobering warning. People who keep track of debts of others are proud or self-righteous. They lack the ability to be self-critical and self-aware. They have not cultivated an awareness of their sin as an offense against a holy and fearful God. Those who minimize their own sins and exaggerate the sins of others show themselves to have no clue about their own debt, and therefore have hearts that are unrepentant.

The point of the parable is those who have come truly to understand the enormity of their debt before God, will find the injuries and debts of others to be quite small and not worth the resentment or revenge others might have.

People who are humble spend more time noticing their own sin than they do the sins of others. If you want to learn how to forgive others, just cultivate an awareness of your own sin against God and taking responsibility for your own sin. Spend more time looking at the log in your own eye than the speck in your neighbor’s eye. When we do that we will be tender hearted toward each other, meek, kind, humble.

If you come to God with unforgiveness in your heart and you ask for forgiveness, He is going to ask you about the unforgiveness you are withholding. Is that what you want?

It’s as simple as this, there is no forgiveness given to one who doesn’t have and give forgiveness.

“Should you not have had mercy as I have had mercy on you?”

Those who see they need mercy and have cried out for mercy and have received mercy should be those who are most merciful. Where the Spirit of God is there is no ill-will or revenge or bitterness.

What do we have to forgive?

One author put together this list: “It means to forgive everyone for everything. Forgive the neighbor who backed over your begonias. Forgive the sibling who colored in your books or spoke cruel words to you. Forgive the parent who never showed you much affection or had favorites. Forgive the spouse who doesn’t meet your needs and the child who ran away from home. [Forgive the Uncle who abused you or the neighbor who gossiped or stole something.] Forgive the coworker who stabbed you in the back and the boss who denied your promotion. Forgive the friend or church member who betrayed a confidence or the pastor who gave you poor spiritual care. Forgive people for whatever they have done to you” (Philip Ryken, *The Prayer of Our Lord*).

Is this easy? Of course not. There are some serious hurts in our lives, some real wounds. That’s why this petition is in a prayer. To do this will take real prayer, real grace from God, real Holy Spirit power. You have to go to the cross to get this kind of forgiveness, you have to receive the blood of Jesus to cover it. It’s not cheap or easy, it’s costly and hard.

Jesus spoke these words to us on His way to that cross to purchase that very forgiveness for us. It makes all the difference to know the cost that was paid to forgive our debt first, the cost to make us both forgiven people and forgiving people.

We can forgive because God first forgave us. It doesn’t begin with us, it begins with God and is made possible by His Spirit in us.

And consider this, if someone else sins against us, they sin against a man. But if we do not forgive them, our sin is against God. So of the two our sin is actually the greater.

Are you known for asking others to forgive you? Has your spouse or your children ever heard you confess, say you are sorry and ask for forgiveness? When was the last time?

Confessing our sin and asking for forgiveness gives us a tender heart, it makes us more loving and compassionate. Learn to pray to forgive and to the extent it is difficult, ask the Spirit’s help.

But what about the what abouts...?

What about if they don’t ask for forgiveness? That is a problem and it hinders what follows. Without repentance there is no reconciliation, no restoration of a relationship. But we can still forgive. It takes two to reconcile but only one to forgive.

Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Forgive them even when they are clueless about their sin.

Our forgiveness doesn’t cancel their sin with God, only God can do that, and He will only do that if they repent. But our forgiveness does cancel their sin against us and frees us from bitterness, resentment, revenge and ill-will that often comes with it.

Even when a person does not repent (cf. Matthew 18:17), we are commanded to love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us and do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27).

What about trust? Forgiveness doesn’t mean we have to trust them, just forgive them. And it doesn’t mean there might not still be consequences or restitution. It just means there is a decision on your part to change the attitude of your heart toward them and you forgive them.

Doesn’t forgiveness make it seem like sin is no big deal? Does God’s forgiveness make sin no big deal? Of course not. Forgiveness does not mean we are being dismissive about sin. Forgiveness means there was sin and it’s forgiven. It doesn’t excuse it,

If someone comes to you to ask forgiveness, don’t blow it off. Don’t say it is no big deal or that’s okay or don’t worry about it. Acknowledge its sin and say, “I forgive you.” Sin needs to be forgiven, so forgive it.

What about forgive and forget? Forgiveness doesn’t mean the sin is easily forgotten. Since we are human and flesh and by nature easily hurt and wounded, some healing takes time. It’s like a wound or a burn. We may have to apply the healing medicine several times for it to heal. We can say, “I forgive you” but when it still hurts and still comes to mind, we are committed to saying again and again, even seven times seventy if necessary, I forgive you.

It’s like the Lord’s Prayer, it’s a daily prayer, forgiveness is part of daily life, it’s a daily need and so we make the daily request.

Implications and application.

Do these words stick in your throat as you pray this prayer? As you mouth these words do the names and faces of those you haven’t forgiven flash through your mind? Do you hurry past this petition and rush on to “Lead us not into temptation”?

The Holy Spirit is specifically calling you to action today. Please listen before your heart gets any harder and any colder.

Are you carrying anger, grudges, resentments, bitterness, offenses, in a word unforgiveness? Are there people you are giving the silent treatment, you won't talk to, or you go out of your way to avoid?

How long have you been carrying a grudge? How long do you want to carry it? What good is that grudge doing you? Who is being more punished, you or them?

How long do you want God to carry His justified grudge against you? Do you want God to punish you for your sins? Or do you want to be set free from all of them? Have you asked God for a forgiving spirit?

Let me lead by example.

If you have sinned against me in something you have said or done, and if you will come to me and just say what it was and ask my forgiveness, I will forgive you right then and there. I won't make you grovel, I won't make you wait, I won't say I will get back to you on that. I will look you right in the eye and say to you, "In the name of Jesus Christ I forgive you and I set you free from that sin." In that moment you will be free and we will be closer friends than ever before.

If I have sinned against you in something I have said or done or not done, I am not aware of it right now. Would you please come to me and make me aware of it so I can ask your forgiveness. And if there is anything I need to do to make it right by way of restitution we will talk about how I can do that.

The only thing that makes this hard is Satan's lies in our ears stirring up all kinds of feelings and emotions and bitterness and self-pity and worry about what they will say or think or do.

In so far as it depends on you live at peace with your brothers and sisters. Do everything in your power to seek and pursue peace. If they resist or dismiss or reject your efforts, so be it, leave it in the hands of God. Just be sure you have done all you know to do.

God's free and complete forgiveness will be our highest privilege and greatest joy for all of eternity. Let's make it our privilege and joy to share it during the few years we have remaining here on earth.

God's glory shines brightest on the cross where He forgives our sins. Our incalculable debt has been covered by an incalculable gift and that same grace now flows from God through us to each other. That same glory that shines on us, shines through us to each other. There is no glory and no joy like the glory and joy of forgiveness and reconciliation. For the sake of the glory of the grace of God let's forgive all the debts of sin owed to all of us by everyone every day.

Prayer: Father, have mercy on us and help us. We want to forgive as you have forgiven us, forgive our unforgiveness. Silence Satan, strengthen our courage, give us bold resolve, fill us with love and compassion, give us the desire to be free and set others free, help us to think more of others than of ourselves, help us overcome our pride, our fear, our nervousness, our shame. Fill us with your Spirit's power, for the sake of Jesus. Amen.