

Communion

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[0 : 0 0] to the passage that we read in Matthew's Gospel in chapter 6, very familiar words, the Lord's Prayer, what we often describe or call the Lord's Prayer, the disciples' prayer really, taught by the Lord for them as they sought instruction in this matter. And of course, we too are instructed as we read and as we consider this prayer. Our concern this evening will be to think of just one of the petitions that we find in this prayer in verse 12, forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. This evening we will be remembering and celebrating what God has done to secure our forgiveness, what God has done to make it possible for us to pray this prayer with any confidence. And of course, we can pray it with complete confidence. Forgive us our debts, forgive us our sins. How is it that we can be so confident that

God will indeed answer and forgive us as we pray? This evening we will be remembering why it is that we can pray in this manner. So, I want to spend some time considering this petition. Now, the language that is used in Matthew's gospel is the language of debts, forgive us our debts. Now, we know that debt is a serious matter. Many of us will be familiar with what it is to have a debt, even in the realm or particularly in the matter of some kind of financial debt. Many folk here will have a mortgage, a loan that you have secured from the bank that you're paying off. You know how important it is to keep up your payments and the consequences of not doing so. Perhaps others will have an overdraft, some other loan for some purpose or other. There's been much in the news recently of these payday loans and the very serious consequences of those who take out these loans and then find they're unable to pay and the huge interest that accrues on these loans. And I think we're all familiar with and conscious of the fact that debt is a serious matter. Some of us as well perhaps have had the experience, the very pleasant experience that comes with paying off a debt. Maybe you've had a debt that over a period of time, months or years, depending on the nature or the magnitude of the debt, but you've come to the point where you've been able to pay it off. And I'm sure you can remember the occasion and what a good feeling it was, what a great relief to know that that debt had been canceled and was no longer hanging over you. Debt, and I don't think we need to labor, the point is something that needs to be taken very seriously. And if we don't, if we're careless in the matter of our debts, then there will be consequences and they can be very unpleasant ones. Well, the verse that we're thinking about this evening uses this language of debts, it speaks of debts that we have. Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. And it is clear that the debt in question is a debt with a God. And it is most assuredly a debt that we must treat very seriously. We can't ignore this debt, nor can we wish it away.

And what I want to do this evening is to think about this petition under three headings that I think reflect truths that are either explicit or implicit in the petition. First of all, to notice that the petition in the prayer recognizes a problem. There is a problem that needs to be dealt with. We've already highlighted what the problem is. It's this problem of a debt that needs to be paid. So, that's a problem that very clearly is identified by the petition in the prayer. But the petition also identifies and recognizes that there is a solution to this problem. Forgive us our debts. Debt has a solution. This debt that we have with God has a solution, and its solution is forgiveness. So, there is a problem. We need to recognize what the problem is. We need to recognize the gravity of the problem. But thank God there is a solution, and the solution is God's forgiveness. But there's another element in the petition, an intriguing element, but an important element. It is what we might call a condition.

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. Maybe the language of condition is one we're a little uncomfortable with in the light of the overall teaching of Scripture concerning the forgiveness that we receive from God. And yet, it's difficult to shy away altogether from the word condition, however that's understood, especially in the light of what Jesus went on to say as He

explained really that petition. There in verses 14 and 15, for if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. It really couldn't be much clearer than that. So, I think it's legitimate to use the language of condition, even if we do need to explain just what we mean by that and what we don't mean by that. But that will come in due course. So, these three elements that we find in this petition, a problem that is identified, a solution that is provided, but also what we are calling condition, perhaps for want of a more suitable word. Let's think then of these three elements in turn. First of all, what is the problem? Well, the problem clearly is our debt with God. Now, to give us some light on this matter, there is, I think, help in looking at how this same prayer is recorded for us in Luke's gospel. And if we just quickly turn to Luke's gospel, and in chapter 11, and in verse 4, and we'll just focus in immediately on the part of the prayer that we're concerned with this evening. So, it's very evident that this is the same prayer. And yet, the language that we find with regard to this petition is slightly or somewhat different.

[6:52] Luke chapter 11, and verse 4, we read, Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. So, it's very clear that it's the same petition, but there is this difference in terms of the language used. In Matthew, we have the language of debt, and in Luke, we have the language of sins. And so, I think it's reasonable to conclude that these two words are being used, we might say, synonymously. And yet, though they are being used synonymously, as we think of the two words, each of them contributes something to our understanding of the problem. So, they're being used, really, to identify the same problem. But as we think of the two words that are different words, and think of the emphasis that each brings together, they give us greater light or greater insight into what the problem is all about. First of all, if we think of the word used in Luke's gospel, the word sin, the word that is used there is a word that comes from a verb, which means to miss the mark. There are different words for sin in the New Testament, but the one that is being used in Luke's gospel, in recording the Lord's Prayer, is this particular word that, as I say, derives from this verb, which means to miss the mark or to fall short. And the idea is that sin is falling short of God's requirement of us. And God, who is altogether perfect and altogether wholly demands of us, perfect obedience, and we fall short. We miss the mark. We don't achieve that.

Even if we try, with all our might, we all are conscious that we miss the mark. We fall short. We have all, without exception, broken God's law. And we do so, of course, in a multiplicity of ways. This language of falling short is language that we also find, as Paul writes to the Romans, all have sinned and fall short, fall short of the glory of God. So, the word sin identifies our problem as being those who fall short, who have missed the mark. But if that's all that we knew, perhaps our response to that would be, as sinners who maybe don't appreciate the gravity of our sin, our response might be, well, yes, okay. I concede that I do miss the mark. I concede that I fall short in some way.

Our perception of how far short we fall might be quite different, depending on how we consider ourselves, with or without reason. But we might say, okay, I do fall short. I'm not perfect. I don't always do what I ought to do. I recognize that's true. But we might say, or many might say, but is that really such a big problem? You know, does it really matter that we're not perfect?

After all, nobody's perfect. Is that not a phrase that we hear so often? Well, nobody's perfect. When maybe in some way we fall short, we say, well, nobody's perfect. And we use that really as a kind of justification. Well, you can't expect me to do everything perfectly because I'm not perfect.

[10:22] Nobody's perfect. We all miss the mark. Is that really such a big problem? We're talking about the prayer and this particular petition identifying a problem. But the question might be, well, is it really such a big problem that we sin when sin is understood as missing the mark?

That is where the other word that is used in Matthew's gospel in our text is helpful because the word that is used in Matthew's gospel really serves to make it very clear, if we were in any doubt, that it is a problem. It is a problem because by falling short, by missing the mark in terms of God's demands upon us, we incur this liability. We are in debt with God. Forgive us our debts. Sin is a problem. And the word debt carries the idea of our obligation to answer for missing the mark. It does matter. It is a serious concern. Sin is a problem and our unpaid debts alienate us from God. Indeed, if they remain unpaid, the separation that is created by our sin and by our debt will be eternal. And that is a serious matter. The problem is serious and we have no means or resources with which to pay our debt.

We began by talking about the debts that we can incur just in life. Now, generally speaking, if we do incur a debt, we do so on the assumption or certainly in the expectation that we will be able to meet that obligation, that our future income will be sufficient to pay the debt. And that's why we feel able to incur the debt. Indeed, that's why we're given the money on the assumption that we'll be able from our resources to meet that obligation. But in the matter of our debt with God, it's a very different thing.

We don't have any resources. We have no spiritual capital or income that we can use to pay the debt. We can't do it. No religious ritual in which we could participate, no moral reformation that we might be able to secure in our own lives will do. It won't address the root of the problem. Even if we were able to reform our lives in such a way that from this day forward, we were perfect, which clearly we can't do.

But even, let's just speculate, perhaps foolishly, let's just imagine we were able to do that. It still would do nothing to answer for incurred debt thus far, our historic debt that has been accrued by our missing the mark, by our sin. So, we have a problem. The problem is that we sin, that we fall short, that we miss the mark. Is that a serious thing? Yes, it is a serious thing. Why?

[13 : 26] Because in so doing, we incur a debt with God, a debt that we cannot pay, and a debt that separates us from God. Well, that's a problem, very briefly outlined. But the petition that we are considering also recognizes, and again we say it, and we don't need to apologize for saying it, thank God, the petition, that there is a solution. Forgive us our debts. And the solution is that the one who is owed, the creditor, He is the one who cancels the debt. He forgives us our debt. God forgives us and releases us from the penalty of our sin, from the consequences, the obligations that come from our sin.

We know as we read through God's Word, the Bible, we find God Himself who makes Himself known in the Bible. We discover what He's like as we read what He Himself reveals of Himself in and through the Bible.

We repeatedly find God presenting Himself as a forgiving God, as one who forgives sinners.

Indeed, He presents Himself as the only one who ultimately and definitively can forgive sin. As we turn to the New Testament, we are reminded of the occasion when Jesus healed the man who had been let down through the hole in the roof. And we remember what happened when not only did He grant this man a healing from His physical ailment or disability, but also He forgave his sins. We remember how His enemies, the religious establishment, as they looked on in horror at His pretension to forgive sins.

And how did they respond? Who can forgive sins but God alone? And of course, they were right. They were dead right in recognizing that only God can forgive sins. As we look to the prophets, and as we think perhaps particularly the words that we find in the prophet Micah, who is a God like you who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of His inheritance?

[15 : 56] You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy. Who is a God like you who pardons sin and forgives transgression? God is the God who presents Himself as one who forgives sins, indeed, as the only one able to forgive our sin, to cancel our debt. Well, it's one thing to state that to be true, and we state it on the authority of God's own Word. But it is reasonable to pose the question, how is that possible? How is it possible for God to forgive our sin? How does that work, to put it another way? How can God simply forgive us in such a way that it might appear that sin doesn't really matter? It's not really that difficult a matter to deal with because God just forgives us.

Yes, we sin. Yes, we need a solution. The solution is forgiveness. And hey, presto, God forgives us, and all is well with the world. Is it possible that God, in that way, in that seemingly very easy way, can deal with the problem of our sin? Well, of course, He doesn't deal with it in that very easy and cheap way. Sin does matter because of who God is. God is a holy God, that we also know because He reveals Himself as such in the Bible. He is a just God, and His holiness and justice are such that sin cannot be ignored. God can't simply turn a blind eye. When God forgives sins, it's not simply a matter of saying, well, I'll just pretend it didn't happen, or I'll just turn a blind eye in a way that we might do. If we might see, perhaps in our own family or our children, and they're guilty of maybe a minor misnabeener, at least in our eyes, a minor one, and well, we just turn a blind eye. That's something we can do. God doesn't do turning a blind eye. God can't turn a blind eye. Now, it's a solemn thing to say of God that He can't do something, but I think we can confidently say that with regard to this matter. God can't turn a blind eye. He can't just say, well, that's okay. I love you so much. You've sinned, but that's okay. It doesn't matter. He can't do that because that would be

inconsistent with His very character, and God will never, indeed, God can never do anything that would be contrary to His own nature, to His own character as a holy God, as a just God. Sin must be punished.

The anger of God that is the result of our sin and our rebellion against Him, that anger must be satisfied. It must be quenched. Again, this is a matter that today many are uncomfortable with, but the teaching of Scripture is so clear on the matter that we cannot avoid it.

Well, we are not able to pay the price of our sin. We are not able to satisfy God's anger. So, how then can it be done? Well, the teaching of the Bible is very clear. The teaching of the gospel is very clear that God Himself has done so in the person of His own Son, Jesus. This evening, we will be remembering and celebrating the manner in which that was done, the manner in which God Himself paid the price for our sin, secured forgiveness for our debts, of how God Himself appeased His own anger. He did so in the person of His Son. Jesus acted as our substitute. He assumed our identity. He took our punishment and bore God's judgment by dying on the cross. God, the offended one, the one who was owed, the one to whom the debt was due, God in Jesus quenched His own irrighteous anger as Jesus died. In the words of John, as a propitiation for our sins. So, we can ask again the question, how can God forgive us? Yes, it's clear that that is the answer to our problem of debt. Implicit, explicit indeed in the petition, forgive us our debts. Forgiveness is the answer. It's the solution.

But how can God forgive us? Well, He can forgive us because the bill's been paid by Jesus. God cancels the debt. He pardons us. But there's more. There's much more. This evening we can't consider how much more there is. But certainly we can say this, that in what God does for us, not only are we pardoned, not only is our debt pardoned, not only are we declared not guilty, but we are also positively made righteous. We are credited with Christ's righteousness, as well as receiving the pardon that our sins need. We think of what Paul says in that respect as he writes to the Romans. And in chapter 5 and in verse 19, for just as through the disobedience of the one man, the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man, the many will be made righteous. Not only forgiven, not only pardoned, but made righteous. And all of what God does for us is reasonable in the light of what God has done.

[21 : 49] Indeed, I think this is the import, really, of the language that John uses. In 1 John chapter 1 and verse 9, we're familiar with the verse, if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness, especially where John says that He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins. There's something very important there. John is saying that the forgiveness we received is grounded in God's justice. Now, that seems something strange.

How can it be just for God to forgive a sinner in such a manner? Well, it's just because Jesus has paid the price. Jesus has taken the punishment. Had He not done so, it would be an act of injustice to forgive us if no price had been paid. But given that the price has been paid, it is indeed just for God to treat us as He does. God doesn't set aside His justice somehow as if His justice is set aside in favor of His love. That's not what happens at all. God doesn't have to choose and say, well, I love them so much, so I'll just have to set aside my justice. No, not at all. Justice and love are satisfied in the work of Jesus Christ as He died in our place at Calvary. So, God forgives us. How do we respond to God's forgiveness? Sometimes when perhaps folk hear of the gospel message and how it is that God is ready and able to freely forgive us, however grievous our sin, however deep-seated our sin, there's nothing that we can do, nothing that we can bring in return for it. Some respond, it all seems too easy.

Of course, at one level, it is true that for us as sinners, there is a sense in which it is easy if we would but recognize what God has done and lay hold of it. But of course, even as we recognize it in a sense that it is easy, we also at the same time recognize that it is also very costly for God.

Our forgiveness was secured at the cost of the blood of Jesus, the death of Jesus, God's own Son. We are forgiven. What happens to our forgiven sins? Well, we don't need to do more than just remind ourselves of the language of Scripture that speaks so vividly and so beautifully of what happens to forgiven sin. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Or the words of God recorded in the prophet Isaiah, I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. But again, God speaking through Micah, you will again have compassion on us. Or rather, Micah addressing God in this way, you will again have compassion on us. You will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. God forgives, and indeed He forgets, for I will forgive their wickedness and will

remember their sins no more. Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. Is this a prayer that you have prayed?

Indeed, is this a prayer that you continue to pray as we would daily seek bread to give sustenance to our bodies? So, we must daily ask that God would forgive us our debts, that He would forgive us our sins. That involves us confessing our sin in seeking and requesting that forgiveness from God, and as we do, turning away from our sin, and that we must do daily. So, there's a problem, there's a solution, but then finally let's just notice that the verse also speaks of what we're calling a condition. [25 : 58] The verse is clear. Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors, or as we forgive our debtors. Jesus is emphatic on this matter as He teaches the disciples how they are to pray.

Jesus is clear that forgiving others is to be seen not only as a duty or obligation, it is certainly that, but in some real sense, a condition for our forgiveness or a requirement that we might experience and continue to experience God's forgiveness. We've already read in that regard verses 14 and 15, which are so clear, and so clear that it's difficult for us to wriggle our way out of the reality that Jesus is recognizing here as to this requirement that is placed upon us, that as we are forgiven, so we are to forgive others. Now, we do have to be clear. We're not saying that our forgiving others is somehow meritorious. We're not saying that Jesus is saying that, that somehow as we forgive others, that is a good work of ours that somehow makes us merit God's forgiveness. That is certainly not what we're saying, and certainly not what Jesus is saying. It's very clear as we look to the whole teaching of Scripture that that is not what is going on. But we certainly can say that as we forgive others, we remove an obstacle to our enjoyment of God's forgiveness, and indeed an obstacle to requesting

God's forgiveness if we are already Christians. And the prayer here clearly is a prayer that is primarily useful for, and designed for, if you wish, those who are believers. It was for the disciples. It was for those who were able to address God as our Father in heaven. And those of us who are, by grace, Christians, and as we recognize our continuing need of forgiveness, we need to come to terms with this clear teaching of Jesus, that we will be granted that forgiveness in the measure that we are willing to forgive others. With what authority, with what sincerity could we come to God and ask Him to forgive us if at the same time as we ask, we are denying others' forgiveness? And so it's important for us, it's important for us always, and perhaps especially as we would gather around the Lord's table, to just ask ourselves the question, if we have failed to forgive, do you feel unable to forgive somebody?

Maybe it's a parent, maybe it's a husband or a wife, son or a daughter, a friend, a colleague, somebody who has done you harm, who has wronged you, who has offended you, who has let you down in one way or another, maybe in a very serious way, and it is difficult for you to forgive them, that God would grant you the power to forgive. That is something that God graciously gives us.

[29 : 05] He gives us grace and the power to forgive those who have wronged us, and thank God He gives it to others that they might forgive us. To be a Christian is not just about peace with God. Yes, that is indeed a great blessing of being a Christian, that we come to experience peace with God, but that's not all that we are to enjoy and experience. We are also to experience peace with one another, and that peace cannot be if we fail to forgive. If you won't forgive, if you refuse to forgive, if despite all the clear indication that this is something that you must do, what can be said of such who would refuse to forgive?

Thomas Watson, who was a Puritan, who wrote and ministered in the 17th century, addresses those who would refuse to forgive and yet claim to be Christians with these words, He that cannot forgive, His grace is counterfeit, His faith is fancy, His devotion is hypocrisy.

Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. So, this evening it is right that we should recognize that we all have a problem, that we are sinners, and that sin incurs a debt with God, but celebrate and rejoice in the fact that a solution has been provided. We can be forgiven, and to know something of what was involved in that solution being provided for us, but also to remember that as we enjoy that forgiveness, that is this duty imposed upon us, that we would forgive others, and that God would grant us the grace so to do. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, You bouff que tu clic mass

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