

Forgive Us Our Debts...

Մեզի ներէ՛ Մեր Պարտքերը

Matthew 18:23-35

Colossians 2:11-15

Sevan has a very unusual story about the debts she owed the American University of Beirut. While she was a student in the 1980's, she got a loan from the University to be paid 2 years after graduation. It was 11,960 Lebanese Pounds (around \$3,500 at the time). After graduation, she was away for a year, then the war intensified and she eventually forgot about it. No one was paying their debts anyway. About 10 years later, one day during Bible study, the Holy Spirit convicted her and she decided to go AUB and pay back. She was very worried not knowing how much she owed. The Lebanese money had tremendously devaluated and the loan was equal to \$8. However, she did not know whether she owed \$8, \$3500 or more.

The next day she went to the financial aid office and presented her case to the manager who looked into the files and said, "Do you remember when the College Hall was the target to a terrorist attack in 1991? All the loan files were burnt. **Your debt is cancelled!** You may make a donation, if you wish."

The debt was fully paid.

Wouldn't you love to see your bank do the same for your house mortgage? Suddenly your mortgage would be cancelled and your debts paid.

We move on to the fifth petition in the Lord's Prayer. This is a difficult one to pray. Asking for our daily bread is good. Asking for daily bread for the neighbors and for the community is very important. Jesus moves further in leading us to pray for the liberation of the soul from sin. Asking God for forgiveness is not easy. I believe that is a problem humanity faces. Why do I need to pray to God saying, "Forgive me"? What have I done? Do I owe God anything? Why debt? Whose debt?

-Debts or Sins:

Luke's version uses the word **sin** (*hamartias*). "...and forgive us our sins" (Luke 11:4) While Matthew says, "Forgive us our debts" (Matthew 6:12).

Who is right, Luke to Matthew? Both words are correct, sins and debts. Each gospel was written for a different audience and context.

Matthew predominately addressed the Jews. Jews were people of the covenant. Therefore Jews looked at Gentiles as sinners. To have "a debt" towards God meant that the person had fallen short of keeping the commandment. Therefore the person was indebted.

Luke addressed the Gentiles. Therefore, he used the words "sin" and was not worried about offending his audience.

Coming back to Matthew's gospel, some translated the word debt as "sins" such (International Standard Version, New Living Translation): "Forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us."

However, in classical Armenian *Krapar*, the phrase is *zbardis mer* (*our debts*) and in vernacular Armenian *ashkharapar* it is *mer bardkere* (*our debts*, like the original Greek).

The word in Greek is **opheilēma**. It means: 1. that which is owed; that which is justly or legally due, a debt. 2. Metaphorically: offence, sin.

In those days, the word **debt** (*opheilēma*) is used in **the commercial world** referring to someone who owes money. Interestingly, **to forgive** (*aphiēmi*) someone also comes from the commercial world. It means to cancel a debt or erase the numbers in a business ledger. It means you do not owe anything to the person anymore. Therefore, the early readers could identify with these words. "Your mortgage is canceled." They would understand the petition: "*Father in heaven, cancel our debts against you, as we also have canceled the debts of others.*" (Darrell Johnson) (the second part will be taken next week).

-What do we owe God? What did Jesus have in mind when he taught us to pray this way?

Helmut Thielicke says it: **“All of us have a great mortgage upon our life.”**¹ We failed in our obedience to God. We have failed in trusting God. That is a debt.

Darrell Johnson says: “We are in debt for all our failures to obey. It is an overwhelming and horrendous debt.”²

Paul says: **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:23 ESV). Some of us do not like this verse. Yet, it is the reality of our fallen world. Sin means we have missed the mark. What was the mark? We were created to worship God. We were created to take care of the Garden of Eden. We were created to have fellowship with our Daddy, Abba. After the Fall, we have created an enmity between God, ourselves and each other. God loves reconciliation. Have we reconciled with God and each other?

Do we have debts towards God?

Just go over the Ten Commandments. Let me go over some of them.

“You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:3)

“You shall not make for yourselves an idol.” (Exodus 20:4)

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” “Honor your father and your mother.” “You shall not murder.” “You shall not commit adultery.” “You shall not steal.” “You shall not give false testimony.” “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” (Exodus 20:5-17)

Some can say those are just Old Testament laws. How about in the New Testament? Jesus prayed the Lord’s Prayer in the middle of Sermon on the Mount.

See what Jesus says about our obedience to God:

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matthew 5:21-22 ESV)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28 ESV)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (Matthew 5:43-44 ESV)

- Do we have debts?

Origen (an early church father 185-254 A.D.) summed up in three points:

-First, the debt we owe to our fellow humans: to parents, to children, to strangers, to the poor, to the aged, to those in authority; to love our neighbor as we love ourselves; to love one another as Jesus loves us.

-Second, the debt we owe to ourselves: to our body, not to abuse it, to care for it as God’s temple;

-Third, the debt we owe to God: to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength; to trust God with all our needs and worries. ³

As I mentioned before, this petition is not a simple one. It is an essential prayer to examining our soul. How am I doing in my walk with the Lord? Am I transparent to God, my thoughts, my desires, my intentions, my motivations, and my life? Am I obedient to Him?

Here is the problem. **No one can do this alone.** The Israelites tried to do it alone and they failed. We cannot fix our lives without God’s interference.

Knowing our human condition, Jesus asked:

“Abba, daddy, your name be holy, your identity I acknowledge, I know you are holy, and you expect from me have a holy life, a different life, a separated life from the old. And Lord, I know I cannot do it alone. I ask for the daily bread every day, so I remember who I am and who you are. I remember that you are my provider. Then I come and ask for cancelling my debts. Oh God, I have many of them. Cancel my debts, Oh Lord.”

Paul said it well:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (Colossians 2:11-15)

Circumcision was a sign of belonging to God. Through Christ, we have a New Covenant with God. **Our new circumcision is to be IN CHRIST.** We have been buried with Christ in baptism. To be baptized in HIM is to enter into the water, to say goodbye to our old life and come out of water with a new life. “... **in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.**” God gave us a new life. He gave us a new chance, a new beginning. He cancelled our record of debts.

J. B. Phillips rendered Paul’s words this way: “Christ has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments which always hung over our heads, and has completely annulled it by nailing it over his own head on the cross.”⁴

Conclusion and Application:

-If Jesus canceled our debts, why did He pray: **“forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”**? (Matthew 6:12 ESV)

Jesus did cancel our debts, but we need to come to God daily and ask him “to wash our feet”. **Jesus gave us a full bath.** That is you are saved once. That was the act of Grace that Jesus did on the cross. However, **my feet need to be cleaned everyday.**

Let us close with two passages from the Psalms. They are prayers of self-examination, prayers of bringing our debts to God. This is my prayer for you. Next week we will continue the second part of the fifth petition: “as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah (Psalm 32:5 ESV)

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103:10-14 ESV)

Amen.

1. Helmut Thielicke, *The Prayer That Spans The World*, P 91.
2. Darrel Johnson, *Fifty Seven Words Changed the World*. P72
3. Origen, *On Prayer*, (trans. William A. Curtis; Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library)
4. Darrel Johnson, *Fifty Seven Words Changed the World*. P75