

Dear brother or sister in Christ,

We have come to the fifth petition in the Lord's Prayer, "And forgive us our debts as also we forgave our debtors." This petition raises a host of difficult issues regarding forgiveness. We will begin with the easier issues and move to the more difficult. First, Jesus helps us to think about what sin is and how we stand in relation to God because of sin by referring to our sins as "debt". This "economic" language helps us to understand sin and forgiveness. God gives me life and breath and everything else for a purpose. He aims for me to use all that he has given me to pursue him as the satisfaction of my soul, to use all my life to know and enjoy and praise him. However, I use all he has given me to pursue my happiness in other things and people. Thus, I am in his debt because I have not used the resources he has given to me for the purpose for which he gave it (You can read a parable that Jesus used to express this exact idea in Matthew 25:14-30.). Like a man who takes out a business loan to start a business but instead gambles it all away at the casino is in debt to the bank with no way to repay what he owes, so we by our "spending" God's time, life, resources on other things are in God's debt with no way to repay. Thus, if I am going to escape being thrown into debtor's prison I need God to release me from or forgive my debt.

Second, as we remember that this prayer is a description by Jesus of the things that our Father wants to do for us, it is encouraging to know that God wants to forgive our sins. Every person who is a son or daughter of God through their union with God's only Son can be assured that his or her Father is eager to forgive his or her sins. As the psalmist says (Psalm 130:3-4), "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared."

A third observation is that Christians are to ask God to forgive their sins every day, thus indicating that Christians commit sins every day. There are many within the broader Christian church who teach that Christians are able to come to a place where they are trusting in Jesus so securely that they no longer sin. This petition shows that cannot be the case as every day Jesus commands me to ask my Father in heaven to forgive my sins. Thus he must expect that I will daily sin.

How are we to understand this command from Jesus to daily ask God to forgive my sins when we are told numerous times in the NT that all of our sins are already forgiven? For example, Paul says in Colossians 2:13-14, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." Here Paul says all of our sins, past, present and future are already forgiven because the record of debt that we incurred with God due to them has been taken out of the way by its being nailed to the cross of Christ. So, why does Jesus want me to ask my Father to forgive my debts when I've already been forgiven of them because he has already paid the debt for me by his life and death?

We must recognize that the one who commands us to ask our Father to forgive our sins is the one who died to secure our forgiveness. Thus we are asking our Father to forgive our sins on the authority of Jesus who lived and died to obtain our forgiveness. We are asking him to forgive us

for his sake, in his name, not because we are sincere. We are not in doubt about our forgiveness when we ask; rather we are applying the work of Jesus to each particular sin as we experience it. It is not that the sin is not forgiven until we ask but that we cannot experience that forgiveness until we ask. Forgiven people are sorry for their sins and go to the Father each time we sin in order to apply the work of Christ to that particular sin and enter into the joy of our forgiveness before God for each particular sin.

Finally, the most difficult part of this petition is the second half. Why does Jesus want us to tell our Father that we forgave all our debtors when we ask him to forgive our particular sins? It would appear from the way that Jesus forms this request that our being forgiven by God is conditioned upon our forgiving others the debts they owe us. This appears even more the case when we add the statement Jesus makes in Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." The question is: do we earn or deserve God's forgiveness because we forgive others?

The answer to that question is no. First of all, vv. 14-15 are a grammatical construction known as a "condition of fact" statement. The two halves of the assertion "if this, then that" are not cause/effect but rather both/and. In other words, my forgiving others does not cause God to forgive me. Rather all who are forgiven also forgive others and if I do not forgive others then it is necessarily true that I am not forgiven. My unforgiveness is the evidence that I have not been forgiven because everyone who is forgiven, also forgives others.

It is plain that this is the point that Jesus is making from his response to Peter's question in Matthew 18:21. Peter wants to know how often he must forgive his brother who sins against him, "as many as seven times?" Jesus tells him there is no limit on how many times he must forgive his brother, he must always forgive and then, to make his point, he tells the parable of the unforgiving servant. The parable describes how a king forgave millions of dollars of debt that one of his servants had accumulated when the servant begged for mercy. However, this forgiven servant, as soon as he leaves the king's presence encounters a fellow servant who owes him a few hundred dollars. He refuses to forgive him, even though he begs to be forgiven, just as he begged the king. He has him thrown into prison. When the king finds out how the servant treated his fellow servant he arrests him and has him thrown into debtor prison for his unwillingness to forgive his fellow servant after he had been forgiven such a great debt.

Jesus finishes the parable by saying, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." (Mat 18:35 ESV)." The point is that all who truly understand the graciousness of God in forgiving our enormous debt are gracious people. The evidence that we "get" forgiveness is that we forgive others. You cannot earn forgiveness; it is a free gift. However, all those who have been forgiven the infinite debt they owe God freely forgive those who owe them such inconsequential debts. We remember before the Lord our having forgiven others when we ask for forgiveness as a reminder of how large our debt is in comparison to the debts others owe us.

Seeking forgiveness with you,