

The Lord's Prayer for Today: Forgive us Our Debts  
Matthew 18:21-35  
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Simon Wisenthal survived the Nazi concentration camps where 89 members of his family perished. He wrote the book, Sunflower, which begins with a haunting story. Wisenthal was selected at random, yanked aside, taken up the back stairs to a hospital corridor where a nurse led him into a dark room. He was left there alone with a badly wounded German army officer, lying on a bed.

In a weak, trembling voice, the man offered a confession to Wisenthal. He recounted his earlier years with Hitler's youth movement, and told Wisenthal about his actions on the Russian front and the atrocities wrought against the Jews in one town by his SS unit. He described one event where they herded all the Jews in town into one wooden building, and then torched it. He told of how some Jews with their clothing ablaze leapt from the second floor, and how his troops shot them as they landed. He started to tell Wisenthal about one boy with dark eyes and hair, but his voice gave way.

Several times Wisenthal tried to leave the room, but each time the man would reach out with a cold, bloodless hand to restrain him. After several hours, the officer explained why he had summoned a Jewish prisoner to his bedside: "I know that what I'm asking is almost too much for you. But without your answer I cannot die in peace." Then he asked Wisenthal for forgiveness for all his crimes against the Jews.

Wisenthal stood in silence for some time, staring at the man's bandaged face. Then he made up his mind and left the room without saying a word; he left the man to die unforgiven.

“Forgive us our debts... as we forgive our debtors.” We all need forgiveness- not just some anonymous Nazi officer. While he may have committed openly horrid atrocities against Jewish people, our sin is often hidden- and equally corrosive to our souls. We've all sinned against God and against one another... and somewhere deep inside, we know it... and like that German army officer, need forgiveness...and so we pray....

Forgive us our debts, or trespasses or sins... debtors and trespasser run into each other all the time. Why is that? Trespasses is the English word William Tyndale used when translating the Greek word “o-fay-lay-mata” back in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century- a word more often used in financial transactions- and that was the word taken into the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. More recent traditions tracing their heritage back to the Anglicans- such as the Methodists and Episcopalians still prefer that usage. Most traditions and modern scholars use the word “debts,” although there are some ecumenical versions that use the word from the Gospel of Luke: “forgive us our sin”- even though most of the wording for the Lord's Prayer comes from Matthew's Gospel.

Theologically, I prefer the word “debts,” because it makes clear that we are all debtors before God. Scripture makes clear what our hearts already know- that we are bankrupt sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God. “Forgive us our debts,” we beseech God- because we're like the first man in this morning's scripture reading. We've drawn down on the bank of goodness God gives to us all, and truth is- we're over our

heads in debt... the amount is monstrous. The amount the man owed the king was ten times the gross national product of the entire realm. The burdens we carry though life are huge, and sometimes overwhelming...

Word spoken in anger.  
Hopes of others dashed.  
Lives messed up, and years wasted.  
Secret deeds, rotting in the dark cellars of our hearts.  
Misdeeds that dishonored spouse and family  
A too-busy soul who ignored the love of others, now living alone with regret  
A child who knows he or she ran dry the storehouse of parental love and support.

Some turn to the bottle; other to drugs or medications- but they don't heal the pain, they just anesthetize it. Counseling might help to name the wound, but it won't eliminate it. The only antidote for the guilt, the painful memories, the regret we carry within us is forgiveness... and how badly we want it!

Only when we accept and experience forgiveness deep in the soul- when we realize that sin's stain can be bleached clean- that's when we discover that the future can be fresh and pure and good... like a new creation. Jesus, the one who teaches us to pray for forgiveness, is the same one who died that we might be forgiven by God: "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Because of Jesus, scripture promises us that "if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." There may well be no more radical words in scripture- do you believe them... really believe them? Your sin- transferred by the mercy and grace of God- to Christ on the cross... trust it, and claim it, and you will be set free. That's the good news of the Gospel- take it, and believe it!

And so we pray regularly, "forgive us our debts"... and not just our debts, but others: "as we forgive our debtors." Thankfully, in Christ, we're cleansed... and we're

called upon to extend the same grace and mercy to others. It's at the heart of what Christianity stands for. God's incredible festival of forgiveness includes not just our own faults and sins, but those around us as well.

That's radical stuff, because we live in a world of retaliation. Someone hurts us, we hurt them... or at least harbor a grudge. You gore my ox- I'll gore yours; kill my people, I'll kill your people. Consider the Middle East and the endless cycle of retaliation between Jews and Arabs; there's the Hatfields and the McCoys; today- maybe the Republicans and Democrats; or, consider you and those people you still haven't forgiven or forgotten ... your wife, your husband, your mother-in-law, your sister, your brother, your next door neighbor whose dog got into your garden...even though its been days, weeks, months, years... a lifetime. And then can we still pray the Lord's Prayer...?

Consider that a literal translation of the Lord's Prayer might go something like this: "Forgive us our sins- our debts, our trespasses- in proportion as we forgive those who have sinned against us." If we stop to really think about what we're saying as we pray- there are those times when we dare not pray the Lord's Prayer until we have a more forgiving spirit within us. "Unforgiving, unforgiven" is the law of the spiritual world over which our Heavenly Father reigns; as a friend of mine once said, "The one who will not forgive breaks the bridge over which he himself must cross." It could well be that God will employ the same measure of forgiveness to us that we employ against those around us.

In our scripture reading this morning, the man forgiven \$500,000 encountered someone who owed him \$10... and had the \$10 debtor thrown into prison until the sum could be paid. Forgiving others... that's so hard for us, because others have hurt us, and

owe us... and we want what's due us. Did you notice the response of the king who had forgiven much... he had that first man arrested and thrown into jail. That seems to suggest that God's response to our own pettiness, judgmental attitudes and grudge-keeping may end up leaving us spiritually imprisoned as well.

Consider the person who harbors a grudge... the person against whom the grudge is being directed may not even know it... but the one carrying the bitterness in his or her heart certainly does. You might be really angry at someone, but that person may well have moved on with his or her life, while you stew in your own juices... who's imprisoned, and who's the free person?

How are we to respond? Truthfully, it is hard to forgive. I know I struggle with it at times, and find it hard to stand here today looking at some of you who I know have been deeply hurt suggesting that you forgive those who have wronged you. But, someday, each of us must. If we don't, its like living in a prison... the anger and bitterness, the cynical judgmentalism will eat us alive. Someday, you and I must come to grips with the need to forgive as we have been forgiven.

When that happens, we are claiming that what took place has been stripped of its power to divide us. That doesn't mean that we'll no longer hurt- forgiving another does not take that pain away. To say "forgive and forget" is so unrealistic- but to forgive is to no longer allow the memory of what happened to control or dominate what we do or say about what hurt us so... and what was once a bloody heart wound begins to heal into a scar.

Every time I think of Simon Wisenthal and his story... and that as a Jew, he was unable to offer forgiveness to that wounded Nazi officer. I think then of another Jewish

man who suffered at the hands of some Gentile army officers. He'd healed the sick, fed the hungry, befriended the leper, the poor, the forgotten people. Still, the authorities made a crown of thorns, drove nails into his hands and feet, and pierced his side with a sword. He looked down at those who had abandoned him, who cried out for his crucifixion, and said, "Father, forgive them- for they do not know what they are doing."

It's a choice you can make, and one that we need to make in how we deal with others. When we tap into God's power to forgive us, we're given the power to forgive others. Jesus Christ broke the back of the Spirit of retaliation on the cross, enabling God's love to unleash the power of forgiveness among us all. Allow God's cleansing love to touch the dirty places in your life, and then ask Jesus to help you share it with others. It is the power of God, and it is the secret to abundant life- for you, for them, and for us all.

Father, forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.