

Psalm 103:1-18 ~ Matthew 18:21-35
As We Forgive
5th of Six-Sermon Series on the Lord's Prayer
August 25, 2019 ~ 11th after Pentecost
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Introduction to Gospel Reading:

"And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Did you ever wonder why we Presbyterians traditionally say "debts" instead of "trespasses" or "sins" when we pray this fifth petition of the Lord's prayer? All three variations have good biblical warrant. Any of you who were raised in the Anglican and Methodist as well as Roman Catholic traditions are accustomed to saying "trespasses." Why do we Presbyterians say "debts"? Well—you've heard, I'm sure, about just how tight fisted our Scottish forefathers and mothers were. It really was all about the money...

Actually, the reason we say "debts" can be traced to John Calvin, the founding father of Presbyterians, who explained, "Sins [Christ] calls debts, because we owe the penalty of them." This explanation influenced our Heidelberg and Westminster Catechisms in the mid 1500's and 1600's and there you go. Besides, by that time, it would have cost way too much money to reprint all our prayer books.

Seriously, the concept of sin as debt drills us directly to the core of how we relate to God. Jesus was actually tapping from the root of his own Jewish tradition where sin was already commonly understood by this metaphor for sin as our debt against God. This part of the Lord's Prayer calls us yet again to be honest and humble: everyone sins. Everyone has racked up a debt that we could never repay. Every time we break God's covenant and go against God's way of love, we add to that debt.

But this is not a sermon about sin. This is a sermon about forgiveness—about the release of that burden and the restoration and redemption that God stands ready to give us. But that's not all. God commands us to forgive others who have wronged us. I want to be clear here: to use Jesus' command to forgive as permission or license to abuse or to be abused (emotionally, physically, or sexually) is a perversion of the gospel and anathema to the spirit of Christ. That's another sermon, too.

Today's sermon is about tapping into divine forgiveness through prayer. A prayer that can help us access a power we may not know that we have. We can thank Peter, who like us, wants Jesus to get just a little more concrete, a little more literal—just this once. So he gives it one more try. Here's how that went.

Sermon:

Come on Jesus.
 Just give me a number so I'll know when I'm done.
 Mission completed.
 No more Mr. Nice Guy.
 I'll forgive exactly as many times as you say—
 But that's it, no more.
 Just give me a number,
 A straight, simple number.
 Please don't answer me with another question—
 Or another one of your stories.
 Just say the word: what is it?
 O.K., I'll get the bidding going with the number 7.
 Now that is generous.
 Way over the top, in my book.
 So, how about it?
 As many as 7?
 Just give me a number and I'll be satisfied.

What's that you said? What are you telling me?
 Is it 77 or 70 times 7?
 There is a big difference between forgiving someone 490 times,
 Or forgiving them 77 times... 313 to be exact.
 So which is it?
 I want to know so I can
 Make a chart, plot a graph, put the app on my phone.
 Then I can measure my progress, check it off the "to do" list.
 Done.
 Over and done.
 No more do overs.

What do you mean we can't be sure?
 We don't really know what number Jesus said to Peter?
 You mean we almost had it, and then we fumbled it?
 This precious jewel, this answer, this corner piece of the puzzle, chewed up by the dog,
 sucked up into the vacuum of time-held truth, without a trace?
 What a shame.

But wait, he did tell Peter a story with some other numbers in it.
 We have a lead. A clue to the truth we're after.
 Evidence we can analyze.
 Let's put it on a slide and look at it under the microscope.
 Better yet: perhaps CRISPR can unveil the DNA of forgiveness.

What we have is a story Jesus made up about two debts:
 A huge one: one hundred thousand dollars.
 And a small one: ten dollars.
 Those numbers made it all the way through the telling, the writing, the copying.
 Those numbers jump off the slide, plain as day.
 Jesus' answer by-the-numbers.
 Observe and record.

First slide: we see a servant forgiven a huge debt: \$100,000.
 A servant who didn't even ask to be forgiven.
 A servant just begging for more time to pay it off.
 And instead that servant was given the ultimate "get out of jail free" card.
 His slate was wiped clean of a debt so huge that
 forgiveness was not even an option on the table of his wildest imagination.
 On this slide we observe a specimen of disproportionate, off-the-map mercy.
 How huge? A debt that would take 150,000 years of work for the servant to pay it off.
 Crazy talk, even by Methuselah's life-span standards.
 Jesus might as well have said the servant owed a million, billion, gazillion dollars.
 He was describing the indescribable dimensions of the ocean of God's grace.
 Stay with me as the plot thickens and stretches in every dimension.

Second slide: We observe the first servant driving away
 with "just forgiven" freshly painted on his rear window.
 We clap and cheer, thinking he's on his way to a whole new life
 of "gracefully ever after"
 But at that very moment he slams on his brakes
 because he sees another servant who owes him a diddly squat debt of \$10.
 He seizes him by the throat, and demands, "pay up, now!"
 The servant in the chokehold begs for mercy
 using the very same line "Give me a chance and I'll pay it all back."
 No way, Loser.
 Instead, Mr. Not-So-Gracefully-Ever-After throws his debtor violently into the slammer.
 He saw the speck and forgot the log and
 the million, billion, gazillion instant lotto of forgiveness he had just won.
 The winning ticket still on his dashboard.

Put the slides together and what do we observe?
 There seems to be a cause and effect in the physics of God's grace.
 God's ocean of mercy, God's river of life, gushing forth never stopping.
 Except for one thing.
 In the Lord's Prayer it comes calling in the little word,
 "as."

So small and unassuming, you might skip over it.
The first, or seventh, or seventy-times-seventh time you say it.

“As” – that little word engraved on the faucet of grace.

Not “h” for hot or “c” for cold,

But “AS” as in

“AS we forgive.”

Take off the lab coat. Look up from the microscope.

Jesus says: “Stop counting. It’s not about the numbers.”

Remember the word “as.”

Do you still want a number from Jesus?

How about 30?

30 pieces of silver. That was the price.

What was the cost?

You want to run the numbers on Jesus?

The pints of blood that gushed out of his body?

The dimensions of his chest wounds?

The exact entry point and angle of those old rusty nails
pounded into his hands and feet?

We hit the nail on the head. We are living in the red.

Take off the lab coat.

Let go of the measuring tape, the compass, your calculating device:

We can’t measure grace.

We could never, ever pay God back.

Not even if we sold all our possessions and had every paycheck garnished
for the rest of our earthly lives

We’d still come up short.

Jesus’ answer is plain but not simple:

If you want to follow me,

If you want to be my disciples:

Forgive.

Remember me and forgive.

It’s the only way to really end the wars we wage.

All the wars we fight:

Within ourselves

Between our friends

Across the borders

Against our enemies.

Forgive them whether they do know or do not know what they are doing.

But I'm right and she's wrong.
 After what she said to me?
 After what he did to me?
 You have no idea what you're asking here.
 It doesn't add up in my book.
 He's got to say he's sorry first.
 It's her turn to pay.
 It's my turn to collect.
 Payback time.
 An eye for an eye.
 Fair is fair.
 And the fight goes on and on and on and on and on and on.

Surely not everything that counts can be counted:
 Beginning and ending with grace, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption.
 Call it by any of those names and it will come running.
 Like the father welcoming the prodigal home.
 Forgiveness is the language of love.
 God is the one who showed us how and gave us the reason why.
 God is the one who gives us our marching orders:
 We're all foot soldiers in the war on sin.

Remember the faucet of grace turns on the little word "as."
 AS in "AS we forgive." AS Jesus forgives us.

We must turn on this faucet to be washed clean.
 We must turn on this faucet to save the world.
 Forgiving is loving.
 Forgiving is saying "thank you" to Jesus.
 Forgiving is life.

ⁱ From Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* as quoted by John C. Purdy in, *Lord, Teach Us to Pray*, The (Kerygma Program: Pittsburgh, PA, 1992), p.57.