



Matthew 6:12

12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Reflection

Today's passage contains the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer. As we've discussed over previous days the Lord's Prayer begins with an address to God and then consists of six petitions or six prayer points that Jesus recommends we use as a model for

our prayer life. Today, Jesus suggests that after praying words to the effect 'Give us today our daily bread' we then pray along these lines:

12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

There is a natural progression here. Just as food is indispensable to the life and health of our bodies, so is forgiveness indispensable to the life and health of our souls. So in moving from the fourth to the fifth petition, we are moving from God's gracious provision for our physical needs, to his gracious provision for our spiritual needs.

We're praying to God, so the debt that is in view is our sin. Tapping into the Jewish

worldview a little here, because of who God is we owe him obedience. When we disobey him our sin creates a debt to God that we cannot repay. Another way of understanding the illustration might be to see God as a righteous judge. When we sin we are storing up punishment, a debt we will one day have to face. But as Christians, through his death and resurrection, Jesus has paid this debt on our behalf. He who knew no sin, took our sin on his shoulders, and was punished by God on our behalf. So through faith in Jesus and his work on the cross, our sins have been paid in full – as long as we continually acknowledge them and ask for the forgiveness that is ours in Jesus. Which is why Jesus offers us these words as part of our daily prayer life – Father, forgive us our debts.

But here's where things take a surprising and very uncomfortable turn. This verse seems to be suggesting that our forgiveness is contingent upon us having forgiven those who've sinned against us. Is Jesus really saying here, and even more forcefully by the way in verses 14 & 15, that if we have not forgiven people who've sinned against us then we are not forgiven ourselves?

I'm going to let Jesus answer for himself by way of a parable that he tells later in Matthew 18:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times,

but seventy-seven times. “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back

what you owe me!’ he demanded. “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. “This is how my heavenly

Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” Matt 18:21–35

I think this passage teaches us very clearly what Jesus means in the Lord’s Prayer when he says, ‘forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.’ You see, once our eyes have been truly opened to the enormity of the debt that God have forgiven us, we see the injuries that other people have inflicted on us as trifling in comparison. Because we’ve been forgiven so much, we can’t help but forgive others just as we’ve been forgiven. However, the opposite is also true. If we have an exaggerated view of the wrongs done to us, it usually follows that we have a proportionally minimized view of the debt we owe God and what it is to be forgiven by him.

Let me be clear. This passage is not saying that unless we forgive others then God can't and won't forgive us. That would go against the clear teaching of Scripture that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone and not by works. However I think Jesus is teaching us in this passage that if we don't forgive others, it is evidence that we haven't experienced forgiveness ourselves. True disciples of Jesus are deeply aware of the magnitude of the debt that God has wiped clean in their lives and thus they can't help but offer up proof of this awareness by forgiving people who have wronged them.

Think

It's important now to stop and think deep-

ly over the implications of this teaching for your life. Please take seriously what Jesus is teaching us here as you take stock of the attitudes of your heart towards people who have wronged you. What you find may disturb you. If we're honest with ourselves I think very few people have a clean slate in this area. But I don't think the broader sweep of Scripture intends us to have a crisis of faith if we realise that there are people that we haven't wholly forgiven. The nature of the Christian faith is one of continuous improvement. From the moment we became a Christian the Holy Spirit works hand in hand with us, transforming us into the likeness of Jesus. So if you are a Christian it is possible that there are people in your past that you have not forgiven. But still, there must be movement here. A thawing in your heart towards them, a de-

sire to begin to forgive them in your mind, even if your heart is still very far behind. This is a difficult teaching, and forgiving some of the deepest of wrongs can be the work of a lifetime. Perhaps this is why Jesus recommends that we pray this verse each and every day.

Pray

Spend some time now confessing your sins before your Father and asking for his forgiveness that is yours forevermore in Christ. Feel the magnitude of how much you've been forgiven. And then ask him that he might speed up the work of his Holy Spirit in your life so that you might become more like your father and be able to extend similar forgiveness to those who've hurt you.