

FORGIVE US OUR SINS AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST US

LORD'S PRAYER 6

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I suppose most of us at some stage in our lives have gone into debt. My first experience of debt was when I needed to borrow money to buy my first car, a 1985 VK Holden Commodore. After 5 years of boarding school, then seven years of seminary, when I arrived at Tamworth as a newly ordained pastor, I had less than a dollar to my name. The LLL gave new pastors a grant so that I didn't have to borrow all of the \$14 000 for the car. After 4 years of repayments, it was a great feeling when I paid off my debt.

The usual version we use for the Lord's Prayer comes from Luke 11. The version in St. Matthew, however, uses a slightly different set of words. In Matthew we ask for our debts, or obligations to be dismissed, or sent away.

I don't mind the word 'debt', because it suggests something we owe, something that has a real and definite cost. When God forgave my sins, it wasn't just a righteous judge declaring me "Not guilty!" as if my fate depended merely pronouncing a set of words. My debt was paid for in blood, and lots of it.

Don't you think that it is a wonderful feeling of freedom for God to cancel our debt. It can be just as wonderful when we cancel the debt of someone who has sinned against us. We are going to consider now these two aspects of forgiveness – God forgiving us, and we forgiving others – and then briefly how these two aspects are related.

I'll start with an average, curious, garden-variety toddler. Let's call him Bertie. At the beginning of the day young Bertie looks resplendent in his cute little one-piece blue and white outfit. The adults are pre-occupied with getting food and drinks ready, so Bertie is left to his own devices. As the day progresses, he manages to encounter all manner of messy and dirty things.

Look, there's a splatter of porridge on his chin! He's got dirt and squashed ants on his bottom and a smear of vegemite on his face, or is jam? There's dried grass in his hair, and his shoes and socks are soggy with mud. Somehow a small snail has found its way into his mouth. Oops! He's still chewing on the shell!

Bertie has had a great day, until his dad attempts to clean Bertie up. Bertie can't see what the problem is. He doesn't feel dirty. Anyway, what's wrong with a bit of dirt? It's not doing any harm! When his dad applies a wet washer to his face, Bertie wriggles and squirms.

Then he grabs the washer himself. He reckons that if he has to have a wash, he's old enough to do it himself! But rather than removing the gunk, all he does is redistribute it to different parts of his face and body.

In some ways, we are all like dirty Bertie. It is in our nature, and in the world, for us to encounter dirt. Usually, we don't even have to go looking for it, because it comes to us. There's a line in one of the Lethal Weapon movies when the character played by Renee Russo asks her partner played by Mel Gibson "Riggs, do you go looking for trouble?" to which he replies, "No, it pretty much knows where I am."

We are all stained with the dirt of sin. Yet, like Bertie in the story, when God tries to wash us clean, we often protest, "But God, we're not really dirty. Besides, everyone else is like this. And what's the problem anyway? A little bit of sin never hurt anyone! When God wants to take the sin out of our lives, we think we are old enough to do it ourselves.

Let's examine this natural way of thinking. Is that really true? Can I make myself clean before God? It's true that I may be able to hide my sin from others, disguising the dirt in my life. I may put clean white clothes over the top of the dirt underneath. I may point to other people whose dirt is more difficult to hide.

Romans 3:23 gives us the truth, when St Paul writes that "all are sinners and have fallen short of the glory of God." Beneath the virtue-signalling, the social media posts, the outward respectability, the good reputation, the standing in the community, the dirt and the guilt is still there.

We can't make ourselves clean before God because the dirt that is visible is just the expression of the inner dirt. Sin affects not only my behaviour. My behaviour is actually the result of the corruption sin has wrought in my thoughts, the way I view others and the world, my desires, my will.

Thus, the debt that I owe God is not a trivial amount that I can budget for, repaying what I owe over time by doing the odd good deed. Remember the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant? His debt was 10 000 talents. In today's terms that is tens of millions of dollars, impossible to pay off even in many lifetimes. All I can do, all we can do, is throw ourselves before God and plead for mercy.

Some would suggest that I am being negative, that saying that we are all sinners and that we can't save ourselves is damaging to people's self-esteem. "People don't want to hear about sin" I've been told. Well, that's completely true, in the same way that a sick person doesn't want to hear that the tests and scans show that they are not healthy, that there is a serious problem.

When modern secular countries reject the idea that we are accountable to God and that we are sinners in 'thought, word, and deed', then there is no forgiveness, no redemption, no reconciliation. Instead, you had better point the finger at someone else before they point the finger at you. If a biblical view of sin is dismissed as negative, look what the denial of sin has created. The sin and guilt is still there, although defined differently, but there is no chance of redemption. All the pain with none of the gain!

God offers mercy and forgiveness beyond our comprehension. Jesus came into the world not to be the perfect role model, but to save sinners. When he shed his blood in our place, all our sin, all our guilt, all our dirt was washed away. Our debt was cancelled. Because

our Father in heaven is merciful and loving, we can pray to him with complete confidence, asking for forgiveness.

Now to the second part of the petition, "...as we forgive those who sin against us." Sounds simple and straightforward, but like many things in practice it is more difficult for most people. Perhaps you can think of a person right now that you have not forgiven. This person wronged or hurt you in some way, and you can't quite let go of feelings of bitterness, ill-will, or the desire to see that person get what they deserve.

Why do many of us find it difficult to forgive? In my view, the underlying reason is our pride. I don't believe pride is always obvious. It's not just the head held high and the haughty demeanour looking down the nose on those not so fortunate to be me.

I also think that pride can co-exist in people who are very humble. That's why we find it difficult not to compare ourselves with others. It feeds our ego to note another person or group of people that we judge to be inferior.

As long as a husband is still hanging on to the time his wife lied to him, or the wife to the time her husband insulted her, then they can feel justified in feeling a little superior. To forgive the offender means putting yourself on their level, and our pride resists that.

Perhaps, then, when someone has offended you, you also have a little power over them. In my opinion, this is what is the reason for the descent into identity politics. Put crudely, whoever is the most offended and makes the loudest noise has the most power.

You also might know something about them that they don't want others to know. As long as you withhold forgiveness, you have a sense of power. To cancel their debt would be losing something of value. To reconcile means losing your advantage.

This is the way many people think. But withholding forgiveness for selfish reasons is neither Christian nor sensible, is it? At best, when there is no forgiveness, your relationship with that person will be a shadow of what it could be. At worst, that void in the heart is filled with anger, bitterness, hate, and the desire for revenge. I once met a person who had nursed a grievance over an incident that took place more than 60 years ago. As a result, they had spent most of their life being angry, and lost most of their friends and family in the process.

Instead of a lifetime during which bitterness tainted everything, they could have experienced the wonderful sense of freedom and peace that comes with cancelling the offender's debt. How sad that the prison walls that they thought they were creating to punish the offender grew to imprison them as well!

Lastly, to the third part of this sermon, the relationship between the two aspects of forgiveness. Does God forgive me because I forgive others? Does God forgive me because I forgive others? No! God forgives me because he is merciful. That's what God's nature is.

Do I forgive others because God forgives me? Yes! The wording in the Lord's Prayer conveys accurately the right and wise relationship. Just as God forgives our sins, we forgive the sins of others. The point of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant was that the mercy of

the king in forgiving a vast debt should have inspired the servant to forgive his fellow servant who owed him a small amount.

When we cancel the debt of someone who has sinned against us, we receive freedom for ourselves, and grant freedom to the one who sinned against us. We can afford to be forgiving and to swallow our pride, because our heavenly Father, in his mercy, forgives our debt. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Amen.