

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”

Matthew 6:12-15

Dr. Jerry Nelson

[www.soundliving.org](http://www.soundliving.org)

The usually friendly neighbor man who flew into a rage when a child walked in his freshly poured cement.

When his startled wife said to him, “I thought you liked children,” he replied, “I like them in the abstract but not the concrete.”

We like the idea of forgiveness, but to actually forgive is quite another thing.

While I’ve not done a formal study of our culture, it seems to me that forgiveness is not a very popular theme.

Revenge, on the other hand **is** quite popular.

It is amazing how many television shows and motion pictures strongly appeal to the motive of revenge.

I was watching a kids’ movie with my son this past week.

In it, for 60 minutes or more, a proud, strutting, soccer coach commits one mean act after another until you can hardly wait for him to “get his.”

Then a cheer wells up within you as he finally loses and better yet, because of a foolish wager he loses, he must kiss a goat. Yes!!!

Or you’re watching a television show where some bad guy commits some heinous crime and you feel a sense of satisfaction when in the end he holds out against the police and is shot dead.

And you find yourself thinking, “That’s right, no pesky defense attorneys and no lengthy judicial appeals, just justice, swift and certain – Yes!”

Or much more to the point of today’s sermon, someone does **us** wrong, terribly wrong, grievously wrong, and irreparably wrong, what wells us within us after we get past the initial shock and hurt?

Isn't it revenge?

"No," you say, "It's justice that I seek."

And I say, "No, justice might be in there somewhere but revenge is also there and it is the pulsing, driving force."

Have you ever felt it: The hurt, the anger, the helplessness, and the dark desire for some kind of retaliation?

And if you won't admit to such feelings of wanting to do them harm, how about those feelings of relational homicide?

Oh, not literal homicide but putting them out of **your** existence – killing them off in any kind of relationship with you.

You say the pain is too great, the hurt is too deep and you can't deal with it anymore, **you're done with them.**

As far as you are concerned they **cease to exist – relational homicide.**

Into all those feelings Jesus comes with these words:

Matthew 6:12-15

"Forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

MT 6:13 And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from the evil one. '

MT 6:14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. <sup>15</sup> But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

"Forgive! You've got to be kidding!"

Does he really expect me to forgive that?

Or again as Lewis said, "Forgiveness is a beautiful word until you have something to forgive."

Jesus is not talking about forgiveness in the way we so often use the idea.

- We so easily speak of forgiving someone because they **didn't mean to do it.**
- Or we forgive them because they **couldn't help it.**
- Or we forgive them because they've **never done it before.**

- Or we forgive them because **in every other way he or she is a nice person** who deserves to be forgiven.

But that is not forgiveness, that's excusing,  
that's explaining their actions **so that guilt is not attributed** to them,  
or at best it is allowing their other goodnesses to compensate for this indiscretion.

Jesus is talking about the forgiveness necessary when what was done was evil, harmful, and with malice.

He is speaking of those actions for which there is no excuse, no mitigating circumstances that forced the action, and no way to compensate for it.

The harm has been done and it is incapable of being undone.

**That person is the one we are called on to forgive!**

It is with that person, or those people, in mind that we must read what Jesus said,

Matthew 6:12

Forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Even for the non-Christian there is good reason to forgive others.

The medical and mental health communities have demonstrated the therapeutic value of forgiveness both physically and emotionally.

But the forgiveness of which Jesus speaks is of a higher order and Jesus ups the ante when he ties it to God's forgiveness of us.

Matthew 6:14-15

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. <sup>15</sup> But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

This is not the only time Jesus does this.

In Luke 6:37 we hear him saying, "Forgive and you will be forgiven."

In Mark 11:25 we read, “If you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

The implications of this are disturbing to us.

Does Jesus mean that we have to forgive others **before** the Father can forgive us?

Is Jesus saying that God’s forgiveness of us is **dependent** on our forgiving those who have sinned against us?

Doesn’t the Bible teach that we don’t **earn** forgiveness?

I think the best way to answer these, and similar questions, is to go back and think carefully about what Jesus said we are to pray.

When Jesus speaks of forgiveness **where does he start?**

He starts with **God’s forgiveness of us:**

“Father forgive **us our** debts.”

**So before we can understand our forgiveness of someone else, we must understand God’s forgiveness of us.**

Most of you know that the word “debts,” in this context is another word for “sins.”

And so we recite it, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Outside of church, the word “sin” sounds strange today – almost embarrassing!

Who speaks this way any longer except preachers?

Tongue in cheek I ask, “Haven’t we learned enough about the human psyche to know that people don’t sin today, they are simply maladjusted or they are in error or they do something with negative consequences?”

We don’t speak of “sin” because “sin” is believed to be an obsolete category for describing human behavior.

Well if sin disappears then so too does guilt.

Guilt then changes from being truly guilty to just feeling guilty. If that is true, then we don't need the forgiveness of sins, we need to help in overcoming the psychological complex.

But God teaches that we **are** sinful and we **are** guilty.

- We have violated the holy standards of God,
- we have not lived in obedience and loyalty to him,
- we have rejected his overtures of love
- **and** we have violated each other.

The Bible indicates that the reason why we **feel** guilty, is because we **are** guilty!"

Most of the people of the world, as evidenced by the religions of the world, spend a great deal of time attempting to deal with their sense of guilt – hence many good works, sacrifices and rituals.

And even among the so-called “enlightened” secular people of the world, those who reject religion, countless hours and millions of dollars are spent in psychotherapy and other means attempting to get beyond the feelings of anger, resentment, and guilt that people have mostly because of broken relationships.

We may not call it “forgiveness” but forgiveness is what people long for.

The first time the conjunction “and” is used in The Lord’s Prayer is between the request for bread and the request for forgiveness.

You won’t find it in the NIV but in the New American Standard and in the Greek from which the translations come, the word “and” sits between the two requests:

“Give us today our daily bread (AND) forgive us our debts...”

**Forgiveness is as daily and as necessary as bread.**

When we preachers talk about sin, we are not just trying to get people to feel guilty so that they will turn to the church or the preacher to get help.

We are not just creating a market for our ecclesiastical wares.

We believe what God says and we see it in ourselves and in all the people around us – we have sinned against God and each other and we are guilty.

That's why forgiveness is so necessary.

Without forgiveness we would have no relationship with God or others – we would live estranged from God and each other.

**Forgiveness and reconciliation are essential human needs – as necessary as bread.**

And forgiveness, when granted, is an awesome experience!

God's forgiveness of us is marvelous.

"The wonder and glory of Divine forgiveness lies in the measure of its necessity." (Oudersluys in Kuiper p109)

We are desperately in need of it!

Many of us treat forgiveness as if it was required of God when we make up for the sins we've committed.

By analogy we might say, "A husband forgot his wife's birthday and so he brought flowers to ask forgiveness."

She measures the contrition in his voice and the value of the gift and decides that he has **done enough to make up for** what he did and thus is worthy of being forgiven.

That's not forgiveness that's compensation.

Forgiveness is in a totally different category.

Don't ever think someone deserves to be forgiven!

**Forgiveness is undeserved!**

That's why forgiveness is part of what we call the gospel – good news.

The miracle of the gospel is that what is impossible for us to accomplish, God accomplishes - we **can be** forgiven – no longer under the weight of the guilt of our sin and no longer liable for the penalty for our sin.

And **the basis** of that forgiveness is nothing less than Jesus' death for us.

He took the penalty for our sin on himself.  
Our sins and forgiveness met on the cross.

The cross makes clear the true cost of forgiveness.  
The Bible says that God's own death was necessary for  
forgiveness to be granted.

*"We may not know, we cannot tell  
What pains he had to bear;  
But we believe it was for us  
He hung and suffered there.  
He died that we might be forgiven  
He died to make us good,  
That we might go at last to heaven,  
Saved by his precious blood."* (Oudersluys in Kuiper 112)

The church is the community of the forgiven!

**It is our message!**

Forgiveness is the remedy for the world's relationship with  
God and with each other.

**"Father, forgive us our debts..."**

**It is imperative that we understand and experience that first half  
of the request about forgiveness before we attempt to  
understand the second half.**

One man said, "No one can rightly claim to be Christian unless  
he has received the forgiveness of sins." (Oudersluys in H.J. Kuiper 106)

**AND it is the awesome experience of God's forgiveness of  
us ("Father forgive us our sins") that makes possible the  
experience of the rest of the prayer ("as we forgive those  
who sin against us"):**

This takes us back to our earlier questions:

Is Jesus saying that unless I forgive others God won't forgive  
me?

Let's read again Jesus' own commentary on that part of the prayer:  
Matthew 6:14-15 "For if you forgive men when they sin against  
you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do

not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

That is pointed language.

Is Jesus saying that we **earn** our forgiveness from God by our forgiveness of others?

It would be relatively easy to conclude that, if it were not for the vast amount of Scripture that make it abundantly clear that we do not and cannot earn our relationship with God.

**God's forgiveness of us is pure grace, not something we earn.**

But the language Jesus uses is strong because God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others are **inextricably linked to each other.**

It is God's forgiveness of us that creates the possibility and ability of our forgiveness of others.

Bob Guelich writes, Our forgiveness of others "does not form **the prerequisite** for experiencing God's forgiveness (Jesus does that). Rather the genuine experience of God's...forgiveness of (our) immense debt **conditions** (our) ability to forgive others. (Guelich 298)

**Greatly forgiven people forgive greatly.**

Unforgiven people don't forgive.

Forgiveness, properly understood in all its cost and glory, stirs us to gratitude and a forgiving spirit.

Oudersluys wrote, "The wonder of Divine forgiveness lies in what it can do to the forgiven soul, and in **what it can make the forgiven soul do.**" (Oudersluys in Kuiper 110)

But it is **not only that.**

God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others are linked in another way.

**We are not ready to ask for and receive God's forgiveness until we are sufficiently broken of our**

**own pride to be forgiving of others who sin against us.**

When I cannot or will not forgive someone else,  
when I harbor resentment,  
when I refuse to be reconciled,  
and when I intentionally replay the memories over and over again,

I am too proud to sincerely request or receive God's forgiveness of me.

Listen to several other voices on the matter:

“The spirit open to receive love is of necessity open to bestow love”.

(Robinson in Morris The Gospel According to Matthew p147)

“What Jesus apparently is saying is the pride which keeps us from forgiving is the same pride which keeps us from accepting forgiveness, and will God please help us do something about it.”

(Fredrich Beuchner Wishful Thinking p28)

“If we harbor within our hearts grudges and enmities, petty jealousies and hatreds against (others), these attitudes become spiritual obstacles to the entrance of God's love and forgiveness...We cannot be sons (or daughters) if we are not willing to be brothers (and sisters).” (Oudersluys in Kuiper 114 and 119)

So how do I forgive others who have sinned against me?

First, Christ paid the penalty not only for my sin BUT ALSO the penalty for the sins of my Christian brother or sister against me.

Who am I to suggest that the death of Jesus is insufficient to pay for my brother's sin against me, when it IS sufficient to pay for my sin against a holy God?

Forgiveness does not come from my ability to overlook another person's sin - that would be unjust.

Neither does my forgiveness of another come from the other person's ability to make up for what they have done – that's impossible.

Forgiveness of our Christian brothers and sisters comes from the fact that **justice has already been served on the cross** and we are commanded to carry out the verdict in our actions toward others – they are no longer guilty – they are forgiven.

**The basis of God’s forgiveness of me is the substitutionary death of Jesus.**

**The basis of my forgiveness of a fellow believer who sins against me is the same substitutionary death of Christ.**

Remember the story of Onesimus, the run-away slave?

Paul wrote on his behalf to Onesimus’ master, Philemon.

The letter urged Philemon to take Onesimus back into his household without punishment.

The most compelling request Paul makes is for Philemon to receive Onesimus as Philemon would receive Paul.

He further says than any debt that Onesimus owes should be charged to Paul’s account.

Jesus speaks to us about the Christian who has hurt us and he says, “I want you to treat that person as you would treat me and I want you to take their great offense against you and charge it to my account.”

If I have it right, and I think I do, Jesus says, “I want you to treat that fellow-Christian who has wronged you as you would treat me!”

I understand that the debt of the injustice of a Christian’s sin against me has been paid in full by the death of Christ so that I ought not to seek further compensation.

But what about the non-Christian who sins against us?

Is he or she “fair game?” No.

The Bible says in Romans 12:19 “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.”

All judgment against sin belongs to God alone.

All sin not covered by the death of Jesus will be punished for eternity.

Justice will be served **but God will serve it.**

I usurp God's place when I seek or take revenge.

God alone has the right to judge.

John Wimber wrote, "When we take it upon ourselves to decide whether we will extend forgiveness in a particular situation, we are seizing a function that belongs only to God. We are in effect, making ourselves God!" John Wimber in

Kingdom Mercy p22

Whether it is a Christian or a non-Christian who sins against me, there is no basis left for vengeance.

No foundation remains for enduring anger.

There is no ground left for me to demand anything.

I am left only one alternative - forgiveness.

Let me more succinctly say it this way:

We say forgiveness isn't fair.

If by "fair" we mean "deserved", we are right – forgiveness isn't deserved.

But if by "fair" we mean "just", saying forgiveness isn't just - we are wrong.

Forgiveness is just because Christ paid for the sins of my fellow-Christians against me and non-Christians will pay for their sin for eternity.

Forgiveness may not be deserved but it is just.

So what does such forgiveness look like?

Ephesians 4:32 "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, **just as in Christ God forgave you.**

Colossians 3:13 "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive **as the Lord forgave you.**

How do we want God to feel and act toward us when we sin against him?

Isn't that the comparison the Bible is making?

But what if the offender has not asked for forgiveness or they even continue to hurtfully sin against me?

Listen to Jesus:

Luke 6:27-36 "But I tell you who hear me: **Love your enemies**, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, **pray for those who mistreat you**. <sup>29</sup> If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. <sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. <sup>31</sup> Do to others as you would have them do to you. <sup>32</sup> "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even `sinners' love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even `sinners' do that. <sup>34</sup> And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even `sinners' lend to `sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. <sup>35</sup> But love your enemies, **do good to them**, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. <sup>36</sup> **Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.**

I don't know what "turning the other cheek" means in every situation. But I do know it has to do with my attitude toward that person and my desire for their good rather than their harm.

It is no wonder Alexander Pope said, "To err is human, to forgive, divine."

To forgive, as God asks us to forgive, is something which God will have to empower us to do.

But the question is, are we willing? Are we even willing to be made willing?

But how do I forgive when I can't forget what they've done?

Maybe not forgetting is God's gift to us.

Forgiveness is at its best when the offense is remembered not when it is forgotten.

God gives us continual opportunity to remember his forgiveness of us and renew our forgiveness of others.

Michael Wilkins, a Free Church minister and professor at Talbot Seminary writes of his anger directed at his stepfather who caused him and his family much pain.

When Michael was in Vietnam his anger toward his stepfather turned to rage and he vowed that when he saw him next he would kill him.

But when Michael returned from war he became a Christian and his world changed.

Four years later the stepfather found Michael who by then was married with a young child of his own.

Michael's wife invited his stepfather into the home.

As Michael talked with him he suddenly blurted out, "I made a vow in Vietnam that the first time I saw you, I would kill you. Today is that day."

Terror came over the face of the stepfather but Michael quickly added, "But now I know that I'm no better person than you. God has forgiven me. And if he can forgive a sinner like me, I can forgive you."

"I will not allow you to hurt my family again, so don't think that this (forgiveness) is made out of weakness. Rather, I forgive you because I have been forgiven."

Wilkins said he was personally as shocked by his own words as was his stepfather.

He writes, "I was deeply aware of the mercy and forgiveness that God had extended to me. I knew my sin better than anyone. I may not (have done the things my stepfather did but in other ways I had used and abused people) in my own self-seeking way. When I came to that awareness, I knew that I needed mercy and forgiveness. And in receiving the gift of life that Jesus extended to me through his work on the cross, extending forgiveness to my stepfather was a natural response... I discovered that the key to forgiveness is to stop

focusing on what others have done **to** us and focus instead on what Jesus has done **for** us.” (Wilkins in Matthew The NIV Life Application Commentary, 636-7).

“Father forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”