

Forgive us our debts

Sermon On The Mount

By Pastor Edward Donnelly

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Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Church

560 Doagh Road

Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim

Northern Ireland

BT36 5BU

Website: www.trinityrpc.com

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/trinity560

We turn in the New Testament to the 18th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew. Matthew 18, reading from verse 21 to the end of the chapter. Let us hear the word of God.

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. 23 Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. 26 The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27 The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. 28 But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denari. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. 29 His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' 30 But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. 32 Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35 This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart."

Amen. We pray that God the Holy Spirit will bless his word to all of us.

Let me say for the benefit of our visitors today from the camp and elsewhere that in our morning services we have been studying the Sermon the Mount and at this point we're looking at the Lord's Prayer and this morning we turn to chapter 6 of Matthew and the 12th verse. Matthew 6:12 where the petition in the prayer is "forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors." Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. We are now at a new stage in the Lord's Prayer, a darker stage, a more serious and sorrowful stage in the prayer. So far we have been praying to God as his creatures, those who he has made who are dependent on him for everything, but now we are reminded that we are not just creatures, we are fallen creatures, we are sinners.

This petition follows logically from the previous one. The NIV shouldn't leave out the little word "and": give us today our daily bread and forgive us our debts. It isn't enough that God should give us our daily bread. It isn't enough that God should provide for our material and physical needs. That would satisfy many people. That's all they want from God, for God to keep them healthy and alive and prosperous, but bread is useless without forgiveness. We can never stop with saying, "Give us today our daily bread," what about our sins? What about our lostness and our need? What benefit would it be for us ultimately if God were to provide us with our daily bread for 60 or 70 years and then cast us into hell at the end? Our daily bread would be of little value if with it we didn't receive the greater and higher blessing of forgiveness. Do you realize that you need God's forgiveness not just as much as but more than your daily bread? "Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our debts."

There are three aspects in this verse that I'd like us to look at and in the first place we have, obviously, a prayer for forgiveness. A prayer for forgiveness, "forgive us our debts." A debt is something which needs to be paid. A debt is an obligation which we must settle. A debt calls out for satisfaction. A debt has got a very loud annoying voice, "Pay me!" it calls. It is a painful position to be in debt. We feel uneasy. We feel guilty. There is a burden on us. We owe something. We are not free men and women. There is a shadow over our lives. We are in debt and we are going to have to settle that debt somehow. There is always a sense of strain in someone who is morally healthy when they're in debt and that sense of strain isn't taken away until the debt is settled. There is something wrong with society when people are not worried about being in debt. The society we live in, there is something sick about it morally in that people can live for years and decades chronically in debt and it doesn't bother them; it doesn't keep them awake at night.

Debt is a painful thing and in this prayer we confess our indebtedness to God. "Forgive us our debts." That is, our debts to you. If in our whole lives we only committed one sin, that would be a monstrous indebtedness to God. That would involve huge guilt that you and I should hear the voice of our Creator and our God and should disobey, and yet we have sinned not just once but many times. I haven't checked the mass, but one writer says if we only sinned once each waking hour in thought, word and deed, we would have well over one million sins to account for in one lifetime. One sin would be serious enough, but each one of us has tens of thousands of sins. We have sinned against God in our thoughts,

in our words, and in our actions over and over again, times and ways without number. Our indebtedness to God is huge, even the best of us.

When we say, "forgive us our debts," we are really asking for something enormous and we have nothing to pay. There is something irrevocable about sin. We cannot put our sin right. We cannot make up for it. There is something infinite about it. It is committed against an infinite God and all we can do is ask for forgiveness. "Forgive us. Forgive us. Forgive us."

My friends, we need to pray that prayer every day. You do and I do because we sin every day and we need to mean it. We need to pray with a sense of sorrow and shame. To pray this prayer involves openness with God, vulnerability. How do you feel when you have to go to another human being and say to them, "I'm sorry, please forgive me"? Do you find that easy to do? None of us do. It shouldn't be easy to do to God.

I think we should specify our debts. I think we should put them into words. I think we should suffer the mental embarrassment of spelling out to God some of those things for which we want to be forgiven. We can hide behind generalities. It's comparatively easy to say, "Lord, forgive me my sins. Forgive me my debts." It's harder to say, "Lord, I lost my temper today with So-and-so and I said such-and-such and I shouldn't have said it and I was wrong and I'm sorry and I ask you to forgive me. I performed this mean action. I spoke this hasty word. I was insensitive. I was lustful. I was greedy. I was selfish." We need to reflect on our sins. We need, I think for our own health, to verbalize them; to drive them out of their hiding places into the light of God's presence and look at them in their ugliness and then to pray, "Forgive us. Forgive us, Lord."

Have you asked for forgiveness today? We should never take it for granted. We should never lose a sense of wonder and joy and praise and love that God is willing to forgive us. It should constantly amaze us. We should build it into our thinking that we are people who need to be forgiven so that will drive all pompousness and self-righteousness away from us, an arrogance, hardness of heart, and that we will be gentle, tender, broken people, people who daily need to come to God and pray, "Lord, forgive me. Forgive me." The prayer for forgiveness.

Let's look, secondly, at the precondition for forgiveness. The precondition for forgiveness. "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." These words are often misunderstood and they're easy to misunderstand. People take them to mean that God forgives us because we have forgiven other people, in other words, that we earn our forgiveness by our willingness to forgive; that the ground on which God forgives us is that we have forgiven other people.

People misunderstand these words and they're easy to misunderstand as us coming to God and saying, "Lord, I have forgiven So-and-so and So-and-so, and because of that, I'm asking you to forgive me." Forgive us our debts on the grounds that we have forgiven our debtors but that is wrong, it's a misunderstanding. That is not what our Lord is saying because if that were the case, we are earning our own forgiveness. We could boast about

our forgiveness. We could say, "God has to forgive me because I'm a forgiving person." That cannot be true. In Ephesians 1:7 Paul says, "In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." He doesn't say we have forgiveness of sins because of our forgiving spirit. He says we have forgiveness of sins because of the death of Christ and the grace of God.

We have forgiveness because Jesus has been punished for our sins. We have forgiveness because he has taken our place; because he has suffered our penalty; because he has paid our debt by his life and death. And because he has paid our debt and our debt is paid in Christ, it is therefore right for us to come and say, "Lord, forgive us our debts," and the basis in which we can ask for forgiveness is because our debts have been paid, and because Christ has paid our debts, we can pray this prayer, and because Christ has paid our debts, God, the righteous Judge, will forgive us. In fact, I say it reverently: God must forgive us if we come in Christ because we are coming in the name of him who by God's appointment has paid for our sins for us. Know the reason why we're forgiven is because Christ has paid our debts for us.

What then does this petition mean, "Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors"? Well, our Lord explains it in the parable we read from Matthew 18. A man is forgiven a huge amount freely and generously and he is owed a small amount and he should have found forgiveness in his own heart. His master says, "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" Jesus is saying something like this: when we really think about how much we have been forgiven, when we reflect on our sins, when we think how guilty we have been, how wicked we have been, when we reflect on the fact that God has freely and graciously and lovingly forgiven us thousands and thousands of great and grievous sins, then we should find our hearts filled with a willingness to forgive those who have wronged us. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "When I see myself standing before God and realize something of what my blessed Lord has done for me, I am ready to forgive anybody anything." When I think what my Lord has done for me, I'm ready to forgive anybody anything.

A person who will not forgive, what are they saying? They're saying, "I'm not interested in forgiveness. I'm not into forgiveness. I don't do forgiveness. Forgiveness has no part in my life. Forgiveness doesn't enter my mental horizon. Forgiveness has no place in my thinking." My friend, if you say that about yourself, have you been forgiven? Have you been forgiven? Do you know what forgiveness is? Can you really have experienced God's forgiveness if you're so hard and so self-righteous and so unwilling to forgive other people?

Friends, when you meet angry resentful people, very often their basic problem is self-hatred and their own guilt. They haven't been forgiven themselves. They don't feel forgiven. They don't sense that they've been forgiven and they take out that inward unease and turmoil in an unforgiving spirit towards other people and they're difficult with other people because they're difficult with themselves. Understand them. Pity them.

But if we see in ourselves a spirit of forgiveness, then we have reason to believe that we have been forgiven in Christ. If we see in ourselves a love, a gentleness, a tenderness, a readiness to extend pardon to people, there it suggests that we have been changed, that we have been forgiven by God's grace. A forgiven person is a forgiving person and if I see that I'm a forgiving person, then it confirms in me the assurance that by God's mercy I have been forgiven. In other words, the petition is something like this, "Lord, I ask you to forgive me my debts because I believe that I trust in Christ. I believe that I'm a new creature. I believe that I am your child, and what confirms me that I am your child? Because you've given me a forgiveness for others. I find that I'm able to forgive my debtors. I find that you have done something in me that enables me to forgive those who hurt me, and I see in that the mark of Christ's working and Christ's changing me and so I am encouraged to come to you, Lord, as your child, as someone whom you have made a forgiving person."

The old catechisms explain this so well for us. The Westminster Short Catechism says in the fifth petition, this is so very balanced and so wise. In the fifth petition we pray that for Christ's sake God would freely pardon all our sins. For Christ's sake, which we are rather encouraged to ask, because by his grace we are enabled from the heart to forgive others. You see what the catechism says: when encouraged to pray that God will forgive us for Christ's sake, and what is it that encourages us? Because that we see that from the heart we are able to forgive others and we say, "This is not me. This is God. This is God's Spirit who is enabling me. This is God who is changing me into a different person and if God's doing this work in me, it suggests that I am in Christ and that I can seek forgiveness."

The Heidelberg Catechism puts it beautifully also: be pleased for the sake of Christ's blood not to impute to us any of our transgressions as we also find this witness of thy grace in us. This witness of thy grace, and what is the witness of God's grace? The catechism says that it is our full purpose heartily to forgive our neighbor. It is our full purpose heartily to forgive our neighbor. That is a witness of God's grace in you. The precondition of forgiveness is the grace of God.

Then we come thirdly and lastly to the practice of forgiveness. It's all very well to talk about these things in theory. It's all very well for those of us who haven't been injured recently and who haven't been damaged by other people, and it's easy to sit here and theorize about forgiveness, but it's a lot more difficult when someone actually wrongs us and does us harm. How do we forgive? How do we forgive? It's not easy to forgive, especially if someone does us a major injury. Some of you have been hurt, greatly hurt, by what other people have done to you in the past. How do we forgive? How do we practice forgiveness? I'd be failing you as a pastor if I were to leave you just with the command and say, "Go and do it." Let me suggest three things that may help us to forgive.

In the first place, we should think carefully about what needs to be forgiven. We should think calmly and carefully about what needs to be forgiven. In other words, try to estimate the debt which is owed to you. What is it you're angry about? What has the other

person actually done that is wrong? It's painful and it might seem counterproductive at first, but I believe it is essential if forgiveness is to be extended, and the amazing thing is that when we do this, when we calm down and try to think objectively and calmly, we often realize that there is nothing much to forgive after all; that we have got very excited and upset and annoyed but when we actually boil it down and say, "Now, wait a moment. What did this person do that was so wrong?" we find that perhaps it wasn't as much as in our fit of temper we imagined. But in any case, it's valuable to estimate the debt. Be honest. Perhaps it's a huge debt. But if we don't do this, I think resentments will surface later on.

We shouldn't be too quick or too glib to extend forgiveness. We shouldn't just paint over the wound. Face the wrong. Face the wrong that has been done to you. Examine it. Think about it. Reflect on it. Have the courage to take on board what has been done. If there's going to be ultimate healing, you have to deal with the whole thing. You can't take a shortcut. If you've been very seriously wronged, don't say, "Well, after all, it wasn't so bad." It was so bad. It was terrible. It was appalling. Face it.

Secondly, it's helpful to try to realize the logic behind forgiveness. A refusal to forgive is often motivated by the desire to punish. "They hurt me, so I'm going to hurt them, and I'm going to hurt them by refusing to forgive them." But, friends, if you refuse to forgive, who are you hurting? I suggest you're hurting yourself far more than the person you refuse to forgive. They may not even know you've refused to forgive them. They may go on leading their happy sinful life and they couldn't care less what you think. They're indifferent to whether you forgive them or not. But yet when we refuse to forgive, we become prisoners of bitterness, slaves of self-pity. The acids of resentment eat away at our joy and our peace of mind. We're unhappy. Our relationship with God is spoiled because we're sinning. Our closeness to him is hindered. We're damaging no one but ourselves. We're not changing anything. You don't do away with the hurt by refusing to forgive. You don't make it any less painful. You don't take away the pain. You don't set right a single wrong by refusing to forgive. You don't counsel and wrongdoing. In fact, you're allowing that person to hurt you even more. You're allowing that person to continue to dominate your life. You're allowing that person who injured you to enter your world and to enter your mind and to live there and you're brooding on it, and you're going over the injury and the line that hurt you again and again and again. Forgiving people is not only right, it makes sense.

Then lastly, we are called, obviously, to practice forgiveness. To practice forgiveness, actually to forgive. Now, that may not at first involve feeling forgiving. We can't do much about our feelings. We do have to forgive people that we would much rather hit over the head, and if you wait until you don't want to hit them over the head, you may wait a very long time.

It may not involve feeling forgiving, it may not involve granting forgiveness, forgiveness cannot be granted until it is sought. It may not mean that the wrongdoer escapes penalties, it doesn't mean you have to agree with what they did, it doesn't mean that you have to say that it wasn't harmful and wrong, but I think we must commit ourselves by

God's grace to doing at least three things. If you forgive someone, don't raise the issue with the other person ever again. Don't raise the issue with the other person ever again. Don't drag it out a year from now the next time you have a row. That's what the Bible means when it speaks of God forgetting our sins. God acts as if they no longer exist. God puts them behind him. He casts them in the depths of the sea. They have been dealt with forever. So forgiving means saying goodbye to the thing; putting it out of the way, it is gone, it is finished, never again will it be brought up by way of accusation. Don't raise the issue with the other person ever again. Secondly, don't tell anyone else about the wrong you have suffered. If it is over, if it is finished, why resurrect it again? And thirdly, don't brood over it yourself. Don't think about it anymore. Don't allow it to dominate your mind. Don't let it fester. Don't let it poison you. Refuse to think about it. You would do that with impure thoughts. You would do that with blasphemous thoughts. If they come into your mind you would say, "I'm not going to think about that thing." Do the same with thoughts of self-pity and anger and resentment. There is a sort of a morbid self-pitying satisfaction on brooding. There is something in us that likes to brood. It's like, I'm sorry to use the illustration, like picking at a scab. There is something in us that when we've been injured, something perverse in us, takes us back to that injury and picks at it, and picks it into a hole and we obtain a weird sort of satisfaction from brooding on the wrong that has been done to us and we have to realize how poisonous and unhealthy and unproductive that is. Say no to those thoughts. And I think you will find that if you commit yourself to not raise the issue with the person, to not speak about it to anyone else, and not to brood on it or reflect on it, you will find that the Holy Spirit will change your feelings and will enable you not only to practice but to experience forgiveness.

"Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors." If only these principles could be applied to this province of Northern Ireland in which we live. Our main problem is that we have two communities who will not forgive each other. They will not forget. They brood. They are filled with self-pity and self-righteousness and anger towards those who have injured them, and they feed those things and they nurture them and they remember them, and they make them their identity. They go through life as injured resentful people. What a transformation it would be if there was a spirit of forgiveness.

But, friends, that transformation can take place in our lives also and there are a surprising number of true Christian people who from time-to-time fail to forgive and their lives become poisoned by that. They lose their joy in the Lord. They lose their peace of mind. It is hard, very, very hard to forgive. It is hard and we live because our Savior gave his life and forgiveness means dying to self, but it is the death that leads to life.

"Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." Amen.

Let us bow our heads in prayer.

O Lord, our gracious God, help us always to remember that we are people who need constant, daily, great forgiveness. We sin and fail in so many ways. We are in debt to you always, so we come now and pray that for Jesus' sake you will forgive us our sins and helps us constantly to worship and praise you as those who are forgiven. And we pray, O

God, that as forgiven men and women you will fill our hearts with the forgiving spirit which is the Spirit of God. How can we profess to be your children if we are not like our Father and you are a forgiving Father. Lord, help us to live as your true children. Help us to be forgiving men and women. Perhaps at this moment there is someone we need to forgive, Lord, as we trust in your mercy, help us even now to forgive them from the heart for the hurt which they have caused us, to forgive them freely in a faint shadow of that forgiveness which we have received. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.