

Forgive us Our Debts

NLT Luke 15:1-2,11-32

1 Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach.
2 This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such despicable people-- even eating with them! 3 So ...11 Jesus told them this story:

"A man had two sons. 12 The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now, instead of waiting until you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. 13 "A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and took a trip to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money on wild living.

14 About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. 15 He persuaded a local farmer to hire him to feed his pigs. 16 The boy became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

17 "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired men have food enough to spare, and here I am, dying of hunger! 18 I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, 19 and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired man."' "

20 "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.

21 His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. '

22 "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. 23 And kill the calf

we have been fattening in the pen. We must celebrate with a feast, 24 for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.'

So the party began.

25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, 26 and he asked one of the servants what was going on.

27 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the calf we were fattening and has prepared a great feast. We are celebrating because of his safe return.'

28 "The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, 29 but he replied, 'All these years I've worked hard for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. 30 Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the finest calf we have.'

31 "His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you and I are very close, and everything I have is yours. 32 We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'"

According to the King James Version, in the 12th verse of the 6th chapter of Matthew's Gospel Jesus tells his disciples to pray like this, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

That sounds straight forward enough.

However, if you've ever attended a funeral or a wedding or other ecumenical service where everybody is asked to say Lord's Prayer together, you know that this line, this verse of the prayer often comes out all mumbled and stuttered and garbled up. Of all the petitions of Lord's Prayer, it is this one where our different traditions, and different denominations really make a difference.

I did a quick search of how this verse appears in the prayer books and liturgies of the various churches represented in our ministerium. Here's what I found.

When it comes to this fifth petition, the Roman Catholics and majority of Methodists ask God to forgive their “trespass”. Turns out that God knows that you've been sneaking around, and hanging out, where you shouldn't be.

Our Lutheran friends, whose theology grew out of Luther's overwhelming need for self-depreciation and humility before God, will confess not just their “trespasses” but their outright “sins” as well.

The Baptists, consistent with their tradition of strong morality, may declare that they “do wrong.” Or, they may not. It all depends on the Baptist.

The Episcopalians, with love for high language and high liturgy, acknowledge that, indeed, they do “transgress.” Whatever that means.

Finally, we Presbyterians, with our great affinity for all matters of accounting and finance, here in the Lord's Prayer admit to God our "debts." Despite what our balance sheet may indicate.

Anyone, any church here, whose unique version of this verse I missed? Even if there were, it doesn't matter, you're guilty too. All of you. All of us. We are guilty in God's eyes.

Even more remarkable than the diverse way that this line of Jesus' prayer gets recited within our churches, is the fact that of all the petitions found in the Lord's Prayer, this is the only one that comes with a condition attached to it.

Guilty as we are, of sins or trespasses, of wrongs or of debts or of transgressions, we pray for God's forgiveness – but - and here's the catch - only if, only after, only when, we first forgive. What we are saying in this verse each and every time we pray it is this, "God forgive me, but only after I have first forgiven."

As hard as it is for a Presbyterian to include the words ' my choice' in any sentence concerning forgiveness, in Jesus' prayer it appears that that is just the kind of decision Jesus sets before us.

In teaching us to pray, "God forgive me, just as I forgive," Jesus gives us the opportunity to forgive others or to not. To release what bad has been done, what offense has been committed against us, or to cling fast to it. And depending on which we chose, this verse proclaims, affects the choice God makes when it comes to forgiving our sin.

These words should give us pause, every time we pray them, as this choice is critical to our spiritual health, and our spiritual longevity, because choosing to forgive, or to not

forgive, is a choice that comes with a profound consequence.

And that brings us to this parable of Jesus, the story of the Prodigal Son.

Speaking about forgiveness in light of this parable, it's important to remember who was there in the audience when Jesus first told it. Luke says there were two very distinct groups listening to him teach that day – the tax collectors and some other terrible sinners, and the Pharisees.

Without delving too far into the social strata of life in Jesus' day, for simplicity's sake let's just say that first group, the tax collectors and sinners, were the bad apples. The others, the Pharisees, the devout, the righteous, saintly, they were the good ones.

As both groups listen to this story of two brothers, I imagine that there's quite a different reaction.

What would have been crystal clear to Jesus audience was how similar the younger son, who plays fast and free with his father's life savings, who blows his inheritance on cheap wine and cheap women, who drags family name down with him into the mud of the pig sty. - how similar he is to the bad apples in the crowd.

In the same way, the self-righteous Pharisees would have been drawing lots of parallels between the elder, responsible, dependable, goody-two-shoes son, who always does what he's told the first time, and their own walk with the Lord.

And as Jesus told about how that younger reaped what he sowed, that he ended up jealous of the slop he fed to the hogs, certainly everyone would have been nodding in agreement - Yes, certainly, the sinful deserve as much - to fall from son to slave, to hold the lowest place in the pecking order, to wallow in the mud, the mess which they

themselves have made of their lives. The sinners would have felt humbled and convicted, the Pharisees, proud, smiling inside, as they considered their own clean hands, clean records, clean living.

Then Jesus, in that shocking, surprising way of his, flips the story on its head. Just when it looks like the sinner is about to get what he deserves, and the righteous son to receive his due reward, Jesus sends repentance and forgiveness crashing through the roof.

This turning point comes when the younger son realizes that his only hope lies in crawling back to the one he's most grievously offended. Realizing that he has done great wrong, that he's sinned, that he's transgressed, against both his earthly and his heavenly fathers, the younger son formulates a plan that will at best, allow him just to survive.

His plan is a bold one. Swallowing his pride, he determines to turn back, and to offer himself as his father's slave. He holds no delusion of a warm reception. He returns to his home fully-prepared to take the lowest post in the household. He knows he deserves no better. He goes on his knees, prepared to forfeit all rights, all conditions, all claims, all hope of parole.

That is true repentance. That is what fairness, what righteousness requires. The sinner knows in his heart that true justice can be done only when his father points him towards the servant's quarters, and turns his back to him, forever.

Of course that's not what happens. Instead, Jesus says that even before the young man can get his well rehearsed confession out of his mouth, his father starts calling for robes and for rings, for someone to light the grill, and spread the table with the good china.

Even while his starving, ragged, stinking to high heaven excuse for a son is still a long way off, Jesus says, the father forgives him, the father runs out to welcome him home, the father clothes him with robes befitting the master's beloved child.

And then, Jesus says, the party begins.

The father's forgiveness brings joy and reunion, forgiveness initiates celebration and restoration in a place where there was before only grief and loss.

That in its self is a powerful lesson in forgiveness. But Jesus isn't finished. (And neither, incidentally, am I.)

As much as the father has chosen to forgive the repentant sinner, so the elder son, still working hard to satisfy his father's will, does not. His response to the father's grace, to the father's generosity, the father's unconditional redemption of his worthless younger brother is disbelief, and exasperation. The elder son looks around and declares that his father is totally irrational, completely insane.

The elder chooses not follow his father's example, he does not forgive his brother. Instead, he chooses to stew and simmer in his anger, in his brother's offense against their family, against their name, against all that is decent and honorable and proper. And the elder brother refuses to join the party. He remains outside his father's tent.

There is a consequence to not forgiving, and the elder brother bears it.

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest and writer, in his reflection on this parable, a book called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, says this:

“It is through constant forgiveness that we become like [our Heavenly Father.]

Forgiveness from the heart is very, very difficult. It is next to impossible. Jesus said to his disciples: 'When your brother wrongs you seven times a day and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I am sorry,' you must forgive him.'

I have often said, "I forgive you," but even as I said these words my heart remained angry or resentful. I still wanted to hear the story that tells me that I was right after all; I still wanted to hear apologies and excuses; I still wanted the satisfaction of receiving some praise in return – if only the praise for being so forgiving!

But God's forgiveness is unconditional; it comes from a heart that does not demand anything for itself, a heart that is completely empty of self-seeking. It is this divine forgiveness that I have to practice in my daily life. It calls me to keep stepping over all my arguments that say forgiveness is unwise, unhealthy, and impractical. It challenges me to step over all my needs for gratitude and compliments. Finally, it demands of me that I step over that wounded part of my heart that feels hurt and wronged and that wants to stay in control and put a few conditions between me and the one whom I am asked to forgive.

This "stepping over" is the authentic discipline of forgiveness. Maybe it is more "climbing over" than "stepping over." Often I have to climb over the wall of arguments and angry feelings that I have erected between myself and all those whom I love but who so often do not return that love. It is a wall of fear of being used or hurt again. It is a wall of pride, and the desire to stay in control. But every time that I can step or climb over that wall, I enter into the house where the Father dwells, and there touch my neighbor with genuine compassionate love.

...Only when I remember that I am the Beloved Child, [that I am the younger son,] can I welcome those who want to return with the same compassion as that with which the Father welcomes me.”¹

Heavenly Father, “Forgive us our trespasses, forgive us our debts, forgive us our wrongs and our transgressions, forgive us our sins – just as we forgive others.

And with your help, Father, in and through our Lord Jesus Christ, may we enter into your tent, full of a joy that only comes by giving and receiving grace. Amen. And amen.

¹ Nouwen, Henri. *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. pg. 129.