

# Forgive Us Our Debts - *Matthew 6:12*

## **Introduction:**

- For the past few weeks we've been taking some time to consider the way that Jesus teaches us to pray through the Lord's Prayer.
- So far in our series together, we've covered a little over half of this Prayer together. We've looked at the first four statements in this prayer, and today and next week we'll be looking at the last two.
- And it's interesting that as you go through the Lord's Prayer, maybe you've noticed this, each element of this prayer challenges us in some way. Darryl took us through the first three statements, which challenge us to get our minds off of ourselves, and onto God, seeing the bigger picture in our prayers and praying for the things that are on God's mind.
- Then last week we looked at V. 11, "*Give us this day our daily bread*" which challenged us to trust in God's provision in our prayers.
- So each element of this prayer challenges us in some way, but what we're looking at today, as we focus on V. 12 is a section of the Lord's prayer that is especially challenging, and maybe not for the reasons you would expect.
- V. 12 says,

*"and forgive us our debts,*

*as we also have forgiven our debtors."* - Matt 6:12 (ESV)

- And as you look at those words, you would think that this would be one of the easiest elements of the Lord's Prayer. "It's just praying for forgiveness".
- Forgiveness is such a foundational concept for Christianity, so you would think that praying for forgiveness would be fairly straightforward, to the point that we're left thinking "Did that really need to be said? Forgiveness should just be a given."
- On the surface it may seem straightforward, but of everything that Jesus includes in this prayer, I would actually consider these the most difficult words to pray of anything in the Lord's Prayer.
- And so the question then is, what makes these words so difficult to pray?
- This verse is kind of split up into two different sections, both of which can kind of trip us up when you really think about what's being said, and both pieces of this prayer for forgiveness are challenging for us in different ways.

- But as challenging as these words can be, by the end, I hope that we'll be able to see that the ability to pray these words is actually an incredible gift.

## **The power of the Gospel makes praying for forgiveness possible:**

- And I think the first thing that can kind of trip us up as we look at this section of the Lord's Prayer, and make these words so difficult is the first half, "*Forgive us our debts*".
- Again, initially it might not seem like there would be anything challenging about that, especially if you've been around the church for a while, but let me ask you something. Have you ever struggled with admitting that you've done something wrong, and asking for forgiveness?
- When I was a kid, I remember going to a birthday party, I was maybe in grade 2, and we were going to watch Spider-Man. I was pretty easily scared as a kid, so my Dad figured that a movie like Spider-Man would be a bit too much for me. He told me he didn't want me to watch it. So I went off to the party, but when the movie came on I felt left out, so I ignored what my dad had told me and watched anyways. Later, when he picked me up and asked if I had watched the movie, I lied and told him I hadn't.
- Now, I am not exaggerating when I tell you that the guilt of that small lie, for whatever reason, haunted me for years. I felt terrible for having watched the movie when I was told not to, then lied to my dad about it.
- And the funny thing was, what we watched wasn't even the live action movie that my dad thought would scare me, it was the old 90's Spiderman cartoon.
- But still, it was years before I actually went to my dad and told him about what I'd done. It was so difficult to admit what I had done, and ask for forgiveness. And that's something that most people would look at and think "really? You felt that guilty about something like that? That's so small!"
- And the worse you feel like you've messed up, the harder it is to go to someone, tell them what you did, and ask them to forgive you. I'm sure we can all think of examples where we messed up, and found it really difficult to come clean, and ask someone else to forgive us.
- Actually asking for forgiveness can be an incredibly difficult thing to do.
- And I think that part of our struggle with asking for forgiveness comes from shame over what we've done, and uncertainty about how people will respond when they find out.
- And if we struggle that much with asking forgiveness from one another, how much harder is it admitting to God all of the things that we've done wrong, and asking for his forgiveness?
- I want you to think back to a few weeks ago when we looked at Psalm 139. We were talking about how deeply we are known by God, and how we can really struggle with words like

*“Search me, and know my thoughts”*, because we know ourselves well enough to know that if God really searched our hearts, he’d find some things we’d much rather keep hidden.

- We’re overwhelmed by our own debts, we feel too far gone, and we feel unworthy of God’s forgiveness, so we struggle to ask for it. That’s what makes words like *“forgive us our debts”* so difficult to pray.
- And yet in this struggle, we miss something so important about forgiveness, and who we’re actually talking to when we pray these words.
- I want to take a minute to look at the passage that was read for us a few minutes ago from Matthew 18. This passage is a parable that Jesus told to his disciples that I think perfectly illustrates this portion of the Lord’s prayer:
- It begins in V. 23 as Jesus starts to tell the story,

*“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.” - Matt. 18:23-24 (ESV)*

- Now sometimes when we read amounts or measurements like *“ten thousand talents”* in the Bible, we tend to sort of gloss over it, or maybe assume that 10,000 talents would be about equal to \$10,000. But just to give you a bit of context for how much debt this servant had, I want to read you a quote from a commentator named Craig Bloomberg.
- *“Estimates in modern currency range from several million to one trillion dollars. The ‘talent’ was the highest known denomination of currency in the ancient Roman Empire, and ten thousand was the highest number for which the Greek language had a particular word”*
- So Jesus is essentially saying that this servant owed the highest amount of money that was possibly imaginable. I don’t even want to know what this servant must have done to accumulate this much debt, but essentially, the debt that he had was one that he would never be able to pay.
- So Jesus continues in V. 25,

*“And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’” - Matt. 18:25-26 (ESV)*

- This is kind of an uncomfortable scene to picture in our minds isn’t it? This guy was not standing there calmly asking “could I please have some more time?” You have this servant, faced with a debt he could never hope to pay, essentially begging for his life, and the life of his family out of pure desperation.

- And the king would have had every right to refuse. The servant had a legal obligation to pay what he owed, or else face the consequences, but look how he responds:

*“And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt” - Matt. 18:27 (ESV)*

- Can you imagine what that would have felt like? I mean, put yourself in the place of this servant, who owes an un-payable debt, and when faced with the consequences of not paying that debt, hearing the words *“your debt is forgiven”*.
- Though really, it doesn’t actually require that much imagination. Just like the servant in Jesus’ story, each and every one of us has a debt that we cannot hope to pay.
- In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus uses the words *“Forgive our debts”*, using the same kind of financial imagery that is used in this parable, and in both cases the idea of *“debts”* is used to represent our sins.
- Because of our sins, each and every one of us is *“in debt”* to God, and Scripture makes it clear what the required payment for that debt is, *“The wages of sin is death”*. The only payment that could ever settle our debt with God is death and separation from him. That’s what we each deserve.
- And again, recognizing how un-payable that debt is can make it difficult to come to God and ask for his forgiveness.
- But Jesus didn’t tell this story to heap on guilt over our sin, he told this story specifically to illustrate the depth of forgiveness that God offers to his children through the Gospel.
- As much as *“the wages of sin is death”*, *“the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord”*. Just as the king forgave the debt of his servant, we have been offered an even greater forgiveness.
- Jesus came to earth to settle our debt, offering his own death in our place. He didn’t deserve to die, but he lay down his life willingly as payment for our sins, and in the process making it possible for us to be forgiven of our debt, because it has been paid in full by him.
- 1 John 1:9 says,

*“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” - 1 Jn. 1:9 (ESV)*

- You see it’s the power of the Gospel that makes this prayer for forgiveness possible. We so desperately need to be forgiven, and because of what Christ has done we have the ability to freely approach God to confess our sins, ask forgiveness for our sins, and to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we will be forgiven because of the blood of Christ that was shed on our behalf.

- This is why every week, after we've spent some time reading a prayer of confession, and taking some time of quiet confession on our own, we always read some words from Scripture that give us assurance of the forgiveness that God has promised, and made possible through the sacrifice of his Son.
- You see, when we struggle so much to pray words like *"forgive us our debts"*, it's because we're missing the power of the Gospel, and the magnitude of the forgiveness that we have in Christ.
- You don't have to try to hide your sins from God. Not that you even could. He already knows what's in each of our hearts. He knows every sin that we have ever committed, even those that we've never told anyone else, and he knows every sin that we will ever commit. There's no hiding from him.
- But because of what Christ has done, we have the freedom to come to God, with the confidence of knowing that we can be forgiven, and there's no sin that Christ's sacrifice cannot cover.
- So you see the first half of this verse should not be a stumbling block for us, as much as a constant reminder in our prayers of what Christ has done for us.

### **The power of the Gospel gives us the ability to forgive others:**

- But there's something else in this verse that makes this part of the Lord's Prayer so difficult to pray, and I think if we're honest, this is the part most of us would struggle with the most.
- There's one small word in this verse that we tend to read right over without giving much thought to it, but has huge implications for the meaning of this passage. The word *"as"*.
- Jesus tells us to pray *"Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors"*
- Again, it's a small word, but you hear that, and suddenly we start to get a little uncomfortable.
- I mean, really think about the implications of what that's saying. We're asking God to forgive us as, or to the same degree, that we forgive others.
- You have to ask yourself, What would it look like if God gave us forgiveness to the same degree that we were willing to give it to others?
- That can be a really difficult question to process, because as much as we can often struggle to ask for forgiveness, we often struggle even more to give it.
- Going back to the parable that Jesus told in Matthew 18, if you look a few verses earlier, you'll see that Jesus tells this story in response to a question that Peter asks him. V. 21 says,

*"Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?'" - Matt. 18:21 (ESV)*

- So even Peter here is trying to figure out, exactly how much do I really have to forgive others. And to his credit, the Jewish tradition was essentially three strikes and you're out, you can be forgiven the first two times if you've wronged someone, but if you do the same thing again, then you won't be forgiven.
- So when Peter asks this question he's more than doubling that number, recognizing that it's important to show abundant forgiveness to one another, but he's still trying to figure out, exactly what is the limit? At what point am I allowed to stop forgiving someone.
- And I think often we do the same thing. It may be different for each person, but we've all got a sort of "forgiveness limit" in our minds. If someone wrongs us a certain number of times, then we're fine to forgive them, but if they go over that limit, suddenly forgiveness becomes a lot more difficult.
- But Jesus responds to Peter's question in V. 22,

*"Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.'"* - Matt. 18:22 (ESV)

- And even here, Jesus' goal is not to give us that magic number, that if someone wrongs you seventy eight times, then you're good to not forgive them.
- Leon Morris writes
  - *"It is a way of saying that for Jesus' followers forgiveness is to be unlimited. For them forgiveness is a way of life"*
- Jesus then immediately begins his story of this servant who was forgiven his enormous debt.
- But after receiving such incredible forgiveness from the king, Jesus continues on telling us what that servant did after having his debt forgiven.

*"But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt."* - Matt. 18:28-30 (ESV)

- It seems ridiculous doesn't it? This guy had just been forgiven an incalculable debt, yet this guy owed him about one days wages, and he couldn't let it go, and had the other servant put in prison, the very same fate he'd just narrowly avoided because his master had mercy on him.
- You read that and think "How could he do that?" And yet isn't this exactly what we do when we, who have been forgiven such an incredible debt by the death of Christ, turn around and refuse to show forgiveness to other people?

- When someone wrongs us, so often we feel justified in our anger. We feel like we have a right to withhold forgiveness because whoever has hurt us doesn't deserve it.
- And yet the reality remains that we don't deserve God's forgiveness, and we never could. We have such an incredible debt, and yet we have been forgiven. How can we then turn around and refuse to forgive someone else? It's the same as this servant refusing to forgive such a small debt after being forgiven such a massive debt himself.
- Jesus then goes on to describe what happens to the servant as a result of his refusal to forgive the other man's debt.

*“When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.” - Matt. 18:31-34 (ESV)*

- That's a pretty difficult way for the story to end, but Jesus gives a bit of an explanation of what all of this means.

*“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” - Matt. 18:35 (ESV)*

- And you see words very similar to this at the end of the Lord's Prayer in V. 14-15 of Matthew 6.

*“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.” - Matt. 6:14-15 (ESV)*

- And you can see that Jesus takes this forgiveness incredibly seriously, because of everything in the Lord's Prayer, this is the part that he returns to give extra emphasis. It's not that these two verses add a whole lot of new information that wasn't pretty clear in V. 12, but Jesus is making sure that of everything he's said, this element of the prayer will stick in the minds of his disciples.
- Now one commentator points out here,
  - *“The point is not so much that forgiving is a prior condition of being forgiven, but that forgiveness cannot be a one-way process. Like all God's gifts it brings responsibility; it must be passed on. To ask for forgiveness on any other basis is hypocrisy”*

- Forgiving others does not earn us God's forgiveness, that's not what Jesus is trying to say. But when we realize the depth of the forgiveness that we've been given in the Gospel, how can we do anything other than forgive others?
- To withhold forgiveness from others is actually a sign that we don't fully grasp or appreciate the forgiveness that we ourselves have been given.
- If we think that we have a right to withhold forgiveness from others, how much more does God have the right to withhold it from us?

## **Conclusion:**

- Now I want to be clear as we end, that this does not always mean that giving forgiveness is easy. Sometimes it can be an incredibly difficult thing, and even painful at times.
- Sometimes there are those who have wronged us so often, or hurt us so deeply, that forgiveness seems impossible.
- And I'm not going to stand here and tell you that this verse means it should be easy for you to just get over whatever situation you're struggling with. That's why I said that these are the most difficult words of any in the Lord's Prayer.
- But just as the power of the Gospel makes it possible for us to be forgiven, the power of the Gospel gives us the ability to forgive, because we know that we have been shown a much greater forgiveness.
- But even still, forgiveness can often still be a long process, sometimes even a daily struggle.
- Every day we need to come to God, confessing our sins and asking for his forgiveness, and on the other hand, sometimes we will need to come to him every day praying "Lord help me to forgive, the way that you have forgiven me".
- This is not something that we have to do on our own.
- And Jesus himself gives such a perfect picture of the kind of forgiveness he describes here, even as he hung dying on the cross in the most agonizing way possible, he prays for the forgiveness of those who put him there.

*"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." - Luke 23:34 (ESV)*

- That was the depth of Christ's love, to go to a death he did not deserve on the cross, in order to take the punishment for sinful humanity, and even as he was feeling the agony of that death, to pray for the forgiveness of the ones who put him there.
- And it's that same love that gives us the strength to forgive others the wrongs that they have done to us.
- 1 John 4:19 says,

*“We love because he first loved us.” - 1 Jn. 4:19 (ESV)*

- And the same is true of forgiveness.
- Praying these words should remind us of our need for God’s forgiveness, and of the incredible love we’ve been shown in the Gospel.
- Praying these words should also remind us of the need to show Christ-like forgiveness to others, and give us the strength to do it.
- Praying these words may not be easy, but the ability to come before God and pray the words *“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”* is such a profound gift, which is only made possible by the blood of Christ.
- The power of the Gospel gives us the freedom to approach God and ask for his forgiveness, and the ability to show the same forgiveness to others.