

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
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**“The Lord’s Prayer, Part IV”
Jeremiah 14:7-9
Matthew 18:21-22**

**Third Sunday of Lent
March 24, 2019**

Jeremiah 14:7-9

“Though our iniquities testify against us, act, O Lord, for your name’s sake; for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against you. O you hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble, why should you be like a stranger in the land, like a traveler who turns aside to tarry for a night? Why should you be like a man confused, like a mighty warrior who cannot save? Yet you, O Lord, are in the midst of us, and we are called by your name; do not leave us.”

Matthew 18:21-22

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

“The Lord’s Prayer, Part IV”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Well friends, we’re at the halfway point in our series on the Lord’s Prayer. So far, we’ve looked at verses nine through eleven of Matthew’s recording of the prayer: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread...” In seminary we had daily chapel services. These services were lead by students and faculty alike. Now, Princeton Seminary, like so many others, is very welcoming of Christians from all denominations. In fact, Presbyterians only make up a third of Princeton’s students. Fridays in seminary chapel were reserved for Communion. And like we do here, we said the Lord’s Prayer as part of the Communion liturgy. It’s quite beautiful to hear the many voices in unison offering these petitions to God. Until we get to our petition for today. In the middle of this unison prayer a cacophony occurs when Reformed students say, “forgive us our debts...” and all the others say, “forgive us our trespasses...” So, which of these options, “debts” *or* “trespasses,” is the correct one? Well, the answer is quite simply either. Both “debts” *and* “trespasses” are accurate synonyms for the word “sins,” which is exactly what Jesus is talking about here.

We use debts because when the New Testament speaks of sin, one of the ways it does so is in terms of indebtedness. When we sin, we put ourselves into debt to God. Therefore, when we ask for his forgiveness, we are asking that he forgive our debt. There are two ways of understanding debt. The first is monetarily. Let’s say a little kid goes to the grocery store, picks up a candy bar, and takes it to the register. The cashier scans it and says, “That’ll be two dollars (It’s a king-size Reese’s).” When the kid hears this, he starts crying and tells the cashier that his mom only gave him one dollar. Well, if you’re standing in line and feel sympathetic for this kid, you might say to the cashier, “Let me satisfy this young child’s debt,” so you take out one dollar from your own pocket and pay the cashier. Since the money is legal and there’s no trouble afoot, the cashier would have to accept this payment and the child can enjoy that Reese’s bar.

But imagine a different scenario. Upon hearing that this candy bar is two dollars, the child snatches it from the cashier and takes off toward the exit. He happens to run right into a police officer just as the cashier yells, “Stop, thief!” The officer would bring the child back into the store and ask the cashier what happened. She would explain that the kid just stole the candy bar. Once again, you happen to witness this and again you feel sympathetic for this child, and so you say to the officer, “Please don’t arrest this kid.” Then to the cashier, “Here, let me pay for this candy bar.” In this scenario, the cashier does not have to accept your money because now the child has a moral debt, and not just a monetary debt. This illustration shows us the importance of the distinction between monetary and moral indebtedness. When we sinned, we fell into a moral debt to God; one we simply cannot pay our way out of. Jesus paid our debt at the cross, but because it was a moral debt, the Father was not required to accept the Son’s payment. However, in his mercy and grace, God allowed Jesus to pay our moral debt for us.

Not only are we indebted to God, this is a debt of unimaginable proportion. The \$2 debt in our illustration is trivial. Most of us could find a way to piece together enough money to cover a \$20,000 debt. But a \$22 trillion-dollar debt is something no individual, or country, could ever repay. Now, our moral obligation to God is far greater still than a \$22 trillion-dollar debt! Now why is this? Why is it that we owe God vastly more than our national debt? The reason is because God commanded us to be holy, just as he is holy; to be perfect, just as he is perfect. With just one sin, one trespass, we fall hopelessly short of that standard, placing ourselves in a position of indebtedness we can never escape. The Apostle Paul, in speaking to the church in Rome, says, “Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? ...But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.” Paul is saying, every day that a person lingers in this life without falling on his knees and asking God to forgive his debts, he is “storing up wrath.”

You see, the problem is when we see God’s mercy and patience, we convince ourselves that since we’ve escaped his judgment thus far, we’ll escape it forever. I skipped over a verse in that Romans passage only to highlight it here. Romans 2:4 says, “Do you presume on the riches of God’s kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that his kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” Or as the Apostle Peter reminded us a few weeks ago, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you...that all should reach repentance.” God hasn’t opened the floodgates of his judgment yet because he wants all of us to have the opportunity to repent of our sins. But that’s not necessarily good news. The longer he delays, the more entitled and self-righteous we become, convincing ourselves that we’re in the clear. Here, Jesus loves us enough to warn us and teach us to beg God for forgiveness. This is why he instructs us to offer this petition.

I’m still not sure if we’ve resolved the initial question. Why are we even indebted to God in the first place? Does God hate us or something? I thought we are his beloved creatures made in his image? Indeed, God does love us. The Scriptures even teach us that God is love. Jonathan Edwards, the great Puritan Calvinist provides for us the answer. Edwards liked to compose sermon’s with provocative titles. A sermon he once preached was called “Men Naturally Are

God's Enemies." Very provocative. In this sermon he identifies a few aspects as to why we are naturally hostile toward God. I'll summarize four of them for you today.

First of all, God is holy and we are not. I've said this before, and it bears repeating. Without the standard of holiness established by God, there would be no way that we could understand our own unholiness before him. The Law is there to remind us that we cannot fully follow it; and yet, we are still instructed to do so. God's perfect holiness and our sinfulness combine to create a breach that *we*—let me repeat that—a breach that *we* cannot close; and therefore, we are at enmity with God. It can be closed, but only by the mediating work of the Savior, who offers forgiveness for our sins.

Second, God is omniscient. Because of who he is, God sees and knows all things. We can hide our private sins from one another, but we cannot hide them from God. I was speaking with one of our members in this past week, and our conversation surrounded the subject of sin. We discussed how sometimes it seems some Christians are very sure and quick to condemn such-and-such activity as a sin. And indeed, there are things that are sinful and we know they are sinful because of Scripture; but the reality is, we all sin. Spotlighting the sins of others only allows our sins to remain in the shadows. But one day, each and every one of us is going to stand before the bar of God's justice and listen to the moments in our life where we sinned against him. I'm going to have to give account for my life. Not your life, not my children's life, but my life and mine alone. And only I can stand before that throne, not you or anyone else in my stead, only I can stand there and say whether or not my sins were covered by the blood of Christ. That truth makes us hostile to God.

Third, God is omnipotent. Think of how disarming God would be if he were holy and omniscient, but impotent, without power and might. We'd have nothing to worry about. But not only is God powerful, he is all-powerful. There is no force on earth, under earth, or above earth that can ever subdue him. Man is hostile to God because he is afraid of God. And more so today. We live in a time when we don't like entities having sovereign authority over us. Many of us hate the notion of big government, and all of us would despise a sovereign monarch. We make ourselves enemies of God when we refuse to recognize his power and authority. And indeed, if he were to put forth even a fraction of his strength, he would prevail. Nothing can defeat the power of God, and the sinner doesn't like that.

Lastly, God is immutable. I've mentioned this before, also. He does not change. Edwards noted that God's immutability means that not only has he been absolutely holy from everlasting to everlasting, there is no hope that he will ever stop being holy. He will never cease to be anything other than perfectly holy. And that, again, puts us at odds with him. He is never, ever going to change and conform to our way of life. No matter what the laws of the land are, no matter what the constitutions of denominations read, no matter the whim of society, God will not conform to them. It is we who need to change and conform to him. And our distaste for that puts us in rebellion against him.

All of this, and the thrust of Edwards' sermon, is that God is a formidable opponent. While God is love, he is also formidable. When we are hostile toward him, when we are estranged from him,

we've entered into a battle we cannot possibly win. The only way the battle will end positively for us is by our unconditional surrender to him. That's exactly what we do when we get on our knees and say, "Forgive us our debts." We are giving up the fight against God. We are saying, "God, we cannot fight you. We don't want to be estranged from you. We want to be restored to you. We want to love you and we want you to love us in spite of our hostility toward you." Praying the fifth petition of the Lord's prayer is a sue for peace.

That's the answer to the "why" question, "why are we indebted to God?" I want to close by talking about the "what" question, "what is forgiveness?" Very often we hear and teach that one should forgive and forget. This phrase is taken out of the context of Scripture. In Jeremiah 31:34, God is speaking of the Israelites returning to him in repentance, and when they do, he "will forgive their iniquity and...remember their sin no more." Or in Psalm 103:12, the Psalmist proclaims that "as far as the east is from the west," God will "remove our transgressions from us." But we have an issue. How can God forget our sins if he is all-knowing and unchanging? Well, this answer is also quite simple. He doesn't forget them in the sense that we might forget our keys or why we keep fighting with our cousins. Rather, God remembers our sins *against us* no longer. Though he's fully aware of our transgressions, he doesn't remind us. He doesn't call them to mind. He doesn't hold them out against us. That's the essence of forgiveness. Stop bringing up the past wrongs. Forgive and forget means God stops recalling our forgiven transgressions. And this petition calls us to imitate that.

Not only does Jesus tell us to pray "forgive us our debts," but he adds, "as we forgive our debtors." Now, I will say, I don't think Jesus is saying we should be forgiven in proportion to our forgiving. Indeed, I hope not, for that is a frightening condition. If this condition is to be taken literally and God is to forgive me in exact proportion to the manner in which I distribute forgiveness, then I'm done for. I just cannot be as forgiving as God. None of us can. I think and I hope this prayer is more an aspiration rather than a condition. For Jesus teaches us to aspire to mirror and reflect the kindness of God. His teachings are clear. We are forgiven much and therefore we should have a deep spirit of charity toward others. How can we refuse to forgive someone who has offended us when the whole reason we are even able to live in the kingdom of God is because we have received forgiveness? Forgiveness is the only way we can stand in the presence of God. And since he is willing to forgive us when we come to him in repentance, so, too, should we be willing to forgive.

As we read this morning, we should be gracious toward others as God has been gracious to us. If someone does sin against us and he or she acknowledges that guilt, repents, and apologizes, we are bound by duty to forgive. Jesus said, we are to forgive our brothers and sisters seven times? Not "seven times, but seventy times seven." If they keep repenting over and over again, we have to keep forgiving over and over again, because that's the basic relationship we have with God. This petition reminds us of the depth of our sinfulness, our need for daily confession, and our need for forgiveness, but also of our Christian duty in our horizontal relationships. While our sins have been paid for, once and for all on the cross, Christ still teaches us to pray for forgiveness as part of our ongoing communion with God and to offer forgiveness in our ongoing union with one another. There is no greater joy than when we get up from our knees knowing

that in God's eyes, we are clean, that he has forgiven our every sin. And to this the Christian goes and does likewise.

Let us pray. Indeed, all thanks and praise are yours, Almighty Father, because we know that you are quick to forgive us when we come to you in contrition. Lord, we know that we are sinful and in many ways we cannot live up to your commands. But we also know that your grace and mercy abound for those who come to you in humility and penance. In this Lenten season, may we be reminded of our need to be forgiven and our need to forgive others. Help us to be quick to forgive, not a few times, but all the time, and not to a select few, but to all people. In this way, we reflect the forgiveness of our own immeasurable debt. In the name of Christ, the Savior, we pray. Amen.