

Forgive Us Our Trespasses

"In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. 10 Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as *it is* in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. 13 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. (Matt. 6:9-13)

I once came across a fascinating piece about how one part of skyscraping construction was done. In the process of construction, rivets needed to be drilled in, but they needed to be heated-up till they were red hot. The rivets were placed into a keg beside a small furnace. When a rivet was needed, a worker would take one with the tongs, plunge it into the coals, and keep it there just long enough so it does not flake. How would you get a red-hot rivet to where it is needed? Believe it or not, the method was to throw it. Perhaps twenty or thirty metres away, perhaps above or below the heater, would stand the catcher.

The catcher stands on a narrow platform of loose planks laid over needle beams and roped to a girder near the connection upon which the gang is at work. "If he moves more than a step or two in any direction, he is gone". All the catcher has is a smallish, battered tin can, called a cup, with which to catch the red-hot steel.

The catcher faces the heater. He holds his tin can up. The heater swings his tongs, releasing one handle. The red iron arcs through the air, sometimes the distance of a short city block. And the catcher's tin can clanks.

When the rivet strikes the catcher's can, he picks it out with a pair of tongs held in his right hand, knocks it sharply against the steel to shake off the glowing flakes, and rams it into the hole, while two other workers come with the pneumatic hammer to quickly fasten it in place.

Now what would happen if a red-hot iron rivet weighing anywhere from 100gs up to nearly half a kilogram, should drop several stories below onto a passing car or a passing human head? There's no doubt it would pass through whatever was in its way. The mystery of why there weren't more falling rivets is puzzling. Once a foreman working on a construction job in New York was asked what would happen if a catcher missed a rivet. This was his only reply, and the only explanation for so few accidents: "Well," said the foreman, "he's not supposed to miss."

He's not supposed to miss. He is supposed to catch a red-hot rivet, thrown at high-speed, 100% of the time. If he does not, the results could be fatal. But the attitude was, he's not supposed to miss.

That might seem crazy to us. But in fact, the idea of missing the mark is something we should be very familiar with. Missing the mark is actually the meaning of the biblical word "sin". Except sin is not missing red-hot rivets across building sites. Sin is missing a much more important target: knowing and loving God. When we treat God or the works of His hands in ways that do not show the right humility, gratitude and love, we sin. That's the heart of sin: a proud, selfish misuse and abuse of God, the world and ourselves.

And the Bible says we have all missed the mark. The standard was a life of unbroken, unselfish communion with God. 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Rom. 3:23)

The consequences of missing that mark are not a red-hot rivet damaging a car or killing a pedestrian. The consequences of missing this mark are far more serious. To live in a world created by God, in which you were made in His image, but yet you live for yourself is to bring two consequences on yourself. One, in the future, judgement. To spend your life robbing God, insulting God, maligning God, ignoring God is to be a criminal who has multiple arrest warrants and never shows up in court. But one day, there is no more running. The day you die, you come face to face

with the one who gave you life as a gift, while you abused it like a selfish right. The judgement that follows is what a holy God does with a creature who hates Him. He puts that creature in the holy fire of His wrath, where the flames of justice cover the offence of sin.

The second consequence of missing the mark happens right now. It is the phenomenon we call guilt. Guilt is the universal experience of humans who know they have done wrong. Paul describes the conscience of all people all over the world their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*) (Rom. 2:15)

David describes the anguish of guilt in Psalm 32:3-4 When I kept silent, my bones grew old Through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah

The experience of inner disgust, of a distaste for yourself. The experience of wishing to run, and hide, and cover the shame you feel, to drown out that inner voice of accusation. The experience of feeling dirty, and deceitful, of being wrong, and lying about it.

I'm convinced that a very large proportion of what are called psychological disorders or problems are sourced in guilt. Jack Winslow, the head of a large British mental institution said, "I could dismiss half my patients tomorrow if they could be assured of forgiveness." But you see, in a secular world, where God is not allowed as an explanation for my inner life, where our emotional experience is explained chemically as nothing more than a matter of serotonin levels in your brain, guilt is outlawed. Guilt must be dissolved with self-esteem, guilt must be dissolved with blaming someone else, guilt must be dissolved with chemicals.

How much depression, how much psychotic aggression, how much bizarre behaviour, how much sexual perversion and sexual crime, how much perpetual anxiety and obsession is actually unresolved, unalleviated guilt?

We can lie to ourselves about who we are and what we have done, but we cannot change our nature. God has made us to have alarms going off in our soul when we sin. We are a race with alarms screaming at us from our childhood, and who spend our years trying to find ways to disconnect the alarm, or pretend its not there, or find ear-mufflers, or play something louder than the alarm.

You're not supposed to miss. But we have, and we do.

This is why the fifth petition of the Lord's prayer is so fundamental: Forgive us our sins. Forgive us our debts. Forgive us for missing the mark. Release us from your judgement; release us from our guilt.

In some ways, this request is our biggest need, and it's also our biggest ask. It's different from the others. It's the only request in the Lord's Prayer that Jesus comments on. It's the only request where we make a kind of conditional statement about what we will do. So, to properly understand this request, we first want to understand, what it means for God to forgive us. What are we asking God to do, exactly? What does it cost Him?

Second, we want to understand, what kind of forgiveness are we asking for?

Third, why is God's forgiveness of us contingent on our forgiveness of others?

I. What Forgiveness Means to God

Of all the things we say and ask for, this is the hardest. To understand this, we simply need to look at the words here. And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.

This is a financial image. Our relationship to God is like a debtor to a creditor. We owe God. We owe Him positively and negatively. We owe Him the way someone owes you money if you have lent it to him and he hasn't repaid it. God has lent us life, and health, and time, and ten thousand

gifts, and we have not repaid Him gratitude, love, and enjoyment. We owe Him negatively the way someone owes you who broke your equipment, or damaged your car, or stole your idea, or harmed your reputation. Every sin we have committed is an act of damage, theft, harm, desecration of God's glory.

Now in the eleventh century, a Christian by the name of Anselm wrote that we can determine the size of the debt by considering the honour of the one offended. If you offend someone of little honour or greatness, the offense or the injury is in keeping with that rather small honour. The greater the person in power, authority, and dignity, the greater the debt if you damage or offend that person.

So once you get to God, you are now dealing with someone whose beauty, honour, and dignity is not simply greater than others, like someone at the top of the heap. You are now dealing with someone whose dignity is infinite. What does it mean injure and offend Him? How great is your debt to Him?

It is an infinite debt. Now mark this. God does not release anyone from an infinite debt, simply because he or she asks. You would not release someone from a ten million Rand debt simply because he asked you nicely. Neither does God. The Bible is very clear that God does not do this.

by no means clearing *the guilty*, (Exod. 34:7)

Exo 23:7 For I will not justify the wicked.

Nahum 1:3 The LORD *is* slow to anger and great in power, And will not at all acquit *the wicked*. (Nah. 1:3)

One of the greatest misunderstandings of the Lord's prayer is to imagine that anyone can simply ask God, forgive me my debts, and God will or must do it.

There is only one way that a just God can release you of your debts, and that is if your debt has been paid.

Paul tells us how God does this:

24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, 26 to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:24-26)

Jesus Christ was God the Son. Being God, His dignity and worth was infinite. But He was truly man, and so could be a substitute for humans. So when a human of infinite worth is innocent, and bears the punishment of guilty humans, God can count the debt of those sinners paid, and the merit of Christ attributed to them. This is the cost of forgiveness. God the Father gave up His Son to death and shame. God the Son gave up His fellowship with the Father to be a sin-bearer. God the Spirit gave up the unbroken love between Father and Son.

God can forgive, not just people since Christ died, but all the people before Christ, on the basis of Christ's sacrifice. God can release you from your debt, because God has already paid God.

That means, it is offensive to God for people to ask Him for forgiveness without reference to Jesus Christ. It is a kind of profanity to expect God to clear your debt with no payment.

But that leads us to the next question.

II. What kind of forgiveness are we asking for?

In other words, we begin the prayer with the words "Our Father", meaning there is already some

kind of forgiveness that has taken place. But then we are asking for our sins to be forgiven. So are we forgiven or not?

To understand this, we need to recognise that the Bible teaches two separate but related kinds of forgiveness which a believer must experience. The first happens once, the second must happen continually.

The first kind of forgiveness we can call judicial forgiveness. Judicial means a judgement, a kind of justice that is done. On the day that you understand your position as a sinner, and are persuaded by God to forsake your sin, and repent of it, and turn to His Son as your forgiveness and only hope, on that day, the Bible says you are justified. Justification is where God clears you of your entire sin debt. Not just the sins you have committed till that day, but your sins past, present and future.

13 And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, 14 having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. (Col. 2:13-14)

It is not possible for God to impute only some of your sins to Christ, and impute some of His righteousness to you. On the day of your justification, it is all or nothing. All your sins imputed to Christ, and all of Christ's righteousness imputed to you.

So people ask, what happens if you think an evil thought a split second before you die in a car accident? The answer is, if you have been justified, then all your sins have been forgiven, and you go to heaven. In fact, a better way to see it is to ask the question this way, what happens if you don't love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, mind, and strength a split second before you die in a car accident? Well, the answer is, if you have been justified, then Christ's perfect love of the Father has been imputed to you, and you go to heaven.

So, in one sense, you can only pray "Forgive us our sins", if God has already forgiven you of your sins. Unless judicial forgiveness is true of you, there is no calling God Father, and no expectation that He will acquit you.

So, if that is true, why ask God for forgiveness more than once? The answer is that there is a second kind of forgiveness described in 1 John.

6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

7 But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. (1 Jn. 1:6-2:1)

John is not speaking to unbelievers who need the initial judicial forgiveness. He is speaking to people who claim to be in fellowship with God. Such believers don't claim they have no sin, nor do they claim they have never sinned. Instead, these people are continually bringing to God their sins, and God is continually cleansing them. Now if they have already been forgiven, what is He cleansing them from? He is cleansing them from the guilt in their consciences. He is cleansing them from the sense of disturbed communion.

This is not judicial forgiveness, this is Fatherly forgiveness. This is God calling on us to walk openly and honestly before Him, to agree with Him that sin is sin, to call it what He calls it. What God wants here is not some kind of work from us which will appease him. Our tears or

sorrow cannot atone for sin. God's anger has already been propitiated: the atonement made, his justice satisfied, the penalty paid, and our sins forgiven in Christ. A New Testament believer confesses because, according to 1 John 1:6-10, this is how we walk in the light.

Confession is calling sin what it is. In confession, we are doing more than admitting we have sinned. Plenty of people in the Bible did merely that – Judas, Pharoah, Saul, and Balaam – but they were not confessing in the biblical sense. Confession is agreeing with God that sin is *sinful*, that it is not worthwhile, that it is ugly. We confess that our values were perverted, that we loved what God hates and hated what God loves. We return to agreeing that sin is not true, good, or beautiful, and God's ways are. We justify God, as David put it in Psalm 51. God is right, and we are wrong. We blame ourselves, and agree that we were unjust in our esteem of what was good.

You see an illustration of this in John 13.

5 After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe *them* with the towel with which He was girded. 6 Then He came to Simon Peter. And *Peter* said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?" 7 Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." 8 Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." 9 Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also *my* hands and *my* head!" 10 Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash *his* feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." 11 For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, "You are not all clean." (Jn. 13:5-11)

We live in time and space, and we experience the moral defilement of our sins as they happen. God is beyond time and space, and has counted all our sins as forgiven. But He graciously cleanses us from the guilt and defilement we feel as we go along.

If you confuse these judicial forgiveness and fatherly forgiveness, it will lead to a false theology of conditional security, and it will destroy your assurance of salvation.

You will become one of those people who thinks the very first thing you should say when praying is, "Father, forgive me my trespasses" After all, if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me, right? Well, why should He hear your prayer of confession if He won't hear you? Clearly, God can hear the prayer of someone who has sinned. What that Scripture means is that it is wrong to act like you have not sinned, when you know you have.

Or you'll become one of those people who thinks this kind of teaching encourage loose living? Well, I don't know how biblical doctrine can encourage loose living. Truth never malfunctions. If you understand judicial forgiveness properly, it gives you the desire and confidence to seek fatherly forgiveness.

Donald Barnhouse once told the story of a man "who had lived a life of great sin and immorality, but had been converted and eventually had come to marry a fine Christian woman. He had confided to her the nature of his past life in just a few words.

As he had told her these things, the wife had taken his head in her hands and she drew him to her shoulder and kissed him gently and said, "John, I want you to understand something very plainly. I know my Bible well and therefore I know the subtlety of sin and the vices of sin that work in the human heart. I know you are a thoroughly converted man, John, but I know that you still have a sin nature and that you are not yet as fully instructed in the ways of God as you will be. The devil will do all he can to wreck your Christian life. He will see to it that temptations of every kind are put in your way and the day might come, John – please, God, that it never does – but it might come when you succumb to temptation and fall into sin.

And John, immediately the devil will tell you it's no use trying. You might as well continue on your way of sin. And above all, he'll tell you not to tell me because it'll hurt me. But John, I want

you to know that there is a home for you in my arms. When I married you I married your old nature as well as your new nature and I want you to know there's full pardon and full forgiveness in advance for any evil that ever comes into your life." Source: <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/2242/the-pardon-of-prayer-part-2>

Will that kind of forgiveness encourage sin or encourage obedience? Judicial forgiveness, full and free, encourages our seeking fatherly forgiveness for our sins along the way.

III. Why Must We Forgive Others?

12 And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. (Matt. 6:12)

14 "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 "But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matt. 6:14-15)

This is the only request Jesus comments on. He doesn't qualify daily bread by saying we must make sure we work, he doesn't qualify deliverance from temptation by saying we should not make provision to sin. But here Jesus add, forgive us, as we forgive. And then He takes the time to say, if you forgive men, their trespasses, God will forgive you yours, if you do not forgive men theirs, neither will God forgive you yours. It is a very simple if-then statement: the condition is forgive others, the result is forgiveness for you.

Why all this? And how can it be true, if what we have just seen is true? If God completely wipes out my sins at salvation, judicially forgives me of all my sins, and forgives me as a father experientially, how could God not forgive me if I don't forgive others? In two ways, that correspond to judicial and fatherly forgiveness.

First, if I do not forgive others; if bitterness lodges in my life, if I nurse permanent grudges, and carry around undying resentments, I may still be unsaved. I may still be one who has never experienced judicial forgiveness. When you have only one nature, the old nature, and have no living faith in God's control, then you must serve as the judge, jury, and executioner of everyone who wrongs you. So you walk around with photographic memory of wrongs done to you, and you punish those people with varying degrees of bitterness, resentment, coldness. But if you have been saved, then the sense of your cancelled debt to God fills you with lightness and freedom to extend the same to others. Once you have breathed in the air of the freeness of grace, you start exhaling that on others. That's the purpose of the parable Jesus told in Matthew 18 of the man who had been forgiven ten thousand talents, but would not forgive a hundred denarii. If you've truly felt the weight of the debt God has lifted from you, you can extend that to others. The one who will not and cannot forgive may be evidencing the fact that he has never truly experienced forgiveness. Forgiven people forgive.

Second, if I do not forgive others, if something or someone has come into my life where I cannot release the debt, I may be forfeiting a sense of God's fatherly pleasure. You may be truly saved, but if you allow some conflict, some relationship, some person to become a source of bitterness, God will send leanness into your soul. God will not lighten your conscience. You will experience deadness in your walk with God. Your quiet times and prayer times will dry up. Peter speaks in 1 Peter 3:7 to husbands to develop understanding of their wives, so that your prayers may not be hindered. Bitterness in a marriage, bitterness in any relationship will hinder prayers. This is why Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, **Mat 5:23** "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, **Mat 5:24** "leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Now is such a person in danger of losing salvation? No. But to live this way is to live under the chastening hand of God, where the childlike joy of grace evaporates.

I think the reason Jesus places this in there is to check our hearts. Are our hearts still amazed by grace? Grace is free, but it costs. When we are busy forgiving others, we are in touch with grace. We understand the cost of mercy. Someone has to pay, so that someone can cancel the debt. It reveals whether our hearts are in a place of humble gratitude, or whether we have become lofty in our own eyes, demanding our rights, turning God's forgiveness of us into something like a demand.

Regular forgiveness of others makes me check: Am I saved, and am I walking in tenderheartedness towards others.

You don't have to pray this prayer, if you are the catcher, and you have never missed. You have loved God wholeheartedly every moment of your waking life, and hit the bullseye of God's perfect standard all the time. If not, you need this prayer. Before you can pray, Our Father, He must become your Father through judicial forgiveness. Once that has happened, we should regularly pray, Father, forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.