

THE LORD'S PRAYER Chapter 6 The Fifth Petition

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Transcript

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Chapter 6

The Fifth Petition

"And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors"

Matthew 6:12

At the outset of our consideration of this fifth petition, it is vital that we give due attention to the fact that it begins differently than the first four. For the first time in our Lord's Prayer we encounter the word and. The fourth petition, "Give us this day our daily bread," is followed by the words, "And forgive us our debts," indicating that there is a very close connection between the two petitions. It is true that the first three petitions are intimately related, yet they are quite distinct. But the fourth and fifth petitions are to be especially linked in our minds for several practical reasons. First, we are taught that without pardon all the good things of this life will benefit us nothing. A man in a cell on death row is fed and clothed, but what is the daintiest diet and the costliest apparel worth to him as long as he remains under sentence of imminent death? "Our daily bread doth but fatten us as lambs for the slaughter if our sins be not pardoned" (Matthew Henry). Second, our Lord would inform us that our sins are so many and so grievous that we deserve not one mouthful of food. Each day the Christian is guilty of offenses that forfeit even the common blessings of life, so that he should ever say with Jacob, "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies. . . which Thou hast shewed unto Thy servant (Gen. 32:10). Third, Christ would remind us that our sins are the great obstacle to the favors we might receive from God (Isa. 59:2; Jer. 5:25). Our sins constrict the channel of blessing, and therefore as often as we pray, "Give us," we must add, "And forgive us." Fourth, Christ would encourage us to go on in faith from strength to strength. If we trust God's providence to provide for our bodies, should we not trust Him for the salvation of our souls from the power and dominion of sin and from sin's dreadful wages? "Forgive us our debts." Our sins are here viewed, as in Luke 11:4, under the notion of debts, that is, undischarged obligations or failures to render to God His lawful due. We owe to God sincere and perfect worship together with earnest and perpetual obedience. The Apostle Paul says, "Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh" (Rom. 8:12), thus stating the negative side. But positively, we are debtors to God, to live unto Him. By the law of creation, we were

made not to gratify the flesh but to glorify God. "When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do" (Luke 17:10). Failure to discharge our debt of worship and obedience has entailed guilt, bringing us into debt to Divine justice. Now when we pray, "Forgive us our debts," we do not ask to be discharged from the duties we owe to God, but to be acquitted from our guilt, that is, to have the punishment due us remitted. "There was a certain creditor which had two debtors" (Luke 7:41). Here, in our text, God is set forth under the figure of a creditor, partly in view of His being our Creator, and partly as being our Lawgiver and Judge. God not only has endowed us with talents, obligating us to serve and glorify our Benefactor, but also has placed us under His Law, so that we are condemned for our defaults. And as Judge, He will yet call upon each of us to render a full account of our respective stewardships (Rom. 14:12). There is to be a great Day of Reckoning (Luke 19:15), and those who have failed to repent of and bewail their debts and to take refuge in Christ will be eternally punished for their defaults. Alas, that so very few conduct themselves in the conscious realization of that solemn Assize. Not only does this metaphor of creditor and debtors apply to our ruin, but, thank God, it applies equally to the remedy for our recovery. As insolvent debtors, we are completely undone and must forever lie under the righteous judgment of God, unless full compensation be made to Him. But we are powerless to pay Him that compensation, for, morally and spiritually speaking, we are undischarged bankrupts. Deliverance, then, must come from outside ourselves. Here is where the Gospel speaks relief to the sin-burdened soul: another, even the Lord Jesus, took upon Himself the office of Sponsor, and rendered full satisfaction to Divine justice on behalf of His people, making complete compensation to God for them. Hence, in this connection, Christ is called the "Surety of a better testament" (Heb. 7:22), as He affirmed prophetically through His father David: "Then I restored that which I took not away" (Ps. 69:4). God declares concerning His elect, "Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom" (Job 33:24). "And forgive us our debts." Strange to say, some experience a difficulty here. Seeing that God has already forgiven the Christian "all trespasses" (Col. 2:13), is it not needless, they ask, for him to continue to beg God for forgiveness? This difficulty is self-created, through a failure to distinguish between the purchase of our pardon by Christ and its actual application to us. True, full atonement for all our sins was made by Him, and at the cross their guilt was canceled. True, all our old sins are purged at our conversion (2 Pet. 1:9). Nevertheless, there is a very real sense in which our present and future sins are not remitted until we repent and confess them to God. Therefore, it is both necessary and proper that we should seek pardon for them. (1 John 1:6-10). Even after Nathan administered assurance to David, saying, "The Lord also hath put away thy sins" (2 Sam. 12:13), David begged God's forgiveness (Ps. 51:1). What do we ask for in this petition? First, we ask that God will not lay to our charge the sins we daily commit (Ps. 143:2). Second, we plead that God will accept the satisfaction of Christ for our sins and look upon us as righteous in Him. Some may object, "But if we be real Christians, He has already done so." True, yet He requires us to sue for our pardon, just as He said to Christ, "Ask of Me, and I shall give Thee the heathen for Thine inheritance" (Ps. 2:8). God is ready to forgive, but He requires us to call upon Him. Why? That His saving mercy may be acknowledged, and that our faith may be exercised! Third, we beseech God for the continuance of pardon. Though we be justified, yet we must continue to ask; as with our daily bread, though we have a goodly store on hand, yet we beg for the continuance of it. Fourth, we plead for the sense of forgiveness or assurance of it, that sins may be blotted out of our conscience and from God's book of remembrance. The effects of forgiveness are inner peace and access to God (Rom. 5:1, 2). Forgiveness is not to be demanded as something due us, but requested as a mercy. "To the very end of life, the best Christian must come for forgiveness just as he did at first, not as a claimant of a right but as a suppliant of a favour" (John Brown). Nor is this anywise inconsistent with, or a reflection upon, our complete justification (Acts 13:39). It is certain that the believer

"shall not come into condemnation" (John 5:24); yet instead of this truth leading him to the conclusion that he need not pray for the remission of his sins, it supplies him with the strongest possible encouragement to present such a petition. Likewise, the Divine assurance that a genuine Christian shall persevere to the end, instead of laying a foundation for carelessness, is a most powerful motive to watchfulness and faithfulness. This petition implies a felt sense of sin, a penitent acknowledgement thereof, a seeking of God's mercy for Christ's sake, and the realization that He can righteously pardon us. Its presentation should ever be preceded by self-examination and humiliation. Our Lord teaches us to confirm this petition with an argument: as we forgive our debtors." First, Christ teaches us to argue from a like disposition in ourselves: whatever good there be in us must first be in God, for He is the sum of all excellency; if, then, a kindly disposition has been planted in our hearts by His Holy Spirit, the same must be found in Him. Second, we are to reason with God from the lesser to the greater: if we, who have but a drop of mercy, can forgive the offenses done to us, surely God, who is a veritable Ocean of mercy, will forgive us. Third, we are to argue from the condition of those who may expect pardon: we are sinners who, out of a sense of God's mercy to us, are disposed to show mercy to others; hence, we are morally qualified for more mercy, seeing that we have not abused the mercy we have already received. They who would rightly pray to God for pardon must pardon those who wrong them. Joseph (Gen. 50:14-21) and Stephen (Acts 7:60) are conspicuous examples. We need to pray much for God to remove all bitterness and malice from our hearts against those who wrong us. But to forgive our debtors does not exclude our rebuking them, and, where public interests are involved, having them prosecuted. It would be my duty to hand over a burglar to a policeman, or to go to law against one who was able but who refused to pay me (Rom. 13:1-8). If a fellow citizen is guilty of a crime and I do not report it, then I become an accessory to that crime. I thus betray a lack of love for him and for society (Lev. 19:17, 18).

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