

WEEK SIX | PETITION FIVE

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

If you're praying the Lord's Prayer with a group of people, this petition is where it can get a little messy. Are we asking God to forgive our "*sins*," our "*trespasses*," or our "*debts*"? Each of these words gets at a different nuance of the same problem.

"*Trespasses*" helps us think about the ways we violate God's loving rule. While the language of "*debts*" hints at how entirely we are dependent on the extravagant and unmerited goodness of God. The Greek tells us that the words translated as "*forgive*" and "*debts*" in Matthew 6 are financial in nature; the petition is really a request to "*clear the books*." Imagine walking into a bank where you owed an enormous loan and requesting that your debt be erased. This petition might be the boldest one yet!

The previous petition requires us to recognize the fact that we don't have what it takes to live a full life. This petition acknowledges the reality that we don't have what it takes to live a righteous life. Old Testament scholar, Bruce Waltke, suggests that it is helpful to think of "*righteousness*" as right relationship in four directions:

- with God,
- with each other,
- with ourselves, and,
- with creation.

All the messes in the world—and in our own lives—comes down to failures in loving in one or more of those relationships. Just like sharing in the communion remembrance can help us be aware of our dependence on Jesus for all we need to live a full life, a regular practice of confession can help wake us up to our dependence on Jesus for all we need to live a righteous life.

And so Jesus leads us in making a confession in the first part of this position. "*Forgive us our debts*," we pray, confessing them and accessing their only remedy with one simple phrase. We are beggars at the bank requesting that our loan be wiped clean, praying with shocking boldness because Jesus said we should.

But what do we make of the second part of this petition: "*Forgive us our debts... as we forgive our debtors*"? This is the only part of the Lord's Prayer that seems to be in some way contingent upon us. And it's the only petition that Jesus amplifies after instructing his followers how to pray. "*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you*," he declares, "*but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*" (Matthew 6:14–15).

As I wrestled with this part of the Lord's Prayer, two things have come into focus.

First, I think Jesus is cautioning us not to place ourselves in what theologian John Stackhouse calls "the secular loop." In an earlier part of Matthew 6, Jesus warns against giving to charity or praying purely for show. In both cases, folks who have removed God from the equation and are seeking human approval have already "*received their reward*" (Matthew 6:2). In other words, if we want to operate solely on the human level and leave God out of it, he'll let us—at least for a while.

When we refuse to forgive, Stackhouse argues, we appoint ourselves ruler and judge, displacing God and once again choosing to operate on just a human level. That may be one reason why our own unforgiveness prevents us from receiving the forgiveness we ourselves so desperately need—we have cut the God who forgives out of the equation.

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This applies, by the way, even to withholding forgiveness from ourselves. “I’ll never forgive myself” is an atheistic statement, because it appoints the self as ruler and judge.

Second, this prayer is rooted in a longing for relational wholeness. Ruth Graham, wife of Billy Graham, was asked, “What is the secret to a lasting marriage?” Given the idealistic light in which we saw her husband, her answer surprised me: “Forgiveness.”

Jesus knows we have no shot at staying in relationship with one another without the power of forgiveness. He also knows unforgiveness hurts us more than the perpetrator. Someone put it this way: “Unforgiveness is like drinking poison yourself and waiting for the other person to die.” So it makes sense that Jesus, the Lover of our Souls, would include a deep concern for relational wholeness—with God, with each other, and with ourselves—into this petition.

BUT WHAT IF I CAN’T FORGIVE?

Maybe you’ve been treated so wrongly and been wounded so deeply that the idea of forgiving the perpetrator seems obscene. What should we do when forgiveness seems impossible? Many people have experienced horrific harm and lasting trauma.

Jesus knows this. He sees what happens and does not take it lightly. He knows it takes time to access painful memories and work through anger. Even after taking these steps we may still have ill will in our heart for the perpetrator. The inner sense of having truly forgiven someone can’t be forced—it’s a gift from God. Our part, after doing what we can to grieve the offense, is to take a step of faith to say, “I’m willing. I’m willing to be willing. I choose to release the person as best as I am able.”

God will do something beautiful with whatever opening we give him. Forgiveness doesn’t mean we place ourselves in harm’s way or remain in toxic relationships. No, forgiveness is a journey toward abandoning the judgment seat and being released from the bondage of resentment.

Arriving at the ability to forgive someone is a process—sometimes a slow and painful one. But where I used to think it was something God demanded of us, I see now that it is something he longs to give us. So we pray the first half of this petition, recognizing our deep need for right relationship. And then we pray the second half, giving God permission to cultivate forgiveness inside of us, however long it takes. As with all the other petitions, we’re asking God to do the good and beautiful things that only he can do.

LIVING INSIDE THIS PETITION

Consider praying through the Anglican liturgy for confession:

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.

For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,

have mercy on us and forgive us;

that we may delight in your will,

and walk in your ways,

to the glory of your Name. Amen.

Then read Psalm 103:10–12 as assurance of forgiveness:

[The Lord] does not deal with us according to our sins,

nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love

toward those who fear him;

as far as the east is from the west,

so far he removes our transgressions from us.