

## Notes

**"O God, Forgive Us"**Matthew 6:12; Jerry Truex; Sept. 4, 2016

---

**A. Introduction**

Today we are looking at the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer. A Petition is a request, so the Fifth Petition is a request that God forgive us.

**Matt. 6:12.** And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (NRS)

At every level and layer of the early Jesus traditions, we find that forgiving others and being forgiven by God is absolutely central. It is a core teaching of the historical Jesus. We know that divine forgiveness was central to Jesus because we find it in his sayings, parables, miracles story, exorcisms, and even on his lips at the moment of his death.

**Sayings:**

**Mark 11:25.** "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses." (NRS)

**Matthew 5:23-24.** "So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (NRS)

**Matt. 5:43-45.** <sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be children of your Father in heaven ..." (NRS)

**Luke 23:33-34.** <sup>33</sup> When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his

left.<sup>34</sup> Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (NRS)

### Parables:

For example, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son – Luke 15:11-32—we hear about a father who not only forgives his son, who had cursed the father and left the family, but also about a father who races to embrace the son when the son returns home.

### Miracles:

For example, in the Healing of the Paralytic—Mark 2:1-12—we hear Jesus announce God's forgiveness and then heal a paralytic man, who had been dropped down through the roof by friends.

The point is, learning *to accept God's forgiveness* and learning *to forgive others* who have wronged us is the heart of Jesus' spirituality. I don't think we can claim to be Christians, unless we practice *receiving forgiveness from God* and *granting forgiveness to others*.

When we practice forgiveness, we not only imitate Jesus, but we also give and receive emotional healing. When we practice forgiveness, we actualize the Reign of God in our hearts and in our world.

So let's look more closely at the Fifth Petition.

## B. Fifth petition: "Forgive us"

### 1. Different versions

**Matt. 6:12** And **forgive** us our debts, as we also **have forgiven** our debtors. (NRS)  
 και **ἄφες** ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν ὡς και ἡμεῖς **ἀφήκαμεν** τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν.

**Matt. 6:14-15** For if you **forgive** others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also **forgive** you; but if you do not **forgive** others, neither will your Father **forgive** your trespasses. (NRS)

Ἐὰν γὰρ **ἀφῆτε** τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν **ἀφήσει** καὶ ὑμῖν ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος· ἐὰν δὲ μὴ **ἀφῆτε** τοῖς ἀνθρώποις οὐδὲ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν **ἀφήσει** τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν

**Luke 11:4a** And **forgive** us our sins, for we ourselves **forgive** everyone indebted to us. (NRS)

καὶ **ἄφες** ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ **ἀφίομεν** παντὶ ὀφείλοντι ἡμῖν·

The fifth petition— “Forgive us of our debts” —has three different versions in the English: Forgive us of our debts, sins, and trespasses. The meaning of all three “refers to one’s failure before God,”<sup>1</sup> but there are differences.

## 2. Spiritual problem

### a. Debts

Matthew 6:12 uses the Greek word ὀφείλημα (*opheilēma*), which is translated “debts.” In the Aramaic, the original language of Jesus, the word Jesus probably used was, *hoba’*, which means both financial debt and sin.<sup>2</sup>

As a *commercial term* it refers to what we owe—money or something like that. But as a *religious term*, it is a metaphor for what we owe God. So Matthew is saying, “God, please forgive us for what we owe you, what we should have given you, but have not.”

What do we owe God? To live up to God’s purposes for human beings. To manifest the image and likeness of God. To be conformed to the image of Christ. To realize the fruit of the Spirit.

<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, Texas: Wood, 1982) 312.

<sup>2</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 290

Yes. That is all true. Matthew may have in mind the *religious sense* of "debt," as we just noted, but Matthew uses a *commercial term*, "debts," when he could have used the *religious term*, "sins," as Luke? Why?

"The problem of debt was very serious in Jesus' time. When the revolutionaries took over the Temple at the start of the Jewish war against the Romans, thirty years after Jesus' day, the first thing they did was to burn the records of debt. The early church thought that Jesus was talking about actual debts."<sup>3</sup>

And that makes sense, because the earliest Christians thought that Jesus had announced that the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated and, when the Kingdom of God comes, there will be economic, political, and social justice, including actual debt forgiveness.

### **b. Sins**

Luke 11:4 uses the Greek word ἁμαρτίας (*hamarias*), which is translated "sins." Sin refers to three things:

- 1) Violating God's will or God's moral law
- 2) Missing the mark of God's ideal (Rom. 3:23)<sup>4</sup>
- 3) Not trusting God (Rom. 14:23)<sup>5</sup>

### **c. Trespasses**

Matthew 5:14-15 we find the word παράπτωμα (*paraptōma*), which is translated "trespasses." Literally, *paraptōma* refers to a "false step"—either crossing a line that was not permitted or walking off the narrow path that God sets before us.

## **5. Spiritual solution is forgiveness (*aphiēmi*)**

### **a. A basic need**

In Judaism, forgiveness is a basic human need.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) 40.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 3:23. "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (NRS).

<sup>5</sup> Romans 14:23. "But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." (NRS)

<sup>6</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 290, n. 331.

**Psalm 103:10-13.** <sup>10</sup> He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. <sup>11</sup> For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; <sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. <sup>13</sup> As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. (NRS)

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter the holy place and atone for his sins and for all Israel. It was the holiest day of the year and this day of forgiveness structured the consciousness of the Jewish calendar. When the high priest entered the holy of holies, he would say,

*"O God, I have committed iniquity, transgressed, and sinned before you, I and my house. O God, forgive the iniquities and transgression and sins which I have committed and transgressed and sinned before you, I and my house" (m. Yoma 3:8).*

Jews understood that forgiveness was a basic need of human beings.

### **b. Imitate God's example**

God provides ultimate forgiveness for human beings and, in that way, God also provided the example for us to imitate. The language of the Fifth Petition is imitation language. Let's look at Matt. 6:12 again.

**Matt. 6:12** And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
(NRS)

καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν  
τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν.

This verse seems to say that we must be willing to forgive others just as God forgives us. Our forgiveness is compared to God's.

Notice that we have a simple comparison expressed by the word "as". In Greek it is the adverb ὡς. Divine forgiveness is compared to human forgiveness. Thus Matthew 6:12 seems to say that God forgives, so we must forgive.

God's forgiveness is a model for us to imitate. The use of the term "as" expresses a call to imitate God and God's character. We find this elsewhere in the Bible.

**Matt. 5:48.** Be perfect, therefore, as [ὡσπερ] your heavenly Father is perfect.

**Luke 6:36.** Be merciful, just as [καθὼς] your Father is merciful.

### c. If forgiveness conditional?

However, just after the Lord's Prayer concludes, Matthew adds two more verses that seem to make our forgiveness of other people necessary for God to forgive us.<sup>7</sup>

**Matt. 6:14-15** For if you **forgive** others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also **forgive** you; but if you do not **forgive** others, neither will your Father **forgive** your trespasses. (NRS)

Ἐὰν γὰρ **ἀφῆτε** τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν **ἀφήσει** καὶ ὑμῖν ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος. ἐὰν δὲ μὴ **ἀφῆτε** τοῖς ἀνθρώποις οὐδὲ ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν **ἀφήσει** τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν

The question becomes this: Is God's forgiveness of us dependent on our forgiving others? Is the only thing that prevents us from being forgiven by God is our failure to forgive others?

Scholars debate this.

- John Dominic Crossan argues that God forgives all sins and debts and that Divine forgiveness is never conditional.<sup>8</sup> God not only forgives this or that sin, but also—or especially—our lack of human forgiveness.
- Dale Allison argues that verses 14-15 make forgiving others necessary for our forgiveness.<sup>9</sup>

I'm inclined to agree with Allison at least when it comes to Matthew's viewpoint. For Matthew, asking forgiveness of God is vain without our willingness to forgive others for the wrongs they have done to us.

<sup>7</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer. Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer* (New York: HarperOne, 2011) 160.

<sup>8</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer. Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer* (New York: HarperOne, 2011) 161.

<sup>9</sup> Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount. Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 127.

"We cannot expect God to do for us what we will not do for other. It is the merciful who receive mercy (Matt. 5:7)."<sup>10</sup>

Of course, this does not mean that God's forgiveness of us is something that we earn or that our forgiving of others is a "bargaining chip" to manipulate God. God's forgiveness is entirely up to God. We cannot earn God's forgiveness

I would add this important note. Notice that forgiveness is something that *we must receive* and, according to Matthew, forgiveness cannot be received or become effective without forgiving others. When I am willing to forgive others, I am able to believe that God might forgive me. What I'm saying is that my willingness to forgive others is *psychologically necessary* before I can accept that God accepts and forgives me.

I would paraphrase Matthew 6:14-15 this way: "My willingness to forgive others is the *necessary psychological condition* that allows me to believe that God, who is infinitely more merciful than me, wills to forgive me also."

This same logic is expressed in 1 John 4:20 on love. Only when I love others can I experience and receive the love God has for me.

**1 John 4:20** Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (1Jo 4:20 NRS)

## 6. Spiritual obstacles

### a. Pride

To receive forgiveness, we often have to deal with our pride or arrogance. Our "egos" don't want to admit failure or fault.

When we are driven by pride, we retain our grudges against people and against God. We become *passive aggressive* toward God and others.

---

<sup>10</sup> Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount. Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 127.

Being *passive aggressive* refers to acting in a way that looks agreeable and pleasing on the surface—agreeable to God or agreeable to other people—but in the end you resent God or you intend to hurt or frustrate people.

For example, your partner asks you to do something for her by a certain date. You agree to do it, but then you forget about it until after the date has passed, and she has to suffer the consequences.

Asking forgiveness depends on admitting our faults and not retain our grudges. That requires humility, the opposite of arrogance.

**2 Chronicles 7:14** if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (NRS)

**James 4:10.** Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. (NRS)

**Micah 6:8.** He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (NRS)

**1 Pet. 5:6.** Humble yourselves therefore under the might power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up. (JDT)

### **b. The evil one**

Right after the Fifth Petition about receiving and granting forgiveness, we say the Sixth Petition about being delivered from the Evil One.

**Matt. 6:13.** And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. (NRS)

It is not a coincidence that Jesus invites us to be forgiveness-of-sins people and then warns us about Evil One.

Just when we are about to admit our faults to God and ask forgiveness, the Evil One tempts us to say, "We don't need God's forgiveness." Or, just when we are about to forgive someone who has harmed us, the Evil One tempts us retain our grudge against that person, thereby derailing the healing, reconciling power of God.

### **C. Steps to forgiveness**

Glenn Stassen presents four steps to forgiveness:<sup>11</sup>

1. It faces the reality that a wrong or injustice, something hurtful or harmful, did happen. It does not pretend that nothing wrong happened. If nothing happened, there would be no need for forgiveness.
2. It is the way of deliverance that helps overcome the vicious cycle of bitterness and seeking revenge in which many people get stuck.
3. It is usually based on some kind of sharing of feelings or empathy—the awareness that I too have caused a hurt against someone else sometime in the past.
4. If forgiveness is complete, it states willingness to restore relationship, to have some kind of community with the guilty person, of course, this is not possible where the person still threatens violence against the one who is hurt.

### **D. Reflections and Discussion**

Summary: The Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer teaches us to *accept God's forgiveness* and to *forgive others* who have wronged us. Forgiveness is the center of Jesus' spirituality, the sign of God's Reign, the catalyst for our inner healing, and the antidote for violence in the world.

---

<sup>11</sup> This is almost verbatim from Glenn Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006) 121-22.