

The Poor Sinners' Prayer

Heidelberg Catechism

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Bible Text: Psalm 38

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The following sermon was preached at Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Redlands, CA. For more information, please visit our website at hopeprc.org.

Let's read Psalm 38 this morning.

1 O LORD, rebuke me not in thy wrath: neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure. 2 For thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore. 3 There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger; neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin. 4 For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me. 5 My wounds stink and are corrupt because of my foolishness. 6 I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long. 7 For my loins are filled with a loathsome disease: and there is no soundness in my flesh. 8 I am feeble and sore broken: I have roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart. 9 Lord, all my desire is before thee; and my groaning is not hid from thee. 10 My heart panteth, my strength faileth me: as for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me. 11 My lovers and my friends stand aloof from my sore; and my kinsmen stand afar off. 12 They also that seek after my life lay snares for me: and they that seek my hurt speak mischievous things, and imagine deceits all the day long. 13 But I, as a deaf man, heard not; and I was as a dumb man that openeth not his mouth. 14 Thus I was as a man that heareth not, and in whose mouth are no reproofs. 15 For in thee, O LORD, do I hope: thou wilt hear, O Lord my God. 16 For I said, Hear me, lest otherwise they should rejoice over me: when my foot slippeth, they magnify themselves against me. 17 For I am ready to halt, and my sorrow is continually before me. 18 For I will declare mine iniquity; I will be sorry for my sin. 19 But mine enemies are lively, and they are strong: and they that hate me wrongfully are multiplied. 20 They also that render evil for good are mine adversaries; because I follow the thing that good is. 21 Forsake me not, O LORD: O my God, be not far from me. 22 Make haste to help me, O Lord my salvation.

Thus far we read the divinely inspired Scripture this morning.

It's on the basis of Psalm 38 and all of Scripture that the Heidelberg Catechism instructs us in Lord's Day 51. Let's turn to Lord's Day 51 of the Catechism this morning.

Q. 126. Which is the fifth petition?

A. "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors"; that is, be pleased for the sake of Christ's blood, not to impute to us poor sinners, our transgressions, nor that depravity, which always cleaves to us; even as we feel this evidence of thy grace in us, that it is our firm resolution from the heart to forgive our neighbor.

Beloved, in the Lord Jesus Christ the children of God pray for forgiveness. The children of God pray for many things but they always pray for the forgiveness of their sins. In fact, oftentimes the child of God even feels like he's sinning when he prays and he does not pray for the forgiveness of his sins. Wherever he is, with whomever he may be praying, no matter what occasion his prayer, the child of God always prays for the forgiveness of his sins. Even when the people of God take their littlest children and teach them to pray, when they teach their littlest children to pray for God's blessing upon their meal, and when after the meal, they teach their children to pray to God a prayer of thanksgiving, they always teach their children to pray also for the forgiveness of their sins.

Usually, the people of God do not teach their littlest children to pray before a meal for God's blessing and, for example, that God's kingdom might come through mission work or to pray after a meal a prayer of thanksgiving and, for example, that God will take care of all of the bodily needs of all of their fellow saints, but they do always teach their littlest children to pray for God's blessing and to pray a prayer of thanksgiving and to pray that God forgive their sins, and that's because the children of God have an acute awareness of the holiness of God and of their own sinfulness and they try to teach their children to be conscious of the holiness of God and of their own sinfulness so that we always pray and we always teach our children to pray for the forgiveness of our sins as Jesus taught us. Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." We call that the fifth petition of the model prayer of the Lord's Prayer. It's the subject of Lord's Day 51 of the Catechism this morning.

Having taught us to direct our attention to God and pray, first of all, for the hallowing of his name and the coming of his kingdom and the doing of his will, then Jesus teaches us to look at ourselves and to pray for our needs. First of all, our basic bodily earthly needs. "Give us this day our daily bread," and then, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." We are taught to pray for forgiveness.

This is the poor sinners' prayer. According to the Heidelberg Catechism, this is the poor sinners' prayer. What is the fifth petition? "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our

debtors," that is, be pleased for the sake of Christ's blood not to impute to us poor sinners our transgressions and so on. The Heidelberg Catechism will have us understand that those who offer this fifth petition are poor sinners and we need to recognize that and acknowledge that. We are poor sinners and then we pray as poor sinners, "Forgive us our debt."

So let's look at the poor sinners' prayer this morning, asking and answering three questions. First of all, who; in the second place, what; and third, how. We who pray for the forgiveness of our sins are poor sinners and we are poor sinners from two points of view. First of all, we are poor sinners from an objective, doctrinal, formal point of view. And in the second place, we are poor sinners from a personal, subjective, experiential point of view.

We are poor sinners, first of all, from an objective point of view. The Scriptures and the Catechism teach us that we ought to regard ourselves as poor sinners because of, number 1, our transgressions; number 2, our cleaving depravity; and number 3, our debts. First of all, we have transgressions. This is the explanation of the fifth petition: be pleased for the sake of Christ's blood, we pray to God, not to impute to us poor sinners our transgressions. A transgression is a crossing of the boundary. God establishes the boundaries for the whole of our existence in his law and when we step over the boundary, we transgress, we sin. And we not only have a transgression so that all of us can look back at some time in our lives and find an instance in which we stepped over the boundary, but the Catechism uses the plural, transgressions, because we have many crossings of the boundary of God's law. Many, many, many, many sins.

Transgressions. We have original sin according to which we are guilty in our first father, Adam, and are therefore conceived as guilty transgressors before we ever do one good or evil thing. And we also have actual sins according to which we break God's law over and over and over again throughout the course of our lives and even throughout the course of the day. We have original sin and actual sin.

We have first table violations and second table violations of God's law. We have first table violations whereby we sin directly against God. For example, we might break the first commandment by making some possession in our lives an idol. We can't live without it. We won't be happy without it. We depend upon this thing. That's a first table violation but we might also have a second table violation where we sin against God and the neighbor. For example, very naughty, we don't obey our parents. We don't submit to our parents and we break the fifth commandment, sinning against God and the neighbor, our parents.

We have public sins. Maybe we lose control of ourselves, having a temper, and we start yelling and yelling and maybe even shouting profanities in the presence of other people. It's awful. A very public sin. But we also have many many private sins and those are most of our sins. They are private. We hide them from others. No one else sees what's going on in our hearts except God, of course. We have public sins and private sins.

We might have old sins that were committed long ago and they still bring once in a while some experiences of shame and we have new sins that were committed in the last 15 minutes. Old sins and new sins.

We have presumptuous sins that are boldly committed with a high hand. We know exactly what God's law says and we just heard a sermon on this or that aspect of our lives a couple of weeks ago and someone has just even admonished us concerning this way and we don't care. We simply do not care. We boldly walk in disobedience. Presumptuous sin, but then there are, on the other hand, what Psalm 19 refers to as these hidden stains. We have these hidden sins of which we are not even aware.

We have regular besetting sins against which we have to struggle all day every day and then we also have some occasional sins. There are unique situations and uncommon temptations for each one of us personally to commit sins that are not a recurring problem. Common sins for us and then less common sins for us personally.

We have sins of omission where we fail to do what God has commanded us to do, and we have sins of commission where we do that which was expressly forbidden us.

We have all kinds of sins. There are so many different ways to look at our transgressions and on account of these transgressions, we ought to consider ourselves to be poor sinners.

Secondly, we have cleaving depravity. "Be pleased for the sake of Christ's blood not to impute to us poor sinners our transgressions, nor that depravity which always cleaves to us." Although we have been born again from heaven by the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ so that we have that principle of new obedience in the Lord Jesus Christ, there is nevertheless, like a dirty garment, that depravity which yet cleaves to us. And by that cleaving depravity, we do not mean so much specific sins that cleave to us but sinfulness, waywardness, a desire to do evil, a propensity to sin, the power of corruption. It still cleaves to us and we cannot shake free from it and it will not be abolished, alas, until we die and go to the grave and it's because of this depravity that still cleaves to us, we ought to consider ourselves to be poor sinners.

And thirdly, we are debtors. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." That we are debtors does not refer to a third category of sin in addition to transgressions and cleaving depravity, but it underscores the wretchedness of our transgressions in cleaving depravity. They are so wretched that we are on account of them debtors and that's awful.

We know from various Old Testament stories and New Testament parables that in the days in which Jesus taught his disciples to pray this petition, a debtor was a most miserable fellow. A debtor got himself into debt by his foolishness or maybe he was brought into debt by some great calamity and then he may live with some merciless creditor seeking recompense by beating him or by putting him in jail or by confiscating his property or his possession, maybe even taking away his children. A debtor was a miserable man. When Jesus made mention of debts and debtors, it probably did send a chill down the spine of every man. Being a debtor is awful. We are debtors.

For the recompense of our transgressions in cleaving depravity, we are obliged to undergo punishment according to God's justice. We are obligated to pay, to pay up, pay in full, and that means for one transgression or simply for our cleaving depravity, we ought to go to hell. And we don't have to go to the door of hell to peer in to see how awful hell is. The revelation of God's glory and holiness is enough to impress us with the awfulness of the place of everlasting destruction, and because we are debtors, that's where we ought to go and that impresses upon us the reality that we are poor sinners.

From a strictly objective point of view, we ought to consider ourselves to be poor sinners but it's more than that, we are poor sinners from a very personal, subjective, experiential point of view. We do not have to be told we are poor sinners. I don't have to have anyone try to convince me that I am a poor sinner nor do you as a Christian. We know it. We know we are poor sinners. We feel it. We experience it. It's our life. We groan and we sigh under the burden of our sins. We are poor sinners. This is why we pray for forgiveness. This is why we always pray for forgiveness. This is why we teach our little children to pray for forgiveness. It's an awareness of the misery of our own sin according to which we are poor sinners.

Yes, we are regenerated, called, believing children of God but it's because of that depravity that always cleaves to us and that mighty stream of foul transgressions that prevails against us from day to day that we feel it. We feel it. We are poor poor sinners, lamenting that the good I would, so often I do not do, and the evil that I would not, that I so often do. Oh wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? We feel it. We are poor sinners.

All men are poor sinners though not all will say so or believe so. What a delicious piece of candy is in the mouth of a little boy or girl, wickedness is in the mouth of the wicked. It's sweet. It's pleasing. He wants it to last as long as possible. "Poor sinner," he scoffs, "I am no poor sinner. I am a good and happy man."

Even within the church not everyone will acknowledge they are poor sinners. Not everyone truly cries, "O God, be merciful to me, the chief of all sinners." The most wretched state for a Christian is not when he's sensible of his sins, that brings him to the cross. It is blessedness. The most wretched state of a Christian is not when he's sensible of his sins, the most wretched state for a Christian is when he's not sensible of his sins and has no broken spirit and contrite heart. That's wretchedness, that's misery, and there are times in the life of the holiest child of God, the holiest saint, when he doesn't feel the weight of his sins as he ought to and he dismisses the word of God and he shifts the blame and self-justifies. Every child of God does that one time or another but the Holy Spirit of salvation always brings the children of God to the experience of the awfulness of their sins, experiencing the reality that we are poor in spirit.

Psalm 38 is the prayer of a poor sinner named David. Only a man who knows himself from his own experience to be a poor sinner talks this way. Let's read again the opening. Let's read the first 10 verses of Psalm 38, not making any comments. Just listen. This is

not only the word of a poor sinner, this is the language of a man who feels it. Nobody has to convince him he's a poor sinner, he feels it. This is how he talks and he talks to his God, "O LORD, rebuke me not in thy wrath: neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure. For thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore. There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger; neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin. For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me. My wounds stink and are corrupt because of my foolishness. I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long. For my loins are filled with a loathsome disease: and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and sore broken: I have roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart. Lord, all my desire is before thee; and my groaning is not hid from thee. My heart panteth, my strength faileth me: as for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me."

That's the word of a poor sinner. We are all poor sinners. We feel the guilt of our sins. We sense God's displeasure. We are humbled and ashamed and troubled by our sins. We know God's wrath against sin is so great. What shall we do and where shall we hide? Shall we run to a priest? Martin Luther tried that. It didn't work. Shall we despair of God's mercy and throw the 30 pieces of silver back into the temple and go running off and hang ourselves in suicide? Judas Iscariot did that. Shall we ignore our sins and sinfulness and deny or attempt to explain away? David did that. It didn't work.

What will we do as poor sinners? This is what the Psalmist did, "O Lord," verse 1. Verse 15, "For in thee, O LORD, do I hope: thou wilt hear, O Lord my God." Verses 21 and 22, "Forsake me not, O LORD: O my God, be not far from me. Make haste to help me, O Lord my salvation." Because we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, in our body and in our soul and because we are indwelt by his Holy Spirit who makes us sincerely willing and ready henceforth to live unto God, we will hear the instruction of the Lord Jesus Christ teaching us to pray and we poor sinners, this is what we will do: we will pray. And we will pray. The poor sinners' prayer. Just like the Psalmist. What will we pray? What is the poor sinners' prayer? "Forgive us our debts." That is, be pleased for the sake of Christ's blood not to impute to us poor sinners our transgression, nor that depravity which always cleaves to us.

We will pray to God asking him not to impute to us our sins, that is, "Lord God, do not reckon to our account the guilt of our sins. On account of our transgressions and on account of that depravity which always cleaves to us, on account of our debts, we are guilty, thus obliged to undergo punishment, to suffer punishment." And so we are asking when we pray for forgiveness, we are asking that God not impute the guilt of that sin to our account. "Do not render us guilty. Do not reckon the guilt of those sins to us that we don't have any punishment." And the ground for this petition is the blood of Jesus Christ. "Be pleased for the sake of Christ's blood not to impute to us poor sinners our transgressions," and so on.

Jesus Christ is the God-appointed Mediator who came into our flesh and to accomplish salvation for us and he was reckoned a poor sinner. Christ never was a poor sinner with his own transgressions, with his own cleaving depravity, and with his own debts. He was

the perfectly righteous Son of God without sin, but he was reckoned a poor sinner with the guilt of all of our sins. 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For he hath made him," that is, for God hath made Christ, "to be sin for us." He made him to be sin for us. He was reckoned to be a poor sinner for us that because of the guilt of our sins, "who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

God imputed our guilt to Jesus Christ and therefore the poor sinners' prayer of Psalm 38 comes to its highest expression in Jesus Christ, especially during Passion Week, and most especially on the cross. God imputed to Christ the guilt of all the Psalmist David's sins. God imputed to Christ all of our sins, all of the sins of all of his elect people. God imputed to Jesus Christ the guilt for our original sin, for all of our actual sins, for all of our first table violations and second table violations, the guilt for all of our public sins and private sins, and old sins and new sins, and presumptuous sins and hidden sins, and regular besetting sins and occasional sins, and sins of omission and sins of commission. God took the guilt for all of the sins of all of his people and he imputed it to Jesus Christ so that he was reckoned to be a poor sinner. And especially toward the end of his life, and most intensely while he was hanging upon the cross, especially during those three hours of darkness, Christ felt the hot displeasure of God. The arrows of God's wrath stuck fast. The heavy hand of God pressed Christ sore.

While he was hanging on that cross in the darkness, there was no soundness in his flesh. There was no rest in Christ's bones. He was feeble and sore broken. He groaned. His heart panted. His strength failed. The light of his eyes was gone from him. Lovers and friends, they stood aloof from his sore. His own kinsmen stood afar off. And alas he cried, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?" That's the poor sinners' prayer. He experienced all of the misery of a poor sinner with the guilt of our sins reckoned to him, to his account, and the misery we feel cannot be compared to the misery he felt experiencing the hot displeasure of God for all of the sins of all of his people.

You think about the experience we have when we're overwhelmed with the guilt of our sin and we're ashamed and our soul sinks. Christ was declared guilty for all of the sins of all of God's people. What he experienced on that cross is inexpressible. To use the language of Psalm 38 doesn't do justice to it. There on the cross, reckoned a poor sinner, he shed that infinitely precious blood to make the once and for all atonement. Now here we are, poor sinners, we sin against God continually and we pray to God for the forgiveness of our sins and when we do that, we are not praying that Christ will make an atonement. Christ already made the atonement once and for all, but we are praying that the blood of that cross will wash away these sins, will blot them out, will cover them in the sight of God so that they are taken away and there is no punishment for us, but that we then experience peace with God and fellowship in his covenant and know ourselves to have the right to life everlasting.

"Forgive us our debts." That's the poor sinners' prayer. "Forgive us our debts." For Jesus' sake, cancel these debts, O Lord. Erase them. Cast these transgressions into the depths of the sea. Remember me no more according to my cleaving depravity which troubles me every day. For Jesus' sake, take away the sense that I have of thy displeasure and the

sense of shame and embarrassment and give us to taste, O God, thy mercy and grace. As a little child savors a piece of candy, give us to taste thy mercy, O God, and the removal of our transgressions. For Jesus' sake, cause not thy face to be hidden from us but cause thy face to shine upon us again. And for Jesus' sake, declare us righteous through the Gospel so that like the Publican we go home justified. We know ourselves to be justified and we do not doubt but are fully persuaded that we have peace with thee which is above all things precious. Forgive us our debts, O Lord. Forsake me not, O Lord. O my God, be not far from me. Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation. That is the poor sinners' prayer.

"Forgive us our debts." We poor sinners understand that we're not alone. We are all poor sinners who desperately need the forgiving grace of God. The elderly saints in the congregation are yet poor sinners. The little boys and girls as they grow up in the church are poor sinners. All of us are poor sinners. All of God's people throughout the wide creation are all poor sinners. In fact, every man is a poor sinner. The people of God are poor sinners and they acknowledge that and our prayer is that God will bring all of us to confession of sin; that he will lead all of us in the way of repentance; that all of us will cry out for mercy and receive the mercy of forgiveness.

"Forgive us," all of us, "Forgive us our debts." The poor sinner doesn't only pray thinking of himself, he prays for the body of Christ. "Forgive us our debts." Even the children who know some English grammar and punctuation will know from the carefully placed possessive apostrophe in the theme of the sermon as printed in the bulletin where you read, "The Poor Sinners'" and after that last "s," then the apostrophe. Even the children will know this is not the prayer of one, this is the prayer of many. It is the poor sinners' prayer. "Forgive us our debts."

Who? We are poor sinners. What? We pray the poor sinners' prayer, "Forgive us our debts." And how? That is, how do we poor sinners pray? Confidently. Confidently. We poor sinners pray for forgiveness over and over throughout the course of our lives and even throughout the course of the day, and we pray confidently expecting the grace of forgiveness because we know God has already worked his grace in our hearts and that it is our firm resolution to forgive our neighbor of the sins he has committed against us. This is what the child of God says, "If God has already given grace to me in my heart so that it's my firm resolution to forgive those who sin against me, then why would God withhold from me the grace of forgiveness when I pray for it? He's already given me his grace."

So Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," and the Catechism explains that in that last phrase, "even as we feel this evidence of thy grace in us, that it is our firm resolution from the heart to forgive our neighbor." I may not pray the poor sinners' prayer with confidence if I do not have a firm resolution in my heart to forgive my neighbor. If I can't forgive my neighbor, if I can't find it within my heart to forgive my neighbor, then God's grace is not operating in me. If I look for vengeance upon the one who sinned against me, if I look to injure or hope injury upon the one who did injury to me, if I say to someone who comes to me, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry will you

forgive me," and I say to them, "I forgive you," but in my heart I hold onto that sin and I don't forget that sin but I still view that one in light of that sin and I mistreat them and I hold them at a distance and go all the way around them and I use that sin against them for the future, now and for the future and I keep thinking about that sin, I didn't forgive them. God's grace is not operating in my heart.

When I don't forgive, when I don't have a resolution to forgive those who sin against me, then I must expect to leave the heavenly sanctuary and throne room of prayer with God chiding me. "Forgive you? You want me, the infinitely holy God against whose most high majesty you have sinned, you want me to forgive you, you hard-hearted vengeful spirit, when you don't have the least desire to forgive your neighbor of that piddly little sin he committed against you?" I must expect to be chided.

But when it is my firm resolution to forgive my neighbor, I pray the sinners' prayer with confidence. Because I know I'm vengeful by nature, I hate God by nature, I hate every single person in church by nature, every single one of them by nature, but God performs the miracle of salvation in my heart and he changes my heart and he makes me gracious as he is gracious. Divine grace makes the sinners' heart gracious. I know God's grace is operating in my heart because I'm ready, I live ready to forgive those who sin against me. And my response to a confession of sin whether it's out on the playground or in the parking lot or in my own home, in my own marriage, with my own family, whether it's in the church of God, my own response to that confession of sin is, "I forgive you. I want to forgive you as God has forgiven me."

When that grace of God is operating in my heart so that it's my firm resolution to forgive my neighbor, then I pray the poor sinners' prayer with confidence. Of course God will grant me the grace of forgiveness, he's already granting me the grace to forgive those who sin against me. That forgiving of the neighbor is not the basis for our forgiveness, even the children know that. Christ's blood is the basis for our forgiveness but that willingness to forgive others, that's a token of God's grace already working in us and that enables us to pray with confidence, "Forgive us, O God, that enormous debt of sin." Enormous debt of sin. "Forgive us that enormous debt of sin even as we forgive our neighbors of their little offenses against us. Little or big, whatever they may be. Forgive us," and in that way we have confidence that God will graciously not impute to us our sins but the righteousness of Christ. Not miserable, not poor, but blessed and rich is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Amen.

Let us pray.

Lord our God, we look forward to the day when we will no longer be poor sinners, we will no longer have any transgressions, we will no longer have any cleaving depravity. We will be sinless and perfectly righteous in heaven and we will never again pray the words of Psalm 38, we will never pray the poor sinners' prayer. It belongs to this earth but not to heaven and that causes us with eager expectation to look for the life of glory that is to come. Until we arrive at that perfection proposed to us in the life to come, make us sincerely willing and ready to live according to thy word which exhorts us to confess

*our sins, to hate our sins, to forgive our neighbor, and to plead with thee for forgiveness.
Do forgive us for Jesus' sake. Amen.*