The Prayer We Thought We Knew, Part 4:
"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

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Scripture: Matthew 6:7-15

We don't like to talk much about "sin" in the Mainline Church. We're especially averse to talking about "sin and salvation."

I've always thought that's kind of weird.

We get uptight when religious leaders raise the subject of "sin," as if any mention of the word leads inevitably to shaming. Yet we readily speak about greed, racism, sexism, and all sorts of other harms we want to be freed from. Aren't these very things "sins"? Wouldn't freedom from them be a significant form of "salvation"?

I mention this linguistic discomfort because when we get to the line, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" in the Lord's Prayer—whether we call them debts or trespasses—we are wading into the murky waters of sin and salvation, at least if salvation means freedom from the burdens of sin.

Debt is about something owed because harm has been done. A trespass is a boundary crossed that should have been respected. Both are ways of describing sin. In fact, Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer uses "debt" and "sin" interchangeably. Where Matthew has "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," Luke has, "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us."

Whatever word we use, Jesus follows the Lord's Prayer with a startling warning: "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."

What are we supposed to do with that?

Is Jesus saying that God's grace is conditional—that God refuses to forgive us until we forgive everyone who has hurt us?

Before answering that question, it's important to be clear about what we mean by forgiveness.

When someone has harmed us, they owe us something. Perhaps an apology. Perhaps restitution. Perhaps changed behavior. Forgiveness, in its most basic sense, means releasing our claim on that debt. It does not mean pretending the debt was never real. It does not mean releasing someone from appropriate consequences. And it certainly does not mean consenting to further harm.

Nor does forgiveness necessarily mean reconciliation.

Sometimes a debt can be absorbed because we value the relationship more than we value what we are owed. In such cases, forgiveness can open the way toward reconciliation. Yet reconciliation requires something from both parties. If someone continues to harm us, shows no remorse, or cannot be trusted not to repeat the harm, restoring the relationship may be neither wise nor loving.

Sometimes the most faithful form of forgiveness is simply to write off the debt and move on.

No one who has ever lived, including Jesus himself, has lived without suffering harm from others. Often, significant harm. So we all carry a ledger of debts that are owed to us.

Sometimes those debts are paid. An apology is made. A wrong is righted. A behavior is changed. Sometimes, even, a ruptured relationship is re-established or renewed.

Yet what about those debts that we cannot ever expect to be repaid?

That apology that never came.
The childhood you should have had.
The protection someone failed to provide.
The recognition you were owed.
The fidelity that was promised.
The years someone took from you.
The acknowledgment that what happened really happened.

We may go on living apparently "normal" or even basically happy lives, yet as long as that debt remains unpaid and the account remains open, part of us can remain standing at the counter waiting for payment from someone who may never walk through the door.

What happens to us when someone genuinely owes us something they can never—or will never—repay?

Before moving on, I invite you to take a moment to locate in your body where these unpaid debts reside. Behind your forehead? In your heart? Your stomach? Or is the weight of these debts more generalized?

[Singing Bowl Meditation]

The debt may be real. We may have every right to expect payment. Yet if the person who owes us cannot or will not pay that debt, how long will we keep waiting at the counter?

There is something important here about the relationship between the two halves of Jesus's prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant gives us a clue. A servant owes his king an impossibly large debt. He begs for more time to repay it, even though repayment is essentially impossible. Instead, the king does something the servant hasn't even asked for: he releases him from the debt altogether.

Then the servant walks outside, finds someone who owes him a much smaller debt, grabs him by the throat, and demands payment.

The servant has received grace, but he is still living by the ledger.

He has been released from a debt he could never repay, yet he continues organizing his life around collecting what is owed to him.

Perhaps this is what Jesus is getting at when he connects receiving forgiveness with extending it. It isn't that God grudgingly withholds grace until we have forgiven everyone else. God's grace is already there. But grace cannot fully liberate us while we insist on continuing to live according to the old economy of payment.

Most of us can readily find significant gaps between what we expect of ourselves and what we actually do. These gaps leave us feeling regret, guilt, shame, or a sense of unworthiness.

We have been given the gift of life, yet have we always used that gift as we intended?

We have been given people to love, yet have we always loved them well?

We have been given bodies, abilities, opportunities, and this extraordinary world to inhabit, yet have we always treated these gifts—or one another—as we wish we had?

Of course, we've also made bad choices and decisions that, God or no God, can weigh us down many years or even decades after we made them.

So the ledger runs both ways. There are debts owed to us. There are debts we owe.

One more kind of debt should be named because it often goes unnoticed. I myself wasn't aware of this particular form of debt that, deep down, I felt was owed to me until a couple of years ago.

Many of you know that there was a time in my life when I experienced abuse in a church that was severe enough that, after over twenty-five years of happily serving churches, I decided I wanted to leave parish ministry altogether.

Over time, I did the hard work of forgiving the person who had caused the harm. I never reconciled with that person because I had no evidence that the harm would stop if I did. So by "forgiveness," I mean that I simply wrote off the debt I'd been clinging to. Letting go allowed me to receive the healing I so desperately needed.

Yet eventually I discovered someone else's name was still written in my ledger.

God.

Part of what made the experience in that church so painful was that I sincerely believed God had called me there. If I had really been following God, why had God not protected me? Why

had my devotion to following the Spirit's call led to so much pain? Was this really where it all led?

I prayed quite sincerely for God to show me a way out of parish ministry altogether—some other way I could serve—and that prayer seemed to be met with silence.

I was angry. Underneath the anger was a debt. I felt God owed me something—an explanation, perhaps. Some acknowledgment of what I had given. Some evidence that all those years of trying to follow faithfully had not simply brought me to a dead end.

Deep down, I was pretty sure God was innocent of the charges. Yet something in me still felt God owed me.

Then one night in prayer I simply said it:

"I forgive you. I forgive you even though my heart of hearts doesn't believe you actually have done anything wrong. I forgive you because something in me still *feels* like you owe me something, and I need to let go of it. I WANT to let go of it. Because I value my relationship with you far more than I value anything you may owe me."

I could say that because this relationship had already given me more than I could ever put on a ledger. I had experienced grace. I had experienced being loved beyond my wildest imagination. Somewhere beneath my resentment, I knew that this grace and love were more real—and more valuable—than whatever debt I felt God owed me.

So I let it go. And something changed.

I found myself open again to the relationship I had been holding partly at arm's length. As that relationship opened, something else opened with it: I discovered that I was once again open to parish ministry. Releasing that debt was the last significant step in becoming free again.

Curiously, not long afterward, First Congregational Church of Eugene came along.

I don't mean to suggest that God rewarded me with you for forgiving God a debt that God probably never owed in the first place—though you would be a handsome reward for that.

Rather, what has become clear is that sometimes we cannot move into the life that is waiting for us because we are still waiting for the past to pay us what it owes.

Perhaps you have carried a debt like this yourself.

Something happened that you believe God should have prevented.
Someone you loved died despite all your prayers.
A life you thought you were being led toward collapsed. You asked for help and heard only silence.

Some of the oldest debts on the books are those we believe God owes us.

Forgiving God does not require deciding that God caused what happened. Nor does it require believing that everything happens for a reason. It may simply mean recognizing that, somewhere along the way, we felt God didn't come through for us as we expected, and that our disappointment or betrayal opened an account that, rightly or wrongly, left God in our debt.

We've been standing at the counter ever since, waiting for an explanation or intervention that never came.

Which brings us back to Jesus's prayer. I don't think Jesus is describing two separate transactions: first we forgive, then God forgives us. Rather, giving and receiving grace are movements of the same hand.

I invite you to make a fist for a moment. [Pause]

Imagine that inside your fist are some of the debts we have spoken of today: debts others owe you, perhaps even a debt you believe God owes you.

Notice that a clenched hand cannot release what it is holding.

But notice something else.

A clenched hand also has difficulty receiving anything.

Now open your hand. [Pause]

When we release the debts we have been clutching—real or perceived—we refuse to let the ledger determine the shape of our lives.

The same hand that releases can now receive.

God's grace is infinite. Grace is not another form of payment that settles the old account. Grace releases us from having to organize our lives around payment at all.

Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Use

1. Forgiveness Without Reconciliation. The sermon distinguishes forgiving a debt from reconciling with the person who owes it. Sometimes forgiveness means absorbing a debt for the sake of a relationship we value; at other times, it means writing off the debt and moving on without restoring the relationship.

When have you found this distinction helpful? How might separating forgiveness from reconciliation change the way we understand Jesus' call to forgive?

2. Living by the Ledger. In Jesus' parable, the unforgiving servant has received extraordinary grace but continues "living by the ledger"—organizing his life around what others owe him. The

sermon suggests that we can do the same, remaining at the counter waiting for payment that may never come.

Are there debts people carry that can never really be repaid—an apology, acknowledgment, lost years, a different childhood? What might it mean to stop waiting for payment without denying that something genuinely was owed?

3. Forgiving God. The sermon explores the possibility that we sometimes carry debts we believe God owes us: an explanation, an intervention, an answered prayer, or simply a life that unfolded differently. Forgiving God does not require believing God actually caused the harm.

Have you ever felt, consciously or otherwise, that God owed you something? What might it mean to release such a debt, and how might doing so affect one's relationship with God?