

“Forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors.”

Matthew 18:21-35

March 14, 2021

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

Today we continue our look at the Lord’s Prayer. Particularly “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Parents of a four-year old little boy, overheard their son praying the Lord’s Prayer. When he got to the part about trespasses or debtors, which we are considering this morning, he obediently repeated, “forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who throw trash in our baskets.” God forgiving us as we forgive others. That is the subject for today’s sermon. Let’s look at what Jesus has to say about forgiveness.

Read Matthew 18: 21-35

Today we move from the bread problem of last week’s phrase to the sin problem. The Lord’s Prayer has a way of getting down to bedrock. We cannot survive without bread. But just as our physical existence depends on food, so our personhood, our essential humanity, depends on relationships with other people and ultimately with God.

What is it that stands between us and God and other human beings? The obvious answer is our “sin”. The Bible is exceedingly rich in its vocabulary for sin. Sin is owing a debt, trespassing on forbidden ground, missing the mark, overstepping limits, straying from the way, setting up a stumbling block, disobeying, rebelling, acting unjustly, acting

treacherously, acting profanely, being twisted, perverse, evil, wicked, worthless, foolish.

A cause for continual confusion is that Christians today do not all use the same vocabulary for sin when they say the Lord's Prayer. Presbyterians and a few others say "debts" while other Protestants use the word "trespasses". Why is that? "Trespasses" is the translation in the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, a translation made by William Tyndale in the 17th century. Therefore, the Episcopal Church and other denominations that have their origin in the Church of England, use "trespasses". The Presbyterians, on the other hand, deeply influenced by the Westminster Assembly which convened in 1643, translated Matthew 6 from the original Greek language, using "debts" and "debtors". So, the difference is not theological but historical. Another way of translating this phrase in the Lord's Prayer is "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us." This makes it clear that we are not asking forgiveness merely for poor financial management or for trespassing on someone else's property. We are talking about sin in all its breadth and depth. Dr. Shirley Guthrie, professor of Reformed Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary and author of "Christian Doctrine", defines "sin" as a distortion of God's intentions for us and for our community. When we use the translate "debts", the metaphor makes it clear that we are personally responsible for our sins just as we are personally responsible for a debt we have contracted. And this "debt" jeopardizes our personal relationship with God and with other human beings.

So, in this matter of debt, or sin, which stands in the way of my relationship with

God and with other people, what do we ask God to do? Forgive us. To forgive us our debts is not to condone or forget. To be forgiven means that the debtor does not pay the debt because he or she cannot. And the creditor bears the cost because the creditor, out of love for the debtor, is willing to bear it. The past is not denied or ignored, but the future is opened in spite of the past. The slave in our parable this morning is released from his bondage and his debt pardoned. The meaning of the parable is clear: God absorbs the cost of our sins and says to us: “this is real, but it shall not stand between us. I will not have revenge on you. I will not exact payment. I will cancel it. Let us go on together.”

If God is willing to cancel the debt with us then we are called to cancel the debt with each other. This is indicated in Part Two of the Parable we have just read this morning. The forgiven slave will not forgive the one who owes him. Did you notice how even the language used by the slave and the one who owes the slave is identical. The forgiven slave cannot forgive someone even when the plea parallels his own. What hypocrisy! The slave asks of God what he is unwilling to grant himself. Indeed, it is truly easier to see the sin or debt owed by someone else than it is in our selves.

This past week I read an antidote involving Martin Luther and his colleague Philip Melancthon, who vexed his more ebullient friend by his quiet and virtuous ways. “For goodness’ sake, why don’t you go and sin a little?” cried Luther in exasperation. “Doesn’t God deserve to have something to forgive you for?” We would much prefer to demand payment for the debts of others than to consider our own debts.

I remember hearing a speech from years ago which Nelson Mandela gave at the White House; President Bush had invited him to be a guest. A reminder: Nelson Mandela spent about 26 years of his life in prison as a political insurrectionist for crimes of treason. As a leader in the African National Congress, he openly opposed South Africa's apartheid – the sinful separation of the races and the abusive economic and political discrimination of non-whites. As a result of his work to integrate South Africa, he was imprisoned as an insurrectionist. He was asked by one reporter to comment on how he felt the day he was released from prison - didn't he want revenge on the people who had robbed him of 26 years of his life. "No," he said. "As I walked across the prison yard toward freedom, I knew that I had to put my bitterness and hate for my captors behind me. I had to forgive the debt. Because, you see, to carry a desire for retaliation with me would mean that I would continue to be imprisoned. To be truly free, I had to forgive. Bitterness and hate imprison the soul like jail cells imprison the body." Nelson Mandela did not give up his work for justice, but he did let go of his hatred and bitterness which resulted from the abuse he endured. Mandela won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1993 and was elected President of South Africa in the country's first all-race election in 1994. Forgiveness does not forget or condone. It cancels the debt so that we are free to go on in our relationship with God and with other people. Our relationship with God and with other human beings are interwoven.

Barbara Brown Taylor, pastor of the Grace-Calvary Episcopal Church, in Clarkesville, Georgia, says in her sermon on this passage: "Staying angry with you is

how I protect myself from you. Refusing to forgive you is not only how I punish you; it is also how I keep you from getting close enough to hurt me again, and nine times out of ten it works, only there is a serious side effect. It is called bitterness, and it can do terrible things to the human body and soul. Resentment and bitterness cause an “arthritis of the spirit”.

Mary Gordon once wrote an essay on anger which appeared in the New York Times Book Review. She tells of a hot August afternoon when she was in the kitchen preparing dinner for ten. Although the house was full of people, no one offered to help her chop, stir, or set the table. She was stewing in her own juices, she said, when her 78 year old mother and her two small children insisted that she stop what she was doing and take them swimming.

They positioned themselves in the car, she said, leaning on the horn and shouting her name out the window so all the neighbors could hear them, loudly reminding her that she had promised to take them to the pond. That, Gordon said, was when she lost it. She flew outside and jumped on the hood of the car. She pounded on the windshield. She told her mother and her children that she was never, ever going to take any of them anywhere and none of them was ever going to have one friend in any house of hers. Mary Gordon then described how her anger and resentment changed her into someone she no longer recognized. “Sin,” says Mary Gordon, “makes the sinner unrecognizable; resentment deforms us. To forgive is to give up one’s own unassailable rightness.” Bitterness and resentment draw the sweetness from our lives. No one does that to us - we

do that to ourselves when we refuse to forgive.

Dr. Al Winn closes this chapter on forgiveness in his book “A Christian Primer” by saying: “The applications of our text are obvious, are they not? Personally, how forgiving are you? We talk about grace and we sing about grace, but do you live out of grace? Are you gracious toward other people, or do you spend a lot of energy thinking of what they “ought” to do? Do you find it hard to forgive people who don’t do what they “ought” to do? Is there a connection between that and your own inability to live in freedom and joy and celebration of the forgiveness and grace of God to you? “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” The more we flex these muscles of forgiveness the less likely we will be to suffer from arthritis of the spirit.