

## Sowing forgiveness seeds: Release us from our debts...

Welcome. (Bob) Metaphor for sermon of scattering seeds. Some of the seeds I hope will find fertile soil in your heart and life.

I acknowledge the difficulties and challenges of talking about forgiveness for those who have suffered unbelievable things at the hands of others, who may, or may not be repentant, especially as someone who in my adult life I have not yet been on the receiving end of anything that has been an insurmountable hurdle to forgiveness. Jesus' teaching as we hear in the Lord's prayer and in the parable and other places speak to the centrality and necessity of forgiveness. But other places speak to the challenge and complexity of it (Matt 18). I acknowledge how this message has been simplified to encourage victims, particularly women, to stay in situations that may have been unsafe. If forgiveness is a particular challenge, please hear this message with grace. Maybe you can't think of anyone you need to forgive, maybe there's new perspectives this morning.

We live in a culture in desperate need of forgiveness. An age of moral outrage, where forgiveness is often rejected, what we want is justice, atonement. Many critique the Christian notion of forgiveness as a way of placing all the moral legwork on the victim, rather than the perpetrator. But, as New York Times writer Elizabeth Bruenig noted in a tweet "*There's something unsustainable about an environment that demands constant atonement, but actively disdains the very idea of forgiveness.*" Which she had to take down due to the outrage. Our need to forgive and be forgiven won't go away by denouncing it. For Jesus, forgiveness finds centre place in this prayer. And it is the only line of the Lord's prayer that receives an intext commentary in vv14-15, highlighting its import.

### **And...**

The first word of this petition places this line in context of:

- "Our father" In the context of relationship. The context of forgiveness is about the restoration of relationship. God's forgiveness and Christ's work on the cross was not transactional. God's goal is reconciliation. Restoration of relationship with us. Forgiveness is a means to that end.
- "Thy kingdom come" and "Give us this day our daily bread" This context reminds us not to over spiritualise this prayer, making our need for forgiveness abstract, stripped of the context of our relationships. It is about the Kingdom coming now, here on earth, in our relationships.

Because of this, it is important to not forget that many are often bound by literal debts.

Now initially I wanted to preach on debt forgiveness. That this is a social petition to bring about the Kingdom economy. For this was the expectation of the Messiah. Jesus came and proclaimed the Year of the Lord's favour, which recalled the Jubilee, where anyone who had sold themselves into slavery were to be released, all debts would be cancelled, and land that had been sold would be restored to the original family. The use of the word debt is an intentional reminder at the heart of this prayer, to not be too quick to spiritualise this debt language and substitute it with sin, or transgression or wrongdoing. The debtor language, remind us of the inherent relational aspects of wrongdoing. And it also reminds us of the ways actual debt, is largely the mechanism by which the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer, and that in the Kingdom of Jesus, which we have just petitioned to come on earth as it is in heaven, there is no debt.

### **Forgive us our debts...**

But of course, 'debts' is indeed used here by Jesus not simply literally, but symbolically as well. Debt is a metaphor for sin, a debt owed to God. In Rabbinic thought, every sin created a deposit of debt before God. The accumulation forming a separating wall between us and God. We have heard in Colossians 2, That through Jesus, God made us alive and cancelled this record of debt with its legal demands, setting it aside, nailed to the cross. God forgives, dismantles the wall that stands against us to restore relationship, not settle accounts. God is not a book-keeping God.

Yet Jesus invites us to pray, forgive us our debts. Or in another translation: release us from our debts. It is a shameless act for the debtor to ask the creditor for remittance. To ask the one you owe, 'can you cancel my debts please?' Yet this is exactly how Jesus tells us to pray. I wonder if a large part of reason for this petition is for us to come to experience the truth of forgiveness. In the parable, the King cancels the servant's debt before he even asks. The unforgiving servant never asks for his debt to be cancelled. His book-keeping mind cannot even comprehend debt forgiveness. He hears the words but cannot imagine the King sticking to this promise. Perhaps he interprets the debt erasure as a response to his request for more time to pay the debt back. The debt is cancelled, but the unforgiving servant feels no release from it. Is still bound, weighed down by it.

Could this be why Jesus teaches us to pray, release us from our debts? That we come over time to experience the reality of that forgiveness and to be transformed by it. The parable uses these shocking words (debts, prison, and torture), to forcefully bring to our attention the felt reality of not feeling forgiveness. Forgiveness feels like release from debt. Unforgiveness feels like prison, even

torture, as we continue to either punish ourselves for the things we have done, or punish others in our hearts and minds, desiring vengeance, we end up torturing ourselves. (Confession)

The Gospel makes clear that the first movement in forgiveness is God's. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). Reconciling. God has already forgiven us. This prayer teaches us to ask for what already has been given. It seems more for our sake than God's. For us to appropriate in the depths of our being that reality. Why? So that it transforms us, that we pay it forward, and in doing so further the Kingdom system of Jubilee. To show the forgiveness we have received. For forgiveness not shown, is forgiveness not known.

### **As we also have forgiven...**

Which brings us to the conditional aspect of the prayer. Forgive us our debts *as we also have forgiven*. How does this relationship work? Firstly, it confronts us with the fact that we cannot pray this prayer, the Lord's prayer, unless we are willing to forgive. It reveals that Jesus is concerned not simply with our reconciliation with God, but just as much about the restoration of relationship amongst us. It is necessary that we are willing to begin the journey of forgiveness. We may not be sure if we will ever get there. It may be difficult. A daily journey. But to stake our flag on the ground that says, 'I will never forgive that person,' is almost to shape our identity around unforgiveness.

To release others from their debts is mutually releasing. In fact, when we forgive, it may be more be about us than the person who has wronged us. (You've heard the anecdotes about this before. About eating poison and expecting the other person to die. Or the two POWs. Bob).

This moral work on the part of the sinned-against is what causes offense at the Christian message of forgiveness. But it truly is something we do for the sake of our own soul. We intuitively know, and research has verified the importance of forgiveness for our wellbeing. Holding on to hurts and resentments deeply affects our physical and mental health. Unforgiveness can become our own prison, our own torture chamber as we are eaten up from the inside by anger, wrath, vengeance. The releasing of the debts of others is a mutual releasing. Both parties, the debtor and the creditor are bound by the debt. To forgive, to release the other is to set ourselves free. Perhaps this is what Jesus is getting at by the shocking hyperbolic language of the King handing over the unforgiving servant to be tortured until the debt is paid back.

Now, what is his debt? What is he imprisoned by? Here's my interpretation: It is not his own debt. For the King has already wiped the debt. The only debt remaining to him, was to pass on

forgiveness. As we have heard in Romans 13, the only debt that ought to remain is the ongoing debt to love. The judgement of the King to be locked in prison until the entire debt was paid is simply the same judgement he has placed on his fellow servant. It recalls the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7, about not judging, for the same measure you use, it will be measured to you. The priest, author and chef, Robert Farrar Capon wrote: “(Unforgiveness is) the only basis on which anyone will finally be condemned. None of our debts – none of our sins, none of our trespasses, none of our errors – will ever be an obstacle to that grace that raises the dead. But if we insist on binding other’s debts upon them, we will, by not letting grace have its way through us, cut ourselves off from ever knowing the joy of grace in us.” (Perspectives in parables?)

### **Our debtors**

So who are our debtors? Now for some of you, names and faces no doubt have to you immediately. Those who have been wronged in serious and obvious ways. But for some of us, we may not have anyone come immediately to mind when asked the question: who do you need to forgive?

For me this week as I have been reading and reflecting on this question, a few different translations helped to broaden my understanding as to who might be my debtors, who I need to release.

- Anchor Bible: *And release us from our debts as we also release **our debtors**.*
- World Biblical Commentary: *And forgive our offenses as we ourselves have forgiven **those who offend us**.* (How does that open things up for you. Are you harbouring anything towards those who offend you?)
- Frederick Bruner: *And forgive us our failures as we, too, forgave **those who failed us**.* (Perhaps this speaks more to sins of omission than commission. That is, we have resentment towards someone who has failed to do something we expected of them. Who has failed you the most? This might be ourselves, might it not?)
- Daniel Harrington: *And forgive us our debts as we have also forgiven **those who owe us**.*

It was this last one that had me lying in bed pondering on Thursday night. If we think about releasing those who owe us something, what about those who only owe us in our own minds? Where might we have manufactured their indebtedness. For example, in our close relationships we may have certain expectations that we hold the other to, a sort of indebtedness, that we may not have articulated or communicated to them. But we are in a way holding them in a sense of debt to us. Maybe it is the need that we get treated with a certain level of respect. Or maybe we are

expecting a certain level of intimacy from our spouse. Or the need to have our effort recognised in the workplace by somebody. What is the need that drives the debt we have put others in? And could it be that when we often sin, we are acting out of a place where in our minds, they have wronged us first by not meeting what they owe us? It's like a more subtle and complicated version of kids saying, "she hit me first." I wonder if that thought evokes new perspectives for you, of somebody you might be holding to a debt, however subtle. Where the words forgive or sin seem disproportionate to what they have done or not done, yet maybe you still need to release them from a perceived debt. What might this look like?

### **Conclusion**

This is a big, complex topic. Of which we've barely scratched the surface of. Forgiveness is a difficult and challenging thing. It can be an emotionally taxing process. But Jesus taught the necessity of forgiveness. Our forgiveness is entangled with our forgiving others. Our being released is bound up with the liberty of others. When we have been wronged, our anger and indignation is socially sanctioned. Sometimes we would rather not hear apologies, even outright reject them. The other temptation is to be too quick to amend the relationship without acknowledging the depths of the hurt, thereby finding or giving no release. As we pray this prayer, as we take it seriously and engage deeply with it, we come to see how bound up we are with one another. Our response upon receiving forgive from God, and giving forgiveness to others, surely must be to realise our own indebtedness to others. Perhaps the language of sin and forgiveness has been a barrier for thinking about those whom you may need to release or seek release from. The act of receiving, knowing, experiencing God's forgiveness, and beginning to extend that to others prompts us to reconsider who may have something against us. Jesus said in Matthew 5, if you are bringing your offering to the altar, and remember that a brother or sister has something against you, leave the altar and go and be reconciled. For that is the goal. Not your religious practice. Reconciliation. Restored relationship. With God. With one another.

*Lord, release us from our debts, as we release those who owe us, and may we discern those whom we need to extend an apology, an offer of reconciliation. Amen.*