

Prayer in the Shorter Catechism (10)

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[0 : 00] For the Christian who ruminates over past failures, there is grace to forgive oneself and to move on.

Forgive us our debts. Although Jesus had no debts of his own, he died to cover all our sins. And he now invites us to come to a loving father who for his sake will freely forgive them all.

First, grace to receive forgiveness. Secondly, grace to give forgiveness.

Grace to give forgiveness. You know, there are many, many, many challenging verses of scripture. I think this is amongst the most challenging.

Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors. I know very many senior Christians, men and women who have known Christ for decades and walked with them.

[1 : 06] And yet, for all the challenges of discipleship, this is the one they find the hardest. That of forgiving others who have sinned against them. In fact, many of them don't even realize that this is what they're doing.

They're holding back forgiveness and refusing to settle accounts according to the gracious atmosphere of the Lord's Prayer, just as Jesus said we should. And so our Westminster fathers concluded their answer.

By his grace, we are enabled from the heart to forgive others. By his grace, we're enabled from the heart to forgive others. You'll notice the perfect arrangement of the words our fathers use.

They don't leave us in any doubt, but that this kind of forgiveness, this forgiveness which covers the debts which others owe to us, it's a product of grace at work in our lives.

If we find it within our own power to forgive others, it is only because God has been at work by his spirit in our hearts, by his grace.

[2 : 22] In the book, *The Lord of the Rings*, not in the film, but in the book, there's a strange character called Tom Bombadil. Now, Tom is a very strange character who saves the four Hobbit heroes from disaster at the very beginning of their journey.

The thing is, Tom never speaks. Tom only ever sings. And he takes these four Hobbits back to his house, and they stay there for a few days with Tom Bombadil.

They drink what he gives them. And within the time that they are there, they too begin to express themselves, not in word, but in song. Singing becomes more natural to them than talking in the house of Tom Bombadil.

In the family of grace, forgiving others becomes more natural to us than holding a grudge against others. If we should happen upon a Christian who is harsh and unforgiving, if we should be that person, then be sure that this person is lacking in the grace of Christ.

That she has forgotten the grace God showed her by forgiving her sins. And what I find so unique about the Shorter Catechism's comment is that it says, by his grace, we are enabled from the heart to forgive others.

[4 : 04] From the heart. The grace of God changes us, transforming us from grudge bearers to forgiveness givers. God changes our hearts.

Makes us able to be like Jesus himself, who even in the hour of his greatest pain forgave his enemies and prayed for them. It makes us able to be like the first martyr, Stephen, who even as he was being stoned to death, prayed for the forgiveness of those who were murdering him, Saul of Tarsus included.

Just as we say that the Lord's Prayer breathes in the atmosphere of grace. So in these five short words, as we forgive our debtors, we desperately need God's grace in which to grow.

Let me close with what I consider to be the most powerful example of Christian forgiveness in the history of the Christian church. Corrie Ten Boone's forgiveness of a former concentration camp

guard.

It's rather a long story, but let me read it as I found it. It was in a church in Munich that I saw him. [5 : 27] A balding, heavysset man in a grey overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were firing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear.

It was 1947, and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. People stood up in silence, collected their wraps, and silence left the room. And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat.

The next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with a skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush. The huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the centre of the floor.

The shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsy and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland.

[6 : 57] And this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück, Ravensbrück concentration camp, where we had been sent. Now he's in front of me, hand thrust out.

A fine message, Fraulein, how good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea. And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand.

He would not remember me. Of course, how could you remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt.

It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze. You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk, he was saying.

I was a guard in there. He did not remember me. But since that time he went on, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there.

[8 : 16] But I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein, again the hand came out. Will you forgive me? And I stood there.

I, whose sins every day, had to be forgiven and could not. Betsy had died in that place. Could he erase her slow, terrible death simply for the asking?

Could not have been many seconds I stood there, that he stood there rather, hand held out, but it seemed to me hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I ever had to do.

For I had to do it. I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition, that we forgive those who have injured us. If you do not forgive men their trespasses, Jesus says, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses.

I knew it, not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart.

[9 : 25] But forgiveness is not an emotion. I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. Jesus, help me.

I prayed silently. I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling. And so, woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me.

And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder. It raced down my arm and sprang into our joined hands.

And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. I forgive you, brother, I cried, with all my heart.

For a long moment, we grasped each other's hands. The former guard and the former prisoner.

[10 : 36] I had never known God's love so intentionally as I did then. Thank you.