



## Forgive Us Our Debts

Tonight we consider the phrase rendered in our liturgy as *forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*. Looking at the separate sheet with the different renditions of the prayer we can see that Matthew has *forgive our debts to the extent we have forgiven those in debt to us* whereas Luke has *forgive our sins, since we too forgive everyone in debt to us*. 'Q' and the early church liturgies agree with Matthew. Without doubt

this phrase is a call for us to think about forgiveness and what it means as well as what our responsibilities are when it comes to forgiving and being forgiven. For the purpose of this study I will not be going into depth about the topic of forgiveness as such – I have already done so in the 2009 Lenten Study. As a supplement to what I have to say this evening I encourage you to download the Lenten Study 2009 notes and listen to the podcast on the church website<sup>1</sup>.

For this session I will concentrate on how we can most effectively pray this prayer and benefit from praying it by looking carefully at the subtle difference between Matthew and Luke (with some reference also to the Aramaic). We need to remind ourselves that Matthew was writing primarily as a Jew for a Jewish audience whilst Luke was a Gentile writing primarily for a Gentile audience. Let's look at the difference; Matthew has *forgive our debts (opheilema)* and Luke has *forgive our sins (hamartia)*. Their choice of word here is important in so much as it indicates what they are wanting their audience to understand about forgiveness. Debts or sins? Or maybe both?

If we consider Jesus' context we can see that he would have been very aware of the indebtedness of his people, especially the peasant classes, who were by and large the ones for whom he had the greater compassion. The Jews were under the oppression of the Romans and they were heavily taxed. Not only that but even within their own social structure the system tended to favour the 'haves' rather than the 'have nots'. Hal Taussig commenting on this says;

Indebtedness was one of the major social and economic problems of first century Israel. The peasant farmers and the merchants in the towns and villages were constantly in danger of falling into serious debt to the landed class and the urban elite.<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to point out also that;

Although these cycles of indebtedness were acute in the first century, the peasant class of Israel had rarely been out of danger of debt during the previous twelve hundred years.<sup>3</sup>

Debt was a constant factor and indeed a curse upon most of the people creating an almost unbearable burden and sense of injustice. Debt and injustice against the poor was a consistent theme of the prophets in the Old Testament. Jesus himself quoting Isaiah says that he has come to bring good news to the poor.<sup>4</sup> And what better news than 'all your debts are wiped away!' For this is the sense of what we read in Matthew as we pray the Abba Prayer, *forgive (or take away) our debts!* Amen to that. Luke is writing for the Gentiles and whilst there would have been experience of debt amongst them the sense of injustice and the resonance of a history of oppression would not have been at the forefront of their experience. Luke focuses this prayer on them being made right before God whereas Matthew is giving an insight into Jesus proclaiming a new order of freedom from oppression and debt.

There is however, a twist, as we might expect from Jesus. The plea for the debts to be taken away is dependent on the extent to which they are able to wipe out the debt of those to whom they are in debt. *forgive our debts to the extent we have forgiven those in debt to us*. It's the equivalent of *love your*

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<sup>1</sup> Go to <http://stmarksclayfield.org/> and click on the resources tab to download Forgiving Jesus

<sup>2</sup> Hal Taussig – Jesus Before God – The Prayer Life of the Historical Jesus pg64

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> Luke 4.18-19

*enemies*. This becomes a hard saying, in order for me to be sure of my own freedom from debt and obligation I must be able to wipe out any debts I have been holding against others – in other words any grudges or feelings of resentment because of a sense of their owing me something. If I carry unresolved issues and harbour resentments in the purse of my heart then I am putting others in debt to me, even if they are not aware of this. If I am unable to wipe the slate clean then I do not allow myself to be free of the crippling debt of unforgiveness and ingratitude, or the paralysis of self-righteousness and victimhood. Very often as ‘victims’ we justify all kinds of attitudes and actions that can easily become the currency of unforgiveness. This is where the prayer is also about forgiveness of sin as we read in Luke, of course. But we have to understand the nature of sin. So often we disguise it as something justifiable – after all what could be more acceptable than the feeling of injustice because of something that someone has done to us? For those who were listening to Jesus first hand, those who were literally indebted to others in their community, this prayer would have been a huge challenge. However, it is a prayer, which once again demonstrates a key Kingdom principle – in the Kingdom of God there is equanimity and justice. The only debt amongst them, as Paul says<sup>5</sup>, will be the debt of love.

Thus, this prayer becomes militant and much more than just a focus on morality and the need to be ‘good’. It becomes a call to live by a different standard, free from resentment, owing no one anything other than the debt of love. Of course, the forgiveness of sin is important but it can so easily become a distraction from what our true calling is – to love God and our neighbour. Interestingly, Matthew records Jesus’ teaching about sin just a few verses later in chapter 6<sup>6</sup>. Remembering that Matthew elected not to use the Greek word for sin that Luke used (*hamartia*), rather he used the word translated as debt (*opheilema*), when he records Jesus speaking about forgiveness of sins he again uses a different word, the word he uses is *paraptoma* which translates as *failings* or *shortcomings*. Jesus was not fixated on morality but on humanity. He accepted and understood that we all get it wrong from time to time. He also recognised that an obsession with getting it wrong led to fruitless legalism which tended towards an almost obsessive focus on sin and cleanliness. It also led to a culture of judgement, either harsh self judgement or the judgement of others. This can then become a vicious cycle which eventually enslaves us in the chains of legalism. All of this can have consequences that leave us far from what we are called to be as people living under the grace of God in the power of the Spirit. Instead of being at peace and in possession of ourselves, we can become anxious, agitated and possessed by our fears and legalism.

The Aramaic rendering of this phrase has something to say to this situation. A translation from the Aramaic would be something like, *And leave us serene, just as we also allowed others serenity*. This is based on the word for forgiveness also carrying the meaning of *leave* and the word for sin carrying the meaning of *tangled threads*. To have those tangled threads untangled is to be left serene. As I final thought on this topic let me share a verse from John’s first letter many will be familiar with;

The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil<sup>7</sup>

The word commonly translated *destroy* is better translated as *undo* – the imagery behind this word is that of a fine silver chain that has been knotted up being patiently unpicked and unknotted. The *tangled threads* of our *failings* or *indebtedness* as human beings are *forgiven* or *undone* or *wiped away* by the love of God as found in Jesus. Let us keep this in mind next time we pray, *forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*.

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 13.8 *The only thing you should owe to anyone is love for one another, for to love the other person is to fulfil the law*

<sup>6</sup> See Matt 6.14,15

<sup>7</sup> 1John 3.8