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SERIES: The Shape of Prayer
MESSAGE: As We Also Have Forgiven Our Debtors
PASSAGE: Matthew 6:12
SPEAKER: Ryan Harmon

Back in the days when I was in school, I had a professor that would offer a prayer that, I will be honest with you, I did not care for his prayer very much. It goes something like this. It'd be on the day of an exam. And that's, of course, a day where everyone in the room is hoping for a miracle. Many prayers are being offered on that day.

And he would begin his prayer like this. He'd say, "Lord, I pray that each student would receive the grade they deserve, that they would perform on this exam in proportion to how much work and diligence they put into their preparation." And then he'd say, amen. And I would think that is exactly the opposite of what I have been praying. I'm hoping for a miracle. That's what I'm hoping for.

Now, why do I tell that story? I tell it because as we continue in the Lord's Prayer tonight, we come to a phrase that sounds a bit like the prayer that my professor prayed, but the stakes are much higher. My professor was praying about an exam. That's what I was concerned about. Jesus here, in the verse we are looking at tonight, talks about our forgiveness.

So in Matthew 6, verse 12, Jesus says, "and forgive us our debts," and then he adds this phrase, "as we also have forgiven our debtors." And at first hearing, That sounds a little bit like Jesus has added a condition to our forgiveness, and that is concerning. So now as we continue, I immediately want to answer that question, just want to make it very clear as we study this verse this evening, Jesus was not saying that our forgiveness depends on the extent to which we forgive others. I want to immediately relieve that tension and here's why.

Because I think Jesus actually was saying something quite deep that we need to hear. And if we're very concerned about a conditional forgiveness, we might miss it. Jesus was offering us words and an opportunity full of hope. And that's what we want to talk about tonight. So open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 6. Matthew chapter 6, we're in verse 12, and we're only looking at verse 12 this evening. If you are visiting with us or you've just recently joined us, we are walking slowly through the Lord's Prayer this summer, phrase by phrase, considering its implications, and



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also asking that it would shape us, that it would impact us. So last week, we began with the first part of verse 12. Jesus said, "and forgive us our debts."

So just as a reminder, we talked last week about how, as important as the phrase that preceded this one was, "give us this day our daily bread," as important as our physical needs are, we have a much more significant need. We, as people, have a moral and spiritual need. We talked last week about how all of us, because we have gone astray, we have gone contrary to what God intends. We have sinned against him. And in sinning against him, we have created a debt with God. We have a moral debt. And our spiritual and our moral debt cannot be paid through diligence through hard work through all of our effort. It cannot.

So that means that we're in a place where we are needy, we are desperate. The only hope we have is that we can cry out to the one to whom our debt is owed, and we can ask that he would forgive us. So when we pray "and forgive us our debts," we are praying, we are asking God, the one to whom we owe our debt, we are asking that he would release us from the debt that we cannot pay, the debt that is rightly his.

Now, as we continue this evening, we add this confusing phrase "as we also have forgiven our debtors." So I said just a moment ago, I already relieved the tension, I do not believe that Jesus here was adding a condition or saying that our forgiveness is dependent upon how much or the extent to which we forgive others. But I think we can admit, a surface level reading of this phrase sounds a lot that way.

I think we can also admit that that's a very human way to read that phrase, because that is very much how we operate as human beings. The way that we operate with others, in our relationships, we operate often on this condition of equality and proportionality. We want to give to others to the extent and in the same way that they've given to us. We just kind of have this attitude in life that says, you get what you give. And if you don't give anything, then you don't get anything. That is the way that we, as human beings, are wired. That's the way that we operate. Exists in all of our relationships.

Think about relationships between friends, between spouses, between siblings, in the workplace, this idea of fairness. We only treat this person as well as they're treating us. That's just kind of how we operate. And there are superficial ways that we feel this burden. An amusing way is one that perhaps you've experienced yourself.

Say that you and a friend are gonna exchange gifts. And so your friend comes up and offers you a gift and the gift, let's say, is extravagant in some way. It's either an expensive gift or perhaps it took a lot of hard work. It's a homemade gift or it's



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just incredibly thoughtful. You know, they remembered a conversation that you had with them fifteen years ago, and in light of that, they went out and bought a gift for you, just to express their care for you, and you received that gift, and you immediately feel a debt. You're embarrassed because you got them a gift card to Scheels.

We know how that feels. All of us do, and we can laugh at it. But it says something very deep about us. We do not like it when others essentially go further than we have gone. That makes us feel like we owe them a debt. We somehow have to make it up. Maybe we even start to scheme in that situation. We'll say, you know what, when they're not expecting it, I'm going to get them a gift so that we're even again. It's how human beings work. That's how we think.

So that means it's quite natural for us to think that Jesus might be suggesting that God forgives us only to the degree to which that we forgive others. Because that seems fair and appropriate, and that's often the way that we work on human terms. But we need to be abundantly clear, that thinking about forgiveness and about God's grace runs completely contrary to the testimony of scripture. That's how we work as human beings. That is not how God works.

God does not give in proportion. He gives to the completely undeserving. And that is so unnatural to us. We have a hard time as human beings even fathoming how that could be possible. That's why we spent quite a bit of time last week talking about it. And it's so important, and it is so unnatural to us, it bears repeating again this evening.

We talked last week, we affirmed that when we come and we say, Lord, forgive us our debts, we are naming that the only solution to the moral and spiritual debt that we have before God is that we be forgiven. There's no amount of good works, there's no amount of church service or Bible study activity and attendance, that we can do. There's not even any way that we can possibly forgive enough people such that it would make God forgive us. That's not how it works.

God gives abundantly, extravagantly, out of his grace, out of his mercy, out of even his pity on us and our desperate condition. Our salvation, our forgiveness, depends on nothing else than the obedience of one man, of Jesus Christ who paid the price on the cross. That is it. That is why we can be assured.

As we were considering this last week, we looked at Paul's words in Ephesians, and I'm going to have them go up on the screen again this evening. Just listen to Paul's word. Ephesians 1, verse 7, Paul says, "in him [that is in Jesus] we have redemption." Redemption is—we've been bought back, we have redemption through his blood that is through the cross. "The forgiveness of our trespasses"—that is, the forgiveness of our sins according to what? Not according to our good



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works. Not according to the degree to which we have been a forgiving person to others. But “according to the riches of his grace which he lavished on us.” That is the gospel truth. That is what our spiritual life depends on, that God paid it all by sending his Son to die for our sins.

Now, this means that whatever it means to add this second phrase to verse 12, this phrase “as we also have forgiven our debtors,” it cannot mean that our forgiveness is conditional or dependent upon how much we forgive. That can't be what it means, that it would be to approach our forgiveness as if it is something we can earn, it's something we can work towards. And if our forgiveness depends upon us forgiving others to a great extent, I can just tell you, no one in this room is saved. Praise God, that is not how he works. Not how he works.

So Jesus must be saying something different. Let's consider together what he is saying, consider these words again. So he said, “and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.” So let's talk about that word “debtors.” And this is a call back to last week. Last week when we talked about debts, we mentioned that debt is a synonym for “sin.” We can just put that word “sin” in there, and it's perfectly appropriate. We have sinned against God, and in sinning against him, we have accumulated debt against him. Now, because of our debt, forgiveness of that debt is the only hope that we have. And so that's what we come to God and we ask him for. Forgive us our debts.

Now, when we come to this word “debtor” in the second part of verse 12, we need to think of it in the same light. If debt is our sin, then debtors, specifically our debtors, are those people who have sinned against us. People who have wronged us. People who have not treated us with the love and the dignity that we rightly deserve as creatures created by, made in the image of, God. People who have wronged us, who've sinned against us. That's what this idea of “debtor” conveys.

This prayer, we have to understand that what Jesus is acknowledging quite simply is that everyone in this room has debtors. All of you have debtors. I bet you can name them. You might be able to even be able to think of their faces right now. You have people who have wronged you. That is part of the human condition. That's part of living life. All of us have that. In our world, that's actually the norm. That is the operating system. That is standard operating procedure in our world, is to commit wrongs against one another. That is how the world works.

Read your history book, and just read it through that lens. People constantly committing wrong against one another. But, of course, it happens on the large scale, but it happens on a small scale. It happens in families. Happens between friends. Happens between coworkers—coworkers wrong each other. Spouses wrong each other. And while it's theologically true, all of our sin is ultimately against God.



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It is also very true that our sin offends and wrongs and hurts and harms others. It impacts our world. That's why our world is in such disarray, because our world is full of people who are constantly wronging others. Therefore, our world is full of debtors. I don't think of it that way very often, but that's true. That also means that each one of us, we have debtors, and we ourselves are debtors to others. Every person in this room is the person that another can think of and say, "They've wronged me. They've sinned against me. They've hurt me." It's true and we need to be honest about it.

So if we *are* debtors, if we *have* debtors, the question, of course, is what can we do about it? What do we need? And the answer simply is *we need to forgive and we need to be forgiven*. That's what we desperately need, what our world desperately needs. We need to forgive and we need to be forgiven.

Remember what it means to forgive. We talked about this last week. Maybe it's helpful to start by saying what it *doesn't* mean to forgive, because I think our world confuses this word quite a bit. Even in the church sometimes, I think there can be harmful definitions of forgiveness that don't really help people all that often. Sometimes people talk about forgiveness as if it is just forgetting. As if you come upon amnesia and you don't remember that someone acted wrongly towards you, that they hurt you. And that is not what forgiveness is. It's not what forgiveness is.

Some people talk about forgiveness and act as though it is the same as returning a relationship where there has been wrong, returning it back as if nothing ever went wrong, and the same trust, and the same level of vulnerability is now going to continue in that relationship. And I just want to say forgiveness is different than a full restoration of relationship. There might be times where it will take a great deal of time for me to rebuild trust with someone, but that's different than forgiveness.

See, what forgiveness is, we mentioned last week—to forgive is to release someone from the debt, from the burden, of their wrong against me. To forgive is to, is to let go of our need—and it is a very deep need—our desire, maybe I should say, to let go of our deep desire to make them pay. To retaliate. To make sure they feel the weight of what they did. See, forgiveness acknowledges wrong—it doesn't forget—acknowledges wrong was done, acknowledges that there was significant wrong and harm. It doesn't minimize that at all.

Actually, calling it forgiveness acknowledges it to be what it actually is. It is sin. That's what we need to call it. It's sin. People have sinned against us and we don't deal with sin by trivializing it or minimizing it. We deal with it by naming it, by confessing it, and then by asking for forgiveness and by giving forgiveness to those who have sinned against us. It's the biblical word for wrongs done. It's just



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sin. We just have to we have to recover that word. It's an important word. Sin is a deep problem and we don't deal with it by dismissing it or minimizing it. Sin is dealt with through forgiveness. That's how we deal with the deep problem of sin.

So when we pray, "and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors," there's a few things happening in this phrase. The first thing that we're doing is we are acknowledging that no matter who you are, no matter how tough you are, no matter how thick your skin is, every single human being alive has had someone wrong them. Someone sin against them. Someone dismiss them. Someone judged them. Someone slander them. Someone gossip against them. And it's not realistic to act as if that's not the case. We need to acknowledge that. And Jesus does when he says, "as we also have forgiven our debtors." He's acknowledging you have debtors.

Second, the way debt is dealt with is through forgiveness. The only way someone who has wronged me ultimately can repay me is admitting they can't. And ultimately, then I can offer them forgiveness for that which they cannot do themselves. There's relational debt there. And while the world says, "yeah, you got to somehow, you got to pay off that relational debt," what we're saying here is that the very deep thing we need when we have committed wrongs is we need to be forgiven. We need to extend forgiveness.

The final thing we see here is the most challenging thing in this text for me. And it simply can be understood by looking at how Jesus talks here in this phrase—the way his words sound, first of all, but also the way he talks about forgiveness in the past tense. First of all, he speaks here almost in a very simplistic way, just assuming this will happen—"as you also have forgiven your debtors"—and he just moves on. But then second of all, he speaks in the past tense. After making a request to God at the beginning of verse 12, "and forgive us our debts," he then moves into the past tense, "as we also have forgiven, our debtors," which implies it's already been done.

That's how we're coming to the Lord in prayer. As we offer up this prayer, Jesus' words suggest that we've already come, releasing the people that have wronged us. Not holding their debt against them. I think we can admit that's incredibly challenging. It's an incredibly challenging thought.

Remember last week when we were talking about "forgive us our debts" and we talked about the great prompting of worship—it should be within us when we realize that because God is who he is, and because of the final perfect work that Jesus accomplished on the cross, we, when we go to him the very first time and confess our sins and trust Jesus, and every time after that, that we go to God and ask for forgiveness, we go full of assurance. It's a wonderful thing. We should be walking tall, knowing we've fallen short, but also knowing that we have a God who



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is merciful. We just sang about it. He is quick to forgive, not because of our works, but because of the finished work of Jesus. Because it's in his very nature to forgive us. We talked about that assurance. We glory in that assurance.

But here's what's challenging. It almost feels as though Jesus is also assuming that when people that have wronged us come to us, they can be assured that we too will forgive them. That's our posture. And that is challenging. But imagine what would happen if that were true. Imagine for a moment that around this city, in our relationships, imagine that what people said is, "You know what I know about the people at Lincoln Berean? They are a quick-to-forgive people. They are a ready-to-forgive people." What impact would that have on our relationships, on our communities, on our city, on our world? I think it absolutely transform our city.

So the question is: why don't we do it? And the answer is: because it's really hard. Would you agree with me about that? Forgiveness is difficult. And as we continue in this text, as we consider this text, I think that it's very clear that Jesus knew forgiveness was difficult. I think he knew this is difficult for us. We struggle to forgive. And I think that's precisely why he chose to emphasize it in his prayer.

We recall that for a couple weeks now, we've been talking about this prayer. We've been talking about the subtle power of this prayer and how it has this tendency almost to be like judo. And here's what I mean. Judo operates on this principle that someone throws a punch and you use, you use their weight against them. And that's kind of how it works. And here's the interesting thing about this prayer. We offer up prayers, but we've said over and over again, very often what God does is he starts to provide the answer not by changing our *world*, but by changing *us*. Talked about that every week.

And so we go, and we pray to the Lord, as Jesus taught his disciples to pray, hallowed be your name. May your name be worshiped and glorified. And we want that for our world, but often the very first point of application is our lives. We start to become worshipers. Not necessarily what we expected when we offered up that prayer.

We pray your kingdom come. We want God to be the King of kings and Lord of lords, to be truly recognized as he is. We want the kingdoms of the world, the leaders of the world, to recognize that. We long for that, to submit to his kingdom. And often what God starts to do is he helps us recognize places where we aren't fully submitting to his kingdom. We become people who say, Lord, I want to submit more and more to your kingdom.

Same thing with your will be done. God's way is the best. We want a world that submits to his way. But we also recognize as we pray that prayer for our world at large that we ourselves need to grow as people who surrender to God's will. And



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often through great resistance, he helps us become people more surrendered to his will.

Even two weeks ago, when Lane preached on “give us this day our daily bread,” I believe the same principle applies. We pray give us this day our daily bread, a prayer of daily dependence, but even as we do that, it could be very possible that the Lord would also start to stir up in us an awareness of people around us who need things, who are dependent, who need daily bread. And it might be that the Lord would work in us and help us see that we could be a way that God answers that person's prayer for their daily provision of bread. And so we become generous people.

So now here's what's interesting...Each week, we've been talking about this point of application, and each week it's been implied in the prayer, until this week. Until we get to this phrase. Isn't it fascinating that for the first time and the only time in the entire prayer, Jesus gives us a request to bring to God and forgive us our debts, and then he immediately also connects it to our very life, the way we live day to day? He adds on, “as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Why did Jesus do that? Why does he make that so overt?

I think the answer is because he knows this is difficult for us. He knows that we as human beings struggle to forgive others. When we have been wounded so often, what we want to do pridefully, maybe even to make that person hurt a little bit, is we don't want to extend forgiveness because that will make us feel better. Jesus knows our nature. Knows us. I think that's exactly why he names it clearly right here. He knows forgiveness is unnatural to us if we are left to ourselves.

I should take that one step further. Forgiveness is impossible to us if we are left to ourselves. That's the deepest truth about us. We, on our own, in our own strength, apart from the strength that God provides, we are incapable of releasing others from their debts. We are incapable of forgiving. And the good news is, God knows that, and God does not intend for us to go it alone. We come to him and we say, forgive us our debts. We trust his finished work on the cross and he forgives us. Our slate is wiped clean, debt forgiven. We live now in ongoing relationship with him, it will be unending.

And in that relationship, he has intentions for us. And the intention is that while we come to him just as we are, while we are forgiven just as we are, he doesn't intend to let us stay that way. He promises to help us grow. He's going to make us into different kinds of people, not in our own strength, but because we are with him. When we're with him, we become different kinds of people.

It's a little bit, It's a little bit like this. In my work is a global outreach pastor, I had the privilege on a number of occasions to go over and visit our staff, our pastoral



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staff, in South Asia. Most of the time, I'd meet them in Nepal, and so I fell in love with that country. And mostly what I fell in love with in Nepal are the mountains. Unlike anything I've ever seen. They are—just the scale of them is overwhelming. So, you know, you go to Colorado, and you see these 14,000 foot mountains, and they are so tall, and it's work to go climb those mountains. But the astounding thing is you go to a place like Nepal, and these mountains tower 10,000 to 15,000 feet higher than those mountains in Colorado. It's amazing. I became fascinated with them.

And because they're so big, of course, a number of people want to try to climb them. And here is the big difference between climbing a fourteener in Colorado and climbing one of these mountains in Nepal. If I wanted to go climb a 14,000 foot mountain in Colorado, I'd do some training, but I probably, if I stuck to it, I probably could get it done. It's not the case in Nepal. In fact, if I just tried to go climb it, I would die. I would die because the altitude, the heights are so great that my body, as it exists right now, is absolutely incapable of surviving at those altitudes.

But here's what's interesting. If I wanted to climb it, I could. And I would train for it, but much more important than my training would be the time that I would spend on that mountain. I'd have to commit months to it. That's just what the people that climb mountains like Everest do. They give two, three, four weeks just to be there, just to live at that altitude because when they live at that altitude, here's what happens. They start to change. Their body physically starts to change. Their blood becomes more capable of transporting oxygen to muscles at a more efficient rate. Their lungs can process things at that altitude in ways they were completely incapable for, not because they worked really hard, but because they lived in that atmosphere. As they lived at those heights, they were transformed. They were changed.

Now in much the same way, God does not intend that we come to him and we stay the same forever. He intends that we change, that we become different kinds of people, not through our own work, but through proximity to him. That we would be with him. That we would seek after him. That we dwell at his altitude, so to speak. And as we live with him, he starts to change us. He starts to bring about a difference in us. He takes us, people in need of forgiveness, and through his grace, and through our time with him, he makes us into forgivers. God brings that about.

That's what Jesus was talking about. "And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." Jesus is highlighting that when the gospel takes hold, it brings about results. It brings about change. Jesus is highlighting the fact that when you draw near to God, you will not remain the same. God is absolutely committed to helping you grow. And when it comes to forgiveness, he is absolutely committed to helping you become more like the forgiver. More like Jesus Christ himself.



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A few years ago, I asked two different high schoolers, I said, of all the things that you know about Jesus, what do you admire the most? What are you most amazed by? And I was shocked that independently of one another, they both said the exact same thing. They said they're astounded by the fact that, there on the cross, Jesus looked at his executioners and he said, "Father forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." Jesus was put up on the cross, was slandered, had that crown of thorn slammed down on his head, was mocked, was ridiculed, was murdered. And in that moment on the cross as he was accomplishing forgiveness for the world, Jesus looked at them and he prayed, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing."

That's who we follow. That's who taught us to pray this very prayer. That is the one that saved us, and that is the one that, through his astounding, empowering grace, seeks to build within us, to grow within us, through his power, hearts that are compassionate and loving and forgiving, just as his heart is. That's what he promises to do.

So let us be people, let us be people that are absolutely assured. Assured that when we go to our Father who is in heaven and we bring confession of our sin, he will forgive. We can be assured of that. And let us be assured of this, that while we come to him just as we are, he will not let us stay the same. He is going to grow us into his likeness. He's going to do it by the power of his spirit. And he's going to do it for his glory. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we do thank you. We thank you that not only have you forgiven us, but you promise, Lord, you promise to bring us to completion, to bring us to maturity in Christ. Lord, we know that that doesn't happen by our own strength. That doesn't happen through our own effort. That happens because we are with you. We are with the one who brings about transformation. And so we do ask, Lord, that you will help us very practically, right in the heart of our lives, places where we struggle to forgive—Lord, help us understand we don't forgive by trying harder. We forgive by coming to you and having you build up in our heart a heart of compassion and forgiveness. Lord, that's gospel change and that's what we long for. We ask that you would do it for your name's sake and for your glory. Amen.

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