

When Prayer is Proven in the Public Square

Luke 11:4b

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It is not difficult for someone to fake sincerity in a prayer to God. We can pray for God's will to be done while privately hoping our will prevails. We can pray that God's kingdom comes soon, while secretly reveling in the cares of this world. But there's one prayer that requires a public attitude; one prayer that demands public accountability. As Jesus teaches His disciples, and us, to forgive as we have been forgiven, He challenges us that words are not enough. God requires a lifestyle of forgiveness from His chosen people.

In Kent Hughes commentary on Luke's Gospel, he told the story of two sisters who lived together their entire lives in a small apartment.

And as anyone living in close quarters can attest, offenses can easily mount up.

Eventually, something was said or done that caused a break in their fellowship. But this time, rather than work together to resolve it, they both allowed it to harden like cement over time.

They eventually agreed to take a piece of chalk and draw a line down their living quarters. They drew a line that divided the living room in half; they divided the kitchen in half and separated their cooking utensils; they even drew a line that divided the fireplace in half. One

sister was responsible for one side and the other sister the other side.

Still, every Sunday they attended the same church, although sitting on different pews. And according to their church liturgy, every Sunday they stood and recited "The Lord's Prayer."

Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: Volume One* (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 413

Kent Hughes did not include any information as to whether, or not they settled the matter between them.

When I read that, I wondered what would have been going through their minds when they got to that line in the prayer: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive everyone who is indebted to us." Or their translation may have read: "Forgive us

our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

I quoted a little girl in our last study who didn't quite understand what trespasses were and when she quoted the prayer, she said it wrong, but really got it right when she said: “Forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets.”

That's one of the most profound questions you will ever work at answering: what do you do when people put trash in the basket of your life?

As we return today to the **11th chapter of Luke's Gospel**, Jesus is teaching His disciples how to pray this pattern prayer—a model for praying.

And we arrive at what Augustine, the 4th century church leader, called the “terrible petition.”

Ibid, p. 414

He called it terrible because of its implications to our own peace of mind should we refuse to do it; the implications it delivers on what he called “the maintenance of our soul” and heart before the Lord that would be hindered if we rejected it.

Here it is, now at **verse 4**, where the Lord teaches His disciples to pray:

*And forgive us our sins, for
we ourselves forgive
everyone who is indebted
to us.*

Luke 11:4a

As we've emphasized before, this prayer is for believers. It began by addressing “Our Father,” and that's because we have a family relationship with Him, through His Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So, when you read this line in verse 4, you need to remember, this is not a prayer for salvation. The Bible says that we are saved by faith alone, not because of our own good works (Ephesians 2:8-9); not even the good work of forgiving other people can save us.

As Al Mohler pointed out in his book on this prayer, we must be careful not to make this mean something that Jesus would not affirm. Jesus is *not* saying that we are forgiven by God because we have forgiven others; he's saying we should forgive other people as we have been forgiven. In other words, forgiven people should become forgiving people.

Adapted from R. Albert Mohler, Jr. The Prayer That Turns the World Upside Down (Nelson Books, 2018), p. 134

This prayer then isn't how we *become* believers; this is how we should *behave* as believers.

Now I want to point out that so far in our study of the Disciple's Prayer, it's possible that every prayer request or statement we recite here can't really be proven to be true or false in our own hearts and lives.

We might just be saying words. It might never be revealed whether or not these words are true!

- **“Father,”** maybe He is and maybe He isn’t.
- **“Hallowed be Your name,”** maybe we do and maybe we don’t.
- **“Your kingdom come,”** maybe we do, but maybe we don’t – who would know;
“Give us each day our daily bread,” maybe we are and maybe we aren’t.
- **“And lead us not into temptation,”** maybe we want Him to do that and maybe we don’t.

The answers can remain private.

But this little phrase— **“Forgive us as we forgive others”**—suddenly becomes public!



Have you ever prayed something without meaning it? How can you ensure that the words you pray reflect the sincerity of your heart toward God?

All of a sudden, this prayer drags us out into the public square and demands the proof of demonstration. It invites accountability.

And it suddenly becomes perhaps the most difficult and the most convicting

phrase in this entire prayer for every believer.

Let’s take a closer look:

Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

Now the Lord is using here the financial concept of indebtedness.

The Aramaic word for sin can be translated debt, which is why some translations use debts and others use sins. They both refer to legal obligations to the Lord that demand repayment.

Warren W. Wiersbe, *On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (Baker Books, 2010), p. 105

Sin is indeed a debt, and we owe God. But the truth is, our sins are so many we will never be able to pay Him off; the debt is too great.

Which is why the Lord Jesus came to die on our behalf. He alone could pay the penalty of our sin and as we learned in our last study, the apostle Paul put it this way:

[He forgave] us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Colossians 2:13b-14

So now Jesus teaches us to pray, with an understanding of the indebtedness that has been paid off by Christ.

Now to the audiences our Lord addressed, they would have immediately shuddered with this concept of indebtedness.

One author commented that for most Americans, debt is annoying, but not life-threatening. However, in the ancient world, debt was punishable by prison sentence. In the Roman empire, during the days of Christ, the prisons were filled with as many debtors as criminals.

Adapted from Mohler, p. 122

Debtors would be thrown into prisons, which were often state-run milling houses. Debtors would be chained to a grinding stone during the day where they would walk around and around, grinding meal for hours.

More dangerous criminals would not only be chained to the grinding stone but blinded in order to prevent their escape.

You might remember this is exactly what happened to Samson in **Judges 16**. The jail was a mill house and when Samson was finally captured by the Philistines, **verse 21 says they:**

And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes . . . and bound him with bronze shackles. And he ground at the mill in the prison.

Judges 16:21

Debtors were often put into prison to motivate family members to pay off their liabilities.

One document was discovered dating back to Old Testament times in Babylon where two family members, a mother and a daughter, were being held for unpaid debts—the implication was the husband was not paying his debt and they’d been arrested and imprisoned. The document read, *“Come here before your wife and daughter die grinding barley in prison.”*

Edwin M. Yamauchi & Marvin R. Wilson, Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical and Post-Biblical Antiquity (Hendrickson, 2017), p. 1404

All this underscores the fact that during the days of Christ:

- You didn’t declare bankruptcy if you couldn’t pay your debts.
- You couldn’t get another credit card and spread out your debt.
- You couldn’t decide if you’d pay on those debts or not.

If you couldn’t pay, you more than likely went to jail and it was possible that you never got out again.

Debt could be a matter of life and death.

Adapted from Mohler, p. 122

You need to understand that when the Lord was teaching the disciples this particular prayer request, He was not only using the language of paying off debt – but of personally responding to debtors.

Adapted from David E. Garland, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke (Zondervan, 2011), p. 464

Lord, forgive us our debts against You, and how grateful we are for this daily opportunity, but that isn’t all.

In a very personal, convicting manner, the Lord turns it around and teaches His disciples to pray: “And Father, teach us to treat other people’s debts like You have treated ours.”

You may think, “Now I don’t know about that part; that’s a bit of a stretch. God forgives our sin against Him, but we’re not God. Surely, He’s not expecting the same from us.”

But He evidently is. And so far, in this prayer, I believe this is the most difficult thing to pray because it is the most difficult thing to practice.

Now, if we compare Scripture with Scripture, there are at least two principle that will allow us to handle this assignment from the Lord as we genuinely pray this prayer.

The Principle of Recalculation

Now I didn’t come up with that word because my next point begins with the letter “R,” and I want to alliterate like they taught me in seminary; actually, I only have one other principle in this outline, and it begins with the letter “I.”

The reason I chose this word is simply because this is exactly what we’ve got to do every single time we’re confronted with the issue of forgiveness; we must recalculate everything according to divine math.

You’ve heard of new math, which I never understood; I didn’t get the old math either. I graduated from high

school with an empty diploma because I had to take Algebra 1 again in summer school to graduate from high school. I barely passed, and as a result was admitted into college on academic probation.

Math and I have never been close friends.

I had a lady came up to me after church one day and she said; “You always give good illustrations from history; why don’t you ever give any good illustrations from math?” Because I can’t think of any good illustrations from math!

Until today. Let me show you.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Peter asks the Lord this honest question in chapter 18 and verse 21:

“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”

And that was a legitimate question because that’s what the rabbi’s of his day were teaching.

If you were a super-spiritual person—in the running for Pharisee of the Year—you would forgive somebody seven times.

Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

In other words, “Peter, take your number and multiply it by 11.” Which basically

meant, “forgive him an unlimited number of times.”

In other words, you must recalculate everything differently as my disciple.

Now with that, the Lord goes on to give a parable that illustrates this principle of recalculation in verse 23:

Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

Matthew 18:23-27

Now to put it into perspective, we need to understand these financial terms, which the Lord’s audience would have understood.

In the Lord’s culture, one denarius equaled one day’s salary; 6,000 denarii equaled one talent. And since I can do

some math, one talent equals 6,000 day’s salary.

So, the average person would have to work 16 years to earn one talent. This man owes 10,000 talents.

Go back to verse 24 and notice here that this servant owes ten *thousand* talents: that’s 164,000 years of salary. He obviously won’t live long enough to pay off this debt.

But how much money was it? Well, to put it into today’s economy, if this man was earning \$50,000 dollars a year, he would owe his master \$8.2 billion dollars.

He can’t work weekends to make this up; there aren’t enough odd jobs to make it happen.

Now obviously, the Lord is using terms to express the absolute impossibility of this man ever paying off his debt.



**How impossible is your debt to God?
Have you considered just how insurmountable the debt you owe God is, and how utterly reliant you are on His forgiveness? How does that perspective change your relationship toward people who have wronged you?**

It was out of the question; He will not live long enough; he would never make enough. This is mathematically,

physically, financially impossible! He's \$8.2 billion dollars in debt!

Now with that in mind, notice **verse 28**:

But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii...

Matthew 18:28a

Now remember, one denarius was equal to one day's salary; so this debt represents around 3 month's salary. The first man owed 164,000 years' salary, and this guy owes him three months.

Jesus describes what happens here in verse 28:

And seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

Matthew 18:28b-30

Now the Lord's audience is going to immediately recognize how unkind and unforgiving this man was, having just been freed of his incredible billion-dollar debt.

And by the way, the amount his fellow employee owed him was no small matter either. Based on the same comparison,

he was owed around \$14,000 dollars by this other man.

That's not pocket change.

But the Lord's point is that you're not going to be able to forgive someone's offense unless you recalculate your offense toward God.

Our problem is that we forget how utterly indebted we are to God who has forgiven us!

Is it possible that we aren't forgiving because we've forgotten how much we've been forgiven?

Yes, somebody out there is indebted to you; it's significant. They really do owe you something: an apology, money, restitution, kindness, gratitude—they owe you that!

And it isn't pocket change! It hurts; you feel it.

And God brings them to a recognition of their offense, and they come to you and ask you for forgiveness. Now what will you do?

Jesus is teaching us to pray this prayer because He knows we need to constantly be reviving this principle of recalculation.

The Principle of Imitation

The apostle Paul delivered this principle to the Ephesian church when he wrote:

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Ephesians 4:32

Forgive one another **just like** God the Father through God the Son forgives you.

Have you ever thought about the fact that you are perhaps never more like your Heavenly Father than when you choose to forgive someone else?



Who is someone you need to forgive this week? Make it a priority to reflect God and forgive those who have wronged you or will wrong you this week.

In the parable, the king was God the Father, and the indebted servant was a repentant sinner.

The parallel point was clear: if that's how God treats a sinner, then how should forgiven sinners treat other sinners who repent?

Adapted from Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Matthew* (Crossway, 2013), p. 526

And by the way, that's a key point here that leads to full and joyful reconciliation: the person who sinned against you is brought to repentance.

Jesus will teach His disciples later on in **Luke's Gospel**—and we'll deal with it at length when we get to **chapter 17**— **"If your brother sins against you 7 times, and repents 7 times, forgive him."**

In that text, we're down to forgiving someone who apologizes seven times. It

isn't 77, it's seven. But that still isn't easy; in fact, Jesus says in that text that it's seven times in the same day.

Peter and the disciples all have their calculators out, "Lord, how many times do we forgive somebody? Seven times?"

Jesus effectively says, "Every time," which means, *stop counting and start forgiving.*

Ibid, p. 522

And the disciples respond by saying, in the next verse: **"Lord increase our faith!"** Essentially, "We can't do this unless You change our hearts, our perspectives, our walk, and our minds."

We need different calculators; we need new math—divine math:

- bitterness-resolving.
- soul-freeing.
- resentment-softening.
- ledger-erasing.
- spirit-changing forgiveness.

These are the benefits of living by the principle of divine recalculation and divine imitation.

In J.I. Packers little commentary on this prayer, he closes his chapter on this text by including this poem:

"Forgive our sins as we forgive,"

—you taught us, Lord, to
pray;

But You alone can grant
us grace

To live the words we say.

How can your pardon reach
and bless

The unforgiving heart

That broods on wrongs,

And will not let old
bitterness depart?

In blazing light, your cross
reveals

The truth we dimly knew,

How small the debts men
owe to us,

How great our debt to you.

Lord, cleanse the depths
within our souls,

And bid resentment cease;

Then, reconciled to God
and man,

Our lives will spread your
peace.

J.I. Packer, *Praying the Lord's Prayer* (Crossway, 2007), p. 82

The Lord isn't just giving us information about prayer; He's leading us to transformation through prayer.

Because this isn't just for praying; this is for living. This prayer is to be proven in the public square one day, one difficulty, one offense, one merciful response at a time.

And as we prayerfully live by the principle of recalculation and the principle of imitation, we become a little bit more like our Father who is in Heaven.

We bring a little bit of Heaven down to earth.

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