

# Forgive us our debts

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[ 0 : 00 ] We're reading today from Matthew chapter 6 verses 5 to 15. And when you pray, you shall be like the hypocrites, for they shall love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets that they may be seen by men.

Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and when you have shut the door, pray to your father who is in the secret place.

And your father who sees in secret will reward you openly. But when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathens do, for they think they will be heard for their many words.

Therefore, do not be like them, for your father knows the things that you need before you ask him. In this manner, therefore, pray.

Our father in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.

[ 1 : 17 ] And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen. For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will the father forgive your trespasses.

Well, the topic of forgiveness requires no introduction, really. Everybody recognizes it's essential. It's essential in all our relationships if they're to survive and thrive.

But after that, it gets complicated. We live in terrible tension. We do relationships. We have to do relationships with people who, like ourselves, are flawed, naturally self-centered.

And that means hurts and injuries and pain and injustices are frequent. They're common. They're normal. And sometimes that means we just want to give up on relationships. It's all just too hard.

[ 2 : 28 ] But then our longing to be known, to be accepted, to be loved, draws us back into those very relationships we feel like quitting sometimes, even though we feel vulnerable and broken.

And on top of that, there's more tension because we live with two standards of forgiveness. At least I think we do anyway. We know we need to be forgiven repeatedly for all the wrongs, for all our wrongs.

We know we need to be treated with generosity, with mercy, with love, when we don't deserve it.

Otherwise, the relationship we're in will collapse. But at the same time, we find it hard to treat others in that relationship in the same way.

We find it hard to be forgiving of others when their wrongs impact on us. Of course, sometimes the tension is understandable.

Sometimes the hurt we experience are such a betrayal or such an unwarranted personal attack.

Sometimes they even wreck our lives forever in more extreme circumstances.

[ 3 : 37 ] And when those sort of things happen, well, it just seems impossible to forgive. And I know some Christians who just find that concept to be so real and so raw for them.

And so we find ourselves nursing anger, pain, bitterness, a desire for justice, even sometimes a desire for revenge.

And all those sort of things threaten to overwhelm us at times. And inevitably, those things impact all our relationships, not just the ones where the hurt comes from, but all our relationships.

Now, here's the point this morning. We bring all of this tension with us as we come to pray. Asking for forgiveness and offering forgiveness to others is a normal part of our daily prayers, if praying as Jesus would have us pray.

In fact, when you look at Matthew 6, such is the fundamental challenge of forgiveness that Jesus adds extra comments for emphasis after the prayer.

[ 4 : 49 ] Look at verse 14 and 15. He doesn't do that for any other part of the prayer. And I think that says something about how difficult we find the challenge of forgiveness.

And how Jesus recognized that. But before we launch into the text, let's do, for some context, let's do some revision on the kingdom of God, the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus' model prayer for his kingdom people.

So Jesus' mission, going all the way back to chapter 4, verse 17, was to reestablish the kingdom of God. And the kingdom of God is just a description of God's rule over his people.

How is the kingdom of God seen, the spiritual kingdom? Well, I said a few weeks ago, it's not a physical geographical form like the United Kingdom.

It's a vast spiritual kingdom, but it does have specific form and definition because Jesus is the king and he rules over his renewed people, his community people, his church.

[ 5 : 47 ] And they enjoy the good life he provides as the ruler of the kingdom. And all that is in sharp contrast to the kingdom of this world, which the Bible talks about and which we experience.

The kingdom of this world, which rejects Jesus and seeks the good life apart from God. Now, zoom in a little bit into the Sermon on the Mount, chapter 5 to 7 of Matthew.

What that's about is Jesus spelling out in detail how his global community of died for people, the kingdom of God, will be recognized. And Jesus is saying that each person in the kingdom, each kingdom person will understand that they cannot achieve God's standard of righteousness or obedience in their own resources.

And instead, they'll put out their hands and thankfully accept his righteousness given as a gift, a free gift to us, but a costly gift to him.

Each kingdom person, says Jesus, will desire to serve King Jesus, desire to be like him in every attitude and desire. We see that right through the Beatitudes.

[ 7 : 02 ] And these things all together overflow as a powerful counterculture, the kingdom of God against the kingdom of this world. And the idea of that is that we might be salt and light, radically impacting the world and ultimately bringing glory to the Lord.

Now, coming into the Lord's Prayer, we must remember that this radical counterculture, which is the basis of the whole of the Sermon on the Mount, is also, therefore, to be seen in our prayer life.

I suspect we don't think about it like that. We seem to lift the Lord's Prayer sort of out of the context altogether. But it's meant to be a radical prayer.

It's meant to be an expression of radical counterculture. It's meant to be an expression of what kingdom people will be like, their desire, their attitudes, and ultimately their actions.

Now, last week, we examined the first half of the prayer with its focus on how kingdom people or Christians should engage with God.

[ 8 : 09 ] Dave took us through that really, really helpfully last week. And so we approach him as kingdom people. We approach him with the ease and confidence of children approaching their father.

Our father. Recognizing at the same time his awesome power and authority, which made us his children, our father in heaven.

And then it goes on. We long to see him honored, to see him served by all, even as we commit to being his loyal servants and everything. Now, that's radical for us.

That's a huge thing to pray. But at the heart of all that, we can say the Lord's Prayer is always about relationship and delight in the Lord.

It's never simply box ticking what is right, as indeed we've seen right through the Sermon on the Mount. Now, with that revision, let's jump into the second half of the Lord's Prayer, the Lord's Model Prayer, remember, and make the point that kingdom or gospel-shaped people will be marked or characterized by an attitude of extravagant forgiving spirit.

[ 9 : 24 ] Now, an extravagant forgiving spirit. It's easy to say, but it's a scary term. Okay, so let's unpack that a little bit.

If prayer is spreading out our helplessness before God and expressing our total dependency on him, and you see that in verse 11, both for our physical needs, give us this day our daily bread.

We depend on God for our physical needs daily, our physical well-being daily. But even more importantly, verse 12, we depend on God, therefore, for our daily spiritual needs and well-being.

The two verses are connected. Now, most urgently, then, is the plea, verse 12, that we might be known for our forgiven spirit.

That's what we're praying in verse 12. We might be known for our grace and mercy in forgiving those who have injured or offended us. Rather than being a person with long memories of injustice. [10:31] Have you heard that term before? You come across people and say, oh, yeah, that person's got a really long memory. And it's the person who's got long memories of injustice who ultimately will be nursing bitterness, anger, and probably living with strained or broken relationships.

And there's the contrast. The two options as well. Forgiving spirit. Or those with long memories.

Now, we ask the question, what is kingdom attitude forgiveness?

Now, you see in the outline of the sermon there, I've hyphenated that just because I want you to try and keep it all together. What is kingdom attitude forgiveness? Well, Martin's already opened up in the children's segment.

But sin here in verse 12 is described as a debt. Now, I think that's a really helpful picture. Because it pictures the fact that sin has a penalty or cost which must be discharged or paid.

That's what a debt is. So, practically, when someone sins against me, that is hurting me or maligning me verbally, physically, or emotionally, then at the end of that process, they actually owe me.

[11:55] And likewise, whenever I sin against you or somebody else, there's a real debt to be settled, to be discharged. Now, with that in mind, we now can sort of make a stab at a definition of forgiveness.

And so, forgiveness is a conscious choice. It's a conscious choice and decision that I make. To do what? Well, to cancel the debt properly owed to me by the actions of another person towards me. That's the first thing. Cancel the debt. And then it gets harder. To absorb the cost of that hurt and offense and injustice myself. That is, as I'm forgiving, I'm giving up my right to be merciless in response to their actions.

That came out of Matthew 18 that Martin opened up. I'm giving up my, in offering forgiveness, I'm giving up my right to anger, to bitterness. And those two things are part of portraying myself as a victim.

So, I'm giving up my right to victimhood. I'm giving up my right to compensation. I'm giving up my right to justice. I'm giving up my right even to restitution. And finally, because of all that, I'm releasing the offender from any obligation of payment or penalty.

[13:23] Now, I don't know how that's coming across to you, but as I was preparing this week, that's just huge. Kingdom forgiveness is far more demanding than simply uttering the words, I forgive you.

And so often that's what we do, isn't it? We say, I forgive you while inwardly continuing to save with anger and bitterness towards that person.

And continue to be unwilling to relate warmly and generously toward them. Sometimes continue to be unwilling to relate to them at all. And yet we still say, you know, I've forgiven them.

So, kingdom attitude forgiveness is radically difficult. Radically difficult.

And it's also radically different to the easy, self-interested, I guess these days respectable forgiveness of our popular culture.

[14:26] Forgiveness is very common in our culture. Not so much repentance, but forgiveness is very popular in our culture because our culture has made forgiveness all about me.

That is, I can offer forgiveness because what I'm doing when I offer forgiveness is taking back power and control from the person who's offended to me, offended against me. That they're a toxic person, and so I'm sort of disengaging myself with them as I forgive them.

Or perhaps they'll even think, I'm actually, in forgiving that person, I'm showing that I'm better than they are. It's very common for these people, for people today to say, look, you know, they're not my values.

And so in forgiving somebody, I'm making a statement that my values are better than their values. Or sometimes forgiveness is a form of revenge because we actually cut off relationship with the person who's offended.

And that's very popular in our culture as well. It all goes under the banner of forgiveness. But you can see how different it is from kingdom attitude forgiveness.

[15:37] So it's a huge thing. Far, far more demanding than uttering the words, I forgive you.

Therefore, an even harder question is, why will I desire this kingdom attitude of a forgiving spirit?

It's one thing to understand what it is. But why will I desire it as a kingdom person? I've already said, look, it's a challenge to pray any sentence of the Lord's model prayer without sinning.

And what I mean by that is that we can easily pray those sentences and actually not believe them, not act on them. And that means essentially we're sinning when we pray the Lord's model prayer.

And goodness only knows what that means in how we've taught our children to say the Lord's model prayer over the years. And we've taught them to sin because they recite it mindlessly. So it's a challenge to pray any sentence of the Lord's model prayer without sinning.

But especially verse 12, requesting that the Lord forgive us. Because we can't ask this of God without also reflecting on our forgiving of others.

[16:50] Verse 12, forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debts. That's in the past. In other words, I'm asking you, Lord, this on the basis of what I've already done for my debtors or to my debtors.

Now, I want to start moving down a particular line here by saying there is no qualification offered here by Jesus.

There's no situations where Jesus, well, okay. I'll soften this a little bit by saying, look, in this situation, this situation, this situation, this situation, there'll be an exemption.

You don't have to forgive. Now, we can go to other parts of the scripture and we can find some situations that require some more negotiation and navigation. But here in this model prayer, remember, this is given, this is what kingdom people we look like.

That's the context here. There's no qualification or softening. If we ask the Lord for forgiveness, it's assumed we have already forgiven those in our debt as a matter of obedience.

[18:03] Now, so far in my talk, if you're following me, then you'll be thinking, this is getting harder and harder and harder. Is Jesus being realistic in this kingdom demand?

Right. And you might be thinking, well, great. Prayer is already hard enough. I already struggle with it. So how could I possibly pray with joy and excitement? Because remember, this is what the prayer is.

It's talking to our father like a little child. How could I possibly pray with joy and excitement, given such high standards, given such scary standards? Well, the balance of my time, I just want to give three great motivations.

I think I can, well, I believe I can discern in the text. You can be the judge of that. The first one is this. I will desire this kingdom attitude forgiveness because I appreciate deeply God's mercy to me. And then the hyphen and I live spiritually because of forgiveness. I just say that again to you, so I live spiritually because of forgiveness.

[19:13] In kingdom terms, we owe God total, tireless loyalty all day, every day.

In terms of chapter seven, seeking first his kingdom and righteousness, no matter the cost. That's what we owe.

Our sin is repeated failure to pay what we owe to God. So again, we come full circle. That means that even as Christians, our daily debt to the Lord is massive.

You just need to read back through the various sections of the Sermon on the Mount. And it just shows us how poorly we do in all of those things.

Whether it's our internal thoughts, whether it's the way we deal with our enemies, whether it's the attitudes we display towards God, and so on and so on and so on. But it's against my massive debt that God displays his forgiving spirit.

[20:31] God made a conscious decision. There you go. That's the thing, a conscious decision, a choice to cancel the debt I owed him, but could never have repaid him.

He then went on to absorb the pain and cost of my sin, my debt, in himself. And he satisfied the demand of justice in and through the death of Jesus.

And finally, thereby, he released me from any obligation of penalty or payment. That's the story that Martin told us in the children's section.

So just close your eyes and reflect on that for a minute. It is God in all his glory.

And by that, I mean, Father, Son, and Spirit working together in grace, love, mercy, compassion, justice, faithfulness, covenant purpose, all of those things and more.

[21:33] God in all his glory, God in all his glory, that working together, that resulted in my forgiveness, resulted in restored life and relationship with him.

I live spiritually. I'm accepted before God spiritually because of forgiveness. Now, verse 12, we need to see here, it's not a tit-for-tat command.

It's not, and I know some people who've read it like this, it's not, I forgive person X so that the Lord will forgive me. That's tit-for-tat. I'm only doing it because I want something from the Lord.

That's not what the sense of it here is properly. What it's doing here is highlighting a forgiving spirit which overflows towards those who owe me.

As Martin said in his children talk, the forgiven forgive. And what's more here, and that's why there's no easy way out, no mitigation here, the Lord will not allow me a double standard.

[ 22 : 51 ] The Lord will not allow me to come to him in prayer expecting him to discharge my massive debt while secretly in my heart feeling justified in refusing to forgive the relatively small debt that others owe me.

And yet, how often do we do that? So it boils down to this. If I display practically an unforgiving spirit in my dealings with others, then it shows one of two things.

It shows either that I've not experienced mercy, repentance, and forgiveness of myself. In other words, it's something that's completely outside my experience. It means I've got no experience of.

Or it means I've forgotten about the cost of God forgiving me, and I've been distracted by the hurt of others. I've forgotten the gospel, in other words.

So my friends, let's give ourselves to praying that our attitudes, our words, and our actions actually reveal Christ and kingdom values in us.

[ 24 : 10 ] And practically, let's move into every relationship, every relationship, every time we engage in a relationship.

Let's move into telling ourselves that no debt of sin that I might experience from this person or this relationship, no debt of sin could come close to my discharge from sin that's come to me by God's grace.

It's a perspective. And we need to keep reminding ourselves of it. And we need to keep praying for it. The second motivation, then, that will lead us to desire this kingdom attitude forgiveness is that I want most to reflect God's character to others.

And so the hyphen here, then, is subtitle, as it were, mercilessness is incompatible with being spirit-filled.

Question. What is the opposite of forgiveness or a forgiving spirit? Put the question again.

[ 25 : 25 ] What is the opposite of forgiveness or the opposite of a forgiving spirit? Now, we might simply say, well, it's being unforgiving. The opposite of forgiving is unforgiving.

Well, I don't think that's actually quite right. It's much stronger than that. The opposite of forgiveness or a forgiving spirit must be some attitude of merciless revenge in some shape or form.

Some payback. If it's that, then you can see that an unforgiving spirit is actually the very opposite of God's character.

And from there, it actually makes a mockery of the gospel. So once again, consider the glory of God in all of this.

So it has always been the Father's plan and purpose that his people would reflect his glory to the whole world. This requires us to display his righteousness or his character.

[ 26 : 27 ] That was the message right through the Old Testament. Be like this so that everybody in the world will say, these are the people of the living Lord, Yahweh.

But we could never display his righteousness or character. We can never achieve that on our own. But we've actually been given that in Jesus. We've been given his righteousness when we were saved.

And with Jesus, we've also been given the Holy Spirit who now lives within us, whose job is to renovate and renew us from the inside out. Giving us both the desire and the ability to say, as it says in Romans, yes to righteousness and no to sin.

And that's what it is to be spirit filled. So when it comes to prayer and praying and the kingdom attitude of forgiveness, then as a Christian, I have every reason, the overwhelming love of God.

And every resource, Father, Son, and Spirit working within me, every resource possible to make me more like my Father in heaven.

[ 27 : 39 ] Every reason, every resource to make me more like my Father in heaven. Acting with strong, determined love rather than acting from hurt or fear.

Acting for the best interest of the other person in spite of their failures towards me. So friends, applying this just even within the Lord's prayer, the Lord's model prayer here, it will go something like this.

If I pray thoughtfully and genuinely, the first half of this prayer, as I express that my greatest desire is for the whole world to see my Father as I see him and long to be like him.

Then I will most want to be like him in the aspect of God's glory that give me spiritual life, forgiveness. So again, my friends, we need to pray and we need to pray daily that my desire and delight and thankfulness to the Lord and for the Lord might exceed my hurt, my sense of injury from others.

Because that will cause forgiveness to the Lord. If we have such a satisfaction, such a delight that the Lord knows our hearts, the Lord knows our circumstances.

[ 29 : 25 ] The Lord loves us. The Lord's put a spirit within us specifically to be able to reflect his character. That then will fray us to overflow in forgiveness to others.

The third and final motivation then that will make us want to desire kingdom, attitude, forgiveness is that the prayer itself expresses my desperate need of God's help daily.

Now, I want to come back again to praying without sinning. Dave did the bulletin this week and said, when I sent the sermon outline yesterday, there's an immediate text come back and said, do you mean praying without sinning or should it be praying without ceasing?

And I said, for better or for worse, it's praying without sinning. So here we go. We'll see how it works. It might be a disaster. But I wanted to be confrontational at that point. Because those two same things sort of jar really hard, don't they?

So here it goes. We need to pray daily because we fail daily. And because we depend on God's protection and help for our spiritual well-being.

[ 30 : 38 ] And that's primarily expressed in seeking forgiveness for myself and a forgiving spirit towards others. Now, when we pray for forgiveness, we need to be careful here.

We're not asking for forgiveness daily as a means of acceptance before God. That point in time forgiveness became ours when we were saved.

So when we're praying this prayer as Christians, we're asking as adopted children, children who know that we failed today, like we failed yesterday, that we've hurt our loving father today and yesterday and the day before.

And we just want the relationship to be right again. We want to make sure that the father will continue to overlook our sin as he has done in that point of time forgiveness when we became Christians.

And so it's right. We're praying to him every day saying, father, I've mucked up again. Forgive me again. And perhaps that explains verse 13, where it says, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

[ 31 : 49 ] So that at first glance seems like a nod request of God. Lead us not into temptation. Would God lead us into temptation? Don Carson suggests there's various alternatives to explain that.

But Don Carson, I think, is the best. At least I'm going with his anyway. So he's suggesting it's a figure of speech. A figure of speech that negates something to actually emphasize it.

And he references several points in the text in the gospel for Jesus actually does that thing. So we, for example, we might speak of some event and say, well, that event was on down there.

And you know what? Not a few people turned up. What we actually mean there, even though we use the negative, is that a huge crowd turned up. My dad used to be rather famous for saying after a lovely meal that mom cooked, well, there wasn't much wrong with that.

It was his weird way of saying that was delicious. So if you read that back in here, and I think it makes some sense, it would be something like this.

[ 32 : 58 ] Given our own failings, given our own weakness, given our inability to recognize and avoid the tricks and traps of the evil one, please lead us into circumstances and situations which will produce righteousness as we are protected and assisted by your powerful spirit working in us.

And if that's the case, then perhaps verse 13 is a prayer that we add to verse 12 in the sense that it's a prayer for ever increasing maturity. And what does maturity show like in kingdom people?

Well, maturity often shows in a greater knowledge of our sin. And so therefore, perhaps the mature prayer in verse 13 is knowing that our greatest temptation in this particular matter is to default to a

veneer of forgiveness on the outside.

Right words. While bursting inside with anger, bitterness and resentment and desire to lash out and hurt those who hurt us. Now, that view would actually fit well into chapter six, where Jesus has been talking about inside out religion that the Jewish religious leaders sort of prided themselves on.

It was all show. It was all words. It was all on the outside. And it wasn't an attitude of heart. And perhaps then the mature kingdom person will recognize and pray daily, urgently, recognizing that our greatest temptation is to default to religion.

[ 34 : 39 ] That is saying the right thing on the outside. I forgive. But it's only a veneer while bursting inside with anger, bitterness, resentment, and as I said before, a desire to lash out, to hurt those who hurt us.

So friends, here's the rub on this point. Let's not mindlessly sin as we pray these words by not being serious about forgiveness.

Let's not mindlessly sin as we pray these words by not being serious about forgiveness. Let's not be looking for loopholes to ease the challenge of this.

Let's not be looking for situations where we believe we can justify not forgiving someone. And how often do we do that? Let's not soften a principle the Lord has given us here without qualification in the context of what kingdom people will look like and how we will be different counterculture to the kingdom of this world.

And wouldn't that forgiving spirit make us, according to kingdom attitude, make us a radical counterculture? Friends, let's beg the Lord for a forgiving spirit, no matter the cost to us.

[ 36 : 05 ] Knowing it will honor the Lord. It will honor the Lord most by displaying the changing power of the gospel.

It will actually say to people all around us, the gospel actually works. How could that person possibly forgive that other person who's hurt them so badly? How could they forgive them so totally, so freely?

And resume relationship with them again? Oh, that's the changing power of the gospel. So I want to conclude with J.I. Packer's question from the bulletin article.

I would urge you to read that. It's taken from his book, I Want to Be a Disciple. And at the end of going through the Lord's Prayer, he turns them into a series of questions. And I want to pick up just one and leave it with you now.

Is there a person whom hitherto you have refused to forgive for what he or she did to you? I'll read it again.

[ 37 : 11 ] Is there a person whom hitherto you have refused to forgive for what he or she did to you? Will you ask the Lord this moment, this moment, to help you change your attitude and get right with that person?

Join me now as we pray. Lord, who can bear the teaching of your model prayer on forgiveness? Accept that, Lord, we come to it with the knowledge that we're not on our own. We have every reason to hate it and want to emulate it.

For we're loved and loved totally as your beloved children, adopted children. And Lord, we know that as we come to this challenge that you're not being unrealistic.

Because not only have you asked us to be like this, you've actually provided the resources to be like this in the Holy Spirit. Teaching us to say yes to righteousness. And no to sin.

[ 38 : 22 ] Teaching us to say yes to a forgiving spirit. And no to a mercilessness and a merciless lifestyle.

Help us, Lord, to hear your teaching. Help us to avoid casting around, finding ways to make it softer in the way we hear it. Rather, Lord, help us to cast ourselves before you and beg your mercy and grace to be able to live with such forgiving spirit that truly we can say, and others will say of us, that they reflect the glory of the Lord God.

Help us, we pray, on a daily basis. We desperately need your help. And we know, Lord, that when we pray these sorts of prayers, you delight to answer them. So help us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.