

*Matthew 6:12 "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."*

Dear Friends in Christ,

## SURRENDERING RIGHTS - FORGIVENESS

Fellow Forgiven, forgiven in the Son of God, Jesus Christ,

### I. Forgiveness – What I want

He stood there in the rain. He had said things he should not have said. He had been in the wrong, and he knew it. He was willing to admit it. So he asked her for forgiveness, but she refused. He even got down on one knee on the wet pavement, but she would have none of it. She would not forgive.

Another woman of another time and place remembered her faults. She had a big fight with a friend and that was the end of the friendship. Years after the fact, she could finally admit her fault. So she determined to make it right, to apologize. As she looked into it, she found out that her former friend had passed away a couple years ago. Guess it doesn't matter, right? I mean, she's gone. But it did matter, "If only I had done this sooner..." You see, it wasn't just that she wanted to apologize. She needed to be forgiven.

In the human heart there is a need for forgiveness. When we look around, it seems that this need does not reside in *everyone's* heart. There are some who seem to find a certain joy in smashing the china, in living at the expense of others, but I wonder if those people, too, don't—at least sometimes—sit at a stoplight in their car wishing that they could be forgiven.

And so right after Jesus tells us to pray for life with the words, "*Give us today our daily bread,*" right after that he tells us to pray for the thing that life in this world necessitates: forgiveness. "***This is how you should pray: Our Father... Forgive us.***" As surely as we need daily bread to eat, we need forgiveness.

Oh, some will say, "Hey, we're believers. Forgiveness is for sinners." There were people who said that in Jesus' day, too, and they were called Pharisees. Jesus, by teaching us to pray, "***Forgive us***" teaches us to realize our need for daily forgiveness. Not always because we wanted to smash the plates against the walls. We have not always been that willful. But since Adam and Eve, even after the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts, we still do that which we should not. That is why Jesus taught this petition not to unbelievers, but to believers.

### II. Forgiveness – What God Gives

But, Jesus, as a true friend, directs us to the one place we can find help: "***Our Father in heaven... Forgive us our debts.***" Our heavenly Father will not leave us like that unforgiven man kneeling in the rain. He won't leave us like that bereft woman who could never get her friend's forgiveness. Our heavenly Father promises forgiveness to all who come.

Back in high school, my best friend in freshman year, Jeff, and I had a fight. Don't remember why. Really good friend. After a couple hours we apologized. I don't remember what the fight was about or what we apologized about. But I do remember one thing. After apologizing I remember the bear hug Jeff gave me, lifting me off the floor. (For me, not being a natural hugger, that was a shock.) It was forgiveness.

God gives us that bear hug when we repent, when we come to God in the privacy of our prayers or in the publicness of our weekly confession of sins. In Jesus' name God gives us a great big bear hug of forgiveness. Our regret is transformed into joy. We are reconciled and we live again, we can sleep

again. God does not want us to wonder whether we might be forgiven, this prayer teaches us that WE ARE FORGIVEN!

***“When you pray say... Forgive us our debts.”*** And we are forgiven. That is what makes Christians joyful people. Of all people, Christians should not be sad-sack “woe-is-me” sort of people. Christians are joyful people, even those of us who don’t wear emotions on sleeves. We are certain of our heavenly Father’s hug. We are certain about what comes after this life. We are not worriedly trying to make up for our wrongs, because we have been forgiven in Jesus. We live in the freedom of forgiveness.

### **III. Forgiveness – What We Share**

Free people desire to share their freedom. A primary objective of our nation in most of the last century has been to support nations and movements which encourage freedom. We love freedom. We want others to share it.

What our nation does in this world, we Christians do in the spiritual world. We tell others of God’s forgiveness in Jesus; freedom from sin. That is half of it. The other half is what Jesus adds in this phrase, ***“Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.”*** Christians themselves should be known as forgiving people.

***“Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.”*** Does that make anyone else uneasy? From the Lord’s Prayer, I confess that this is the one phrase that can make me falter. It almost sounds like Jesus is making my forgiveness depend on how well I forgive others. From the wider context of Scripture, we know that God forgave us first, not that we forgave other people first, and somehow made ourselves worthy of God’s forgiveness. To pick one Bible passage from many, *“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Romans 8:1).

And yet Jesus is intent on pointing out a connection between God’s forgiveness and our forgiving. Jesus told a parable about this. It is a familiar parable and I only have time to summarize it. A king had a servant with a huge debt he could never repay. The king chose to forgive it. When this same servant refused to forgive his fellow servant a very small debt, the king summoned the unmerciful servant and threw him into prison *“until he should pay back all he owed.”* (Mt 18). The king’s forgiveness was freely granted. But when the servant failed to live like a forgiven debtor, the king’s forgiveness was revoked. Our failure to be merciful can negate God’s mercy to us. We can never earn God’s mercy, but we can negate it. And one way we can negate it is by not freely forgiving as we have been freely forgiven.

### **IV. Forgiveness – Giving Up What Is Owed Us**

But now all kinds of practical questions come to mind, questions that people ask.

Can I forgive someone if they are not sorry for their sin against me? It depends on what you mean by “forgive.” If “forgive” means that we tell them that they are ok with God, even though they feel no remorse, no we can’t forgive them. But if “forgive” means that I will give up my personal rights to punish, to seek vengeance, to hold a grudge, then we must forgive. But even while we say that we have forgiven, we must somehow communicate that they have a debt outstanding with God.

Another question: Can I forgive someone and still allow them to be punished? A pastor once struggled with this. He was robbed. The robber was caught. The robber asked his forgiveness. This pastor was conflicted. This robber had a rap sheet as long as his arm. To forgive or to press charges? The pastor did both. The pastor forgave the man and he pressed charges because of his duty to protect fellow citizens from the robber. At the same time he publicly stated that he had personally forgiven the man and would seek no compensation. Which brings to mind our first reading where David was forgiven, yet the LORD pronounced a punishment upon David, *“because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt...”* Sometimes other considerations complicate forgiveness.

Another question: What if I don't feel like forgiving? I've been there. Here's my advice: First, forgive with your mouth, and let your heart catch up. Do what God's word tells you is right, and the Holy Spirit will work on your heart. Sometimes you need to go with your head instead of your heart.

And there are more questions about what forgiveness looks like in real life. Forgiveness gets tricky in practice. But perhaps the most important thing to remember about forgiveness is what forgiveness really is.

Recently a refrain has been heard: "The system is rigged." Whether it really is or not is open to debate. But that's not my point. The point is that all of us have seen enough cheaters in this world—kids who jump the lunch line, accountants who cook the books, drivers who pass a traffic jam by driving on the shoulder, pro athletes who deflate footballs, gossips who spread rumors. As unhealthy as it is for us, we have plenty of reason to think that the system is rigged, or at least that some people are trying to rig it. That is exactly why we have *The Bill of Rights* in our Constitution.

Back when America achieved its independence, many people were suspicious. Maybe the new home grown government would abuse them just as they felt Britain had. In the new United States of America, small states like New Jersey were suspicious of powerful, big states like New York and Virginia. Big states were suspicious of smaller states, because for a while there, each state had equal representation: Rhode Island as much as Virginia. With all these suspicions flying around, they came up with *The Bill of Rights*. Everyone wanted their rights and interests protected.

Which is understandable and good, and I am glad that I live in a country with a bill of rights. But that is what makes me afraid when I stare forgiveness in the eyes. In forgiveness, I surrender my rights. Forgiveness is premised on the fact that someone has done something wrong against me. If there was no wrong, there would be no forgiveness. And when I have the question in front of me of whether or not to forgive, I have a problem. Forgiveness means that I give up my right to be angry, to be upset, to seek retribution, to hold a grudge. Forgiveness means that I surrender my rights.

Which is why when I think about forgiving, I hesitate. Forgiveness means that I take my personal *Bill of Rights*, crumple it up and throw it in the fire. The other person who has done something evil, wrong and wicked gets away with it. Forgiveness makes me a loser, doesn't it! And the biggest loser of all is God. His glory has been dishonored, his name besmirched, his creation sinned against. Which is what makes forgiveness so amazing. It makes us forgivers, too. It is possible because God has already forgiven us.

Lastly, come with me out to the Great Plains in the 1860's. An Indian chief named Maskepetoon rode up to a band of Indians. Searching the ranks of the Indian band, Maskepetoon had recognized someone. This someone was the murderer of his son. He had not killed Maskepetoon's son in war. No, it was treachery. While the flag of friendship flew overhead, this young man and Maskepetoon's son had gone out together one day, and he murdered Maskepetoon's son. Now Maskepetoon was horse to horse, face to face with the murderer. As chief, his was the right of judge, jury and executioner. No one had more authority or better reason to execute judgment then and there.

But first, tomahawk in hand, he spoke. "You betrayed my trust and cruelly killed my only son! You deserve to die; but for what I heard from the missionary at the camp fire last night, I would already have buried this tomahawk in your brains! The missionary told us that, if we expected the Great Spirit to forgive, we must forgive the greatest wrong." He continued, "As I hope the Great Spirit will forgive me, I forgive you." Then Maskepetoon bowed down over his horse's neck and gave way to tears.<sup>1</sup>

What sin of yours has God refused to forgive? Hmm. That's what I thought. What have you not forgiven your fellow person? Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (p. 457). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.