

The Lord and His Prayer:  
*Forgiven as Forgiving*

Deuteronomy 15: 1-11

Matthew 6: 12 (Luke 11:4)

Matthew 18: 21-35

If anyone has ever gotten deep in debt, you know how very difficult it can be to get yourselves freed from it. You find yourself highly constrained in everything you want to do, always aware of the burden of debt pressing on you.

College graduates bearing enormous debts, from which they cannot escape in any way, by law, face long term financial issues that can be crippling. Student loan debt in the US stands at \$1.4 trillion, second only to home mortgages. Many can't pay these loans and otherwise survive, particularly on the pitiful wages offered by employers, wages that have been stagnant for decades. Many have to delay independence as they live with family into their thirties, put off marriage, child bearing, home buying, and normal things that people would have fulfilled by their thirties in kinder times. There is no relief in sight for them.

This aspect of never-ending deep indebtedness informs the reading from Deuteronomy. In ancient times, failure to pay a debt could bring servitude, even enslavement. The unscrupulous might detain a debtor for many years. To combat this, Deuteronomy calls for a year of God's "Jubilee" every seven years. In the Jubilee year, or 'the year of the Lord's favor,' debts are cancelled, slaves are freed, and property is returned – all three are related together, integrated as socio-economic maladies that ancient people would commonly face.

Here as in our previous talk about bread in the Lord's Prayer, God's economics come squarely into the picture. In Deuteronomy, the law of God clearly seeks to undermine and even reverse common, accepted economic practices.

We have also recognized that God did not create scarcity and poverty. Rather human invention or human sinfulness created scarcity; God created abundance, plenty for all. That's basically what God says in vs. 4: *There need be no poor people among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, **if only** you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.* In other words, do what God tells you and pursue the goals which God has set before you, and there won't be any poverty problems. Of course, this is unlikely, so there is a Jubilee Year every few years that eliminates debt, liberates slaves, and returns property so that the poor can have a chance to get themselves aright.

But what about the rich people? Frankly, God is **not** concerned about the rich people because God knows that rich people remain rich people despite the Jubilee Year. God is concerned about the debtors, the enslaved, and the loss of family or tribal property. God is always concerned about the weak, marginal, and poor among his people. God knows that exploitation of the weak by the strong will always occur unless

there's an injunction against it. The Jubilee Year is a mechanism for relief for the weak from the heavy hand of the strong.

How this would work in reality was already anticipated as God cautions the wealthy not to be hardhearted and tight fisted with the poor who seek relief. If the Jubilee Year approaches, "don't show ill will toward your needy brother." God knows his people. Indeed, it's admitted that "there will always be poor people in the land," not because of God's way. Rather, human sinfulness hoards the abundance God has provided, introducing concentrated wealth and scarcity-induced poverty.

As the Lord's Prayer invites the ways of heaven to become the ways on earth – *as in heaven, so on earth* – forgiveness of debt and forgiveness of sin should be seen together in the petition, [*God,*] *forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*. The restoration of heaven to earth, healing the breach that occurred in the beginning in Genesis, requires this petition to bring about fulfillment of the Kingdom of God which was Jesus' primary focus. God's gracious forgiveness requires the reflection of our own grace in forgiveness to others. God does not need our help bringing judgment; God does expect us to be forgiving instead.

Deuteronomy 15 is a backdrop for Matthew 18's parable of the unforgiving servant *and* for Matthew's terminology in the Lord's Prayer. In Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, he doesn't use the word "debts", preferring the generic term "sins." That alternative "sins" sounds okay, but think about it. As Deuteronomy 15 showed, what God calls "sins" may be what the righteous faithful call "financial success" or "business acumen." So, simply saying "sins" can be a rather flat, even unhelpful term. When Matthew gives the image of "debts," he gives a tangible picture of what sinfulness before God is like.

We sinners have a Platinum Visa card to register our sins. Every time we sin, God swipes it through the debt-making machine. Our credit cards get pretty hot from all of that swiping, and at the end of one day, we've racked up quite a debt. The statement comes in and the minimum payment is millions of dollars, at least for common folks. Rich folks get a minimum payment in billions of dollars, and if you're in the Bill Gates level of wealth, then it's in trillions of dollars. You get the idea. Whatever we might afford, the bill is astronomical, far beyond any hope of ever paying.

In the parable of the unforgiving servant, the story describes a man who owes the king an incredible amount of money. (Herod the Great only collected 900 talents in taxes each year; compare Herod's 900 talents to the parable's 'ten thousand talents'.) How he became so indebted is unknown. All we know is that this colossal debt is owed and the king expects to be paid. The servant can't pay up and the king is ready to put his whole family into servitude and seize all his assets. It would be a rather useless measure as far as getting the debt repaid, but it would give the king some satisfaction. The servant pleads for more time. Shockingly, the king takes pity on him, **cancel**s the debt and sends him on his way.

That exchange shows God in the role the king who has compassion and by an act of grace – undeserved and unwarranted – releases the servant from his debt. This is what God does for the sinful when our overheated credit card of sin statement comes in. It's marked, "forgiven." That's what God does for us.

In response, the forgiven servant goes out from the king and finds someone who owes him a couple of hundred dollars. The man pleads for more time, but the servant forgiven by the king throws the man in debtor's prison. People are outraged, knowing the grace of the king toward his servant. Word gets back to the king who calls in his servant and invokes a harsh penalty for the lack of forgiveness shown.

Now, that is the way **we** read and understand this parable. It's another way in which we individualize and personalize these parables and make them about us. In fact, Jesus told this parable with a quite different field of interest.

Rather than individualizing it, Jesus told this parable to condemn the religious authorities and the Temple's system of sacrifices in order to gain forgiveness. Those are the "servants" of the "King," right? This parable will get a full action sequence when Jesus causes a Temple riot by disrupting the marketplace. The Temple marketplace was where you bought the items needed in order to make a sacrificial offering to gain you forgiveness, purity, atonement, etc. That one should have to buy forgiveness, purity, or anything else to be in right relationship with God was abominable as far as Jesus was concerned.

In the parable, the one forgiven the **huge** debt is the High Priest and priestly class and Temple system. Although their gigantic debt was forgiven, they pursue every poor sucker and shake them down for all they're worth before granting them forgiveness. Religious hypocrisy is one of Jesus' real sticking points. And the harsh penalty meted out to the unforgiving servant is what you get for being a hypocrite, for failing to fulfill God's will which is your job, for failing to serve the Kingdom, having instead served sinful worldly Powers of greed, corruption, and exploitation of the poor, weak, and vulnerable. The text says: *In anger, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.*

In either case, the parable illustrates the principle of forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer. Again, the heavenly pattern is to be followed on earth; 'God in heaven, forgive our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors on earth.'

Heard in flat terms, we might believe that if we fail to forgive our earthly debtors, then God will not forgive our debts charged in heaven. There are some assumptions we need to recognize first. The one who prays about God's forgiveness is aware of their own sinfulness, their debt. This one praying is also aware of God's gracious love that forgives what we owe. If you remove either the leg of awareness of sinfulness, or the leg of God's gracious forgiveness, the petition in the Lord's Prayer falls apart and makes no sense. The petitioner in the Lord's Prayer, having experienced the grace of God's forgiveness, and with an awareness of their sinful debt, has at least *tried* to practice such gracious forgiveness in their own life.

Our actual practice of forgiveness always causes me to clarify what this means. In the church in particular, confusion about forgiveness and tolerance and forgetting is ever-present. Let's define these three terms. Forgiveness is the renunciation of a claim to have a past wrong corrected and satisfied. Tolerance is allowing for reasonable differences of opinion in thought and action. Forgetting is a failure of memory, like amnesia or dementia. Forgiveness is not tolerance. Tolerance is not forgetting. And neither forgiveness nor tolerance has anything to do with forgetting.

Yet, Christians will confuse these, tolerating unjust and unethical behavior, and expecting the wronged to simply 'forget' what happened to them, as if forgetting was 'forgiveness.' The Christian principle of forgiveness is meant to counter the ancient principle of retribution, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But it is **not** meant to allow injustice unaddressed. Injustice is certainly counter to God's will, so we are hardly expected to *both* forgive *and* allow injustice. Both must be addressed on their own terms.

Peter asks Jesus, *How many times must I forgive my brother – seven times?* Jesus' reply, *Not just seven times, but seventy times seven*, is not literal; it's a number beyond reasonable counting. The meaning is clear; a path of retribution and revenge is never to be undertaken by God's people. We must follow the same sacred pattern of grace and forgiveness that God has extended to us for our sinfulness.

Jesus sets a direction for us to follow as servants of the Kingdom. We're always being pointed to the future. Undoing the past, either through a demand for restitution or a requirement for revenge or retribution, is ultimately ineffective. Many wrongs can never gain adequate compensation. Even the death of another does not rectify the death of one who was killed. An act of injustice is not eliminated, corrected or compensated by another act of injustice. Quite simply, the past cannot be undone. We're pointed to the future, commanded to be reconciled in whatever loss we experienced in the past. We're taught to work toward a future where such a loss won't occur again. As Jesus taught Peter, if loss occurs again, then we must forgive that new loss, and once again orient ourselves toward the future, hopefully learning more and working further toward preventing such a loss again.

There are many losses to be suffered in a lifetime, large and small. Our ability to forgive and turn toward the future while turning away from revenge and retribution will always be tested. We are not called to be doormats for injustice, but to work toward a future that brings peace, justice and grace to all in the pattern of the Kingdom of God.

Let us always pray for God's ongoing grace and forgiveness as we remain aware of our debt of sinfulness. And let the heavenly pattern be given life and witness in our lives as we gratefully acknowledge the blessing of our God by extending grace and forgiveness to those who have brought us loss and pain.