

Robert Vannoy, Lord's Prayer, Message #4

“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”

If you recall the beginning of the series, I mentioned in Matthew chapter 6, when the Lord gave the prayer that has become known as “The Lord’s Prayer” to his disciples, he did that saying, in Matthew 6:9: “After this manner, therefore pray ye.” Certainly I think that in the Lord’s Prayer, there is much for our instruction both with respect to things we should pray for as well as how we should go about it. The Lord’s Prayer, when you subject it to careful study, is an extremely rich passage of Scripture. It is a very carefully constructed prayer, I have discussed something of that in all of the messages. You get basically three beginning petitions concerning God: his name, his kingdom and his will. And then you come to three petitions that concern our needs: our daily sustenance--our daily bread, our forgiveness of sin, and our deliverance from temptation. There is also an opening to the prayer and a conclusion of the prayer. It is a carefully constructed prayer.

I’d like this morning to center your attention on the fifth petition, which is in Matthew 6:12, “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” This is the second of the three petitions that concern our needs: “forgive us our sins as we forgive others.” I would like us to consider that petition under these three headings. If we truly pray this petition “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” I think we do three things. First, we acknowledge our guilt before God--“Forgive our debts.” Secondly, we request God’s forgiveness--“forgive us.” And thirdly, we extend our own forgiveness to others--“as we forgive our debtors.”

So first of all, we acknowledge our guilt before God. Most concretely, through the prayer, in all sincerity, it is first of all confession. It is a confession that we are debtors, that we are guilty before God. I think if you reflect on our own confession of sinfulness and of our guilt before God, particularly as God’s children. I think that very often, that confession comes perhaps a bit too easily. If and when it does come there is something basically wrong with the confession. I think it’s possible that when we understand the biblical teaching concerning the depravity of man and sinfulness of man and how all men descended from Adam by natural generation of sinful man by

nature itself, you become aware of that. Theologically, we are aware of the implications of that, and then we can say, perhaps very easily and readily, “I am a sinner, there is no good thing in me. My heart is deceitful and desperately wicked.” In so doing we can become immune to the seriousness of that confession. The confession can become rather common place, taken for granted and rather trivial. We might not feel any worse than anyone else. We are aware that we all share in that fallen human state, but we don’t feel any worse than anybody else either. How often do we say in all earnestness as Paul did, that “we are the chief of sinners.” Isn’t it possible that sometimes we take comfort in the fact, that sin is part of the human condition. Then that very fact, perhaps, sometimes in a very subtle way when we confess our sins, it can be a subtle form of self-justification, “Oh really, I’m no worse than anyone else, we’re all sinners.” Therefore we confess our sin in a rather brief and insincere way.

So we must question, when we confess our guilt before God, are we really being honest? Or are we simply easing our conscience, with a sort of superficial kind of confession of guilt? I think we ought to reflect on that. We often unthoughtfully attach a phrase to the end of our prayers “and forgive us our sins.” I think so often we don’t really take that too seriously. Do we perhaps even forget to ask forgiveness in our prayers, because we are so intent on asking our petitions. So it is a matter of our own guilt, our own sinfulness. Does it even enter into our prayer life?

You notice further that this word “debts” is in the plural, an acknowledgement of our guilt before God, “forgive us our debts.” But it’s in the plural, it’s not seen in general. I think it is when we persist in a sinful action that we’re often prone to easily ask for forgiveness for sin in general, and never get into the specifics. To get to the specifics requires reflection on our own conduct. It requires effort, it requires time, it requires sensitivity to the works of the Holy Spirit in our lives, it requires the knowledge of Scripture of what God requires of us. So that we can come before God and not simply ask for forgiveness of sin in general but be specific. Ask for forgiveness for this act, for this fault, for this word, for this deed, which was not what it should have been. I think that often, even now confession of guilt before God can become dishonest and self-protective, a form of fooling ourselves into facing that we

humble ourselves before God when really at least for a degree retain something of our own self-righteousness.

Now when we truly pray “forgive us our debts,” in the fullness of the meaning of that, we will be seriously and honestly concerned with our guilt before God. We will be fully aware of how basically selfish we are, and how often the good that we do is done with the wrong motives. Our prayer will then be one of the honesty of David in Psalm 51. Psalm 51 is a great psalm. David cries out with the awareness of his sin and pleads for the mercy of God: “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned. Hide thy face from my sins, blot out all my iniquities. Create a clean heart in me.” That sort of spirit should characterize our own confession of our guilt before God. So first of all, when we truly pray that petition we will acknowledge our guilt before God.

Secondly, we request God’s forgiveness. You notice that the petition is with God, the Lord taught his disciples through pray to ask for God’s forgiveness. When you reflect on that I think it becomes immediately apparent that only God’s children can pray this prayer. Remember the prayer began, “Our father which art in heaven” and with those who have become the children of God, there are the ones who have faith in Christ, who can ask for God’s forgiveness. But when you reflect on it further, I think that we encounter some theological questions that bring you right to the heart of the Gospel, and that is the gospel of the atonement. How can God forgive? How can we be told to ask God to forgive? As Paul pointed out in Romans: “how can God be just and the justifier of those that believe?” How is that possible?

Something that has been very helpful to me in reflecting on this matter of forgiveness and of the gospel and atonement generally and the theological issues involved in that is the discussion of J. Oliver Buswell in his *Systematic Theology*, in his section on the atonement. And he says some things in that text that relate to forgiveness, in the relationship of forgiveness to the atonement that I think are quite helpful for our understanding. Not only for the forgiveness of Christ, of God, for our

sins through the work of Christ, but also for the forgiveness that we extend to other people. Buswell says, and I quote from him, “I believe that all genuine forgiveness involves substitutional suffering, wholly commensurate with the dis-value of that which is forgiven.” Now that’s an interesting statement. It may take a while to penetrate. Here he says, he thinks that all genuine forgiveness whether you’re talking about divine forgiveness or human forgiveness, “All forgiveness involves substitutional suffering wholly commensurate with the dis-value of that which is forgiven.” Because all forgiveness, human or divine, is in the very nature of case vicarious or substitutional. The guilt of one individual’s sin against another cannot morally be transferred to a third party. It appears a person offended by another person and this person is guilty because of the guilt of the person that guilt cannot morally be transferred to some third party. We have the offender and one offended. Because Moses and Paul prayed that they might become a substitute for Israel and bear their guilt, but it was morally impossible. For they were third parties in the affair. The sin was between God and Israel. You can’t have that third party. None of them can by any means redeem another or give a ransom for him, Psalms 49:7.

When we say that Christ died, as our substitute, we do not in any sense imply that he was a third party, thus in between God and man. “The guilt of one individual sin against another can morally be born either by the sinner, as in case of justice without forgiveness, or by the one sinned against in the case of forgiveness.” This is key to what Buswell is saying, Christ was not a third party in the affair at Calvary. He was God, you have to remember that. He was the God-man, but he was God against whom that sin and every sin in the last analysis was committed. No movement or system of theology could ever comprehend the meaning of death of Jesus Christ. But in the word “atonement,” that one word, Buswell says that it is more fully comprehended than in any other human formula. When the son of God being hanged on a gibbet of shame by the sons of men he said, “Father forgive them.” Instead of saying, “angelic hosts destroy them,” he did in the most unimaginable way substitute himself, that is in Christ, who was the substitute, for his own he took their sin in his own body on the tree. What a wonderful Savior!

The fifth petition acknowledges we are sinners, we have broken God's law. There are only two alternatives either we must pay the penalty of our sins or we can be forgiven. But to be forgiven, suffering fully commensurate with the value of that which is forgiven is required, a sin against, a dis-value. You can't take that and transfer it to a third party. For the conclusion is that when we ask for forgiveness, we're asking for something that is unthinkable and unimaginable. Yet it was given to us by divine revelation. We are asking that God, the holy God, the creator of the universe, take our guilt upon himself. Shouldn't we view with amazement, that forgiveness of sin made possible by the atoning work of Christ. For one may truly pray this petition, "forgive our debts as we forgive others," first of all is to acknowledge and confess our own guilt. Secondly, we ask God's forgiveness, and in doing that we are realizing that the suffering, the guilt, that God himself bore in order to provide for us that forgiveness.

Then thirdly, we extend our forgiveness to others. Scripture says, "forgive us our debts AS we forgive our debtors." I think there is a great deal of misunderstanding often about this last phrase. Certainly it does not mean that our forgiving of others should be an example for God. Nor does it mean that God conditions his forgiving of us based on our forgiving of others. We don't plead for forgiveness on the basis of our forgiving of others. It's nothing like that, we don't merit God's forgiveness of us. But what is said here in that word "as" is that there is a relationship between our forgiveness of one another and the forgiveness of God that we receive through the atoning work of Christ. The word "as" is not the same as "because." It's not "forgive our debt BECAUSE we forgive our debtors." It simply means that there's a relationship, not a cause.

In Luke 11:4 in the other time when Christ gave this prayer, we read: "forgive our debts, for indeed, we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us." Now the relationship is between our forgiving and God's forgiving, I think is something that is expressed very beautifully in verses 30-32, where we read that we are to be "kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven you." God has forgiven us, and as God has forgiven us, we realize that, and

we extend our forgiveness to others. Colossians 3:13 “Forbearing one another, forgiving one another, if any men have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.”

I think that this petition was two parts. “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” can be compared with the first and second table of the law. You know in the ten commandments, the first set of commandments concern our relationship with God. The second set of commandments concern our relationship with our neighbor. All the law is summarized in: love God with all your heart and your neighbors as yourself. You cannot truly love God, if you don’t love your neighbor. You cannot truly love your neighbor, if you don’t love God. There is a relationship between the two parts of the law. It is interesting that in Galatians 5:14, when Paul speaks to that close connection between the first and the second table of the law. Paul says, “all the law is fulfilled in one word.” Not two, but one word. And what is that? “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” You can’t go around and say you love God if you don’t love your neighbor. The two cannot be separated. Someone who truly loves God will love his neighbor. I think that the same kind of relationship is involved here. You cannot settle down and say that your sins have been forgiven, if you are not forgiving others yourself.

Remember the story that Christ himself told in Matthew 18, we don’t have time to look at that, but it is the story of the one who had this great debt and it was forgiven him. He claimed he would repay it but there was no way he could repay it, and so it was forgiven. Then he goes out and he grabbed someone who owed him a few pennies, and said “pay me what you owe me!” And the lord at the end of that, in Matthew 18, at the end of that parable, said, in verse 32, “O you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt, because you sought me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant,” and then there this expression, “even as I had pity on you? And his lord was angry and delivered him to the inquisitor until he could pay all that was due him. So likewise will my heavenly father do unto you if you from your heart forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses.” Now that’s strong.

I think that when you look at the history of the church, you see so much, even

in our time, and in the past times, of this unforgiving spirit. How can this be? There's an inseparable relationship between God forgiving of us and our forgiving of other people. Not as a reason or ground of God's forgiveness, but as something that accompanies it and flows from it. I think we should examine ourselves. Are we characterized by a forgiving spirit? Then remember, as Dr. Buswell pointed out, true forgiveness will cost. It's not easy. It doesn't come cheap. It cost God his Son. It costs substitutional suffering, wholly commensurate with dis-value of that which is forgiven. The greater the offense, the greater the cost of forgiveness. Yet even as Christ forgave you, so also, do you.

In conclusion, let me just read a statement from Thomas Watson on forgiving others. He says on forgiving others: "It is a sign of God's forgiving us. It's not a cause of God's forgiving us but a sign. We may not climb up into heaven to receive whether our sins are forgiven. Let us look into our own hearts and see if we can forgive others. If we can, we need not doubt that God has forgiven us." May each of us always truly pray, "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." And in so doing, confess our guilt – truly confess our guilt – ask for God's forgiveness, and then extend our forgiveness to others. Let us pray.

Our Father, we stand amazed at the greatness of your love for us. We thank you again that you sent your son into the world, to take on human flesh and to suffer and to die, to make atonement for our sins, that we might be forgiven. We pray, Father, that you will increase our love for you, our awareness of all that you've done for us and that by your Spirit you would help us to be characterized by a forgiving spirit towards others. For we ask it, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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