

'Forgive Us, Our Debtors'

by Derek Cleave

The greatest need of the human heart is to have our sins forgiven, and God provides this forgiveness through the death of Jesus Christ.

Duration: 55:20

Scripture: Matthew 5:44, Matthew 6:14-15, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 18:21, Matthew 18:23-27, Ephesians 4:32

Topics: "Forgiveness"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by recounting a parable from the Bible about a servant who owed a debt to his master. The servant was forgiven his debt but refused to show mercy to a fellow servant who owed him money. The master then punished the servant for his lack of forgiveness. The speaker emphasizes that just as the servant owed a debt to his master, we also owe a debt to God for our sins. He explains that we cannot escape this debt and that God's patience is not a substitute for forgiveness. The sermon concludes with the reminder that we must forgive others in order to receive forgiveness from God.

Transcript

We are going to read together from the Bible, from the Gospel written by Matthew, chapter 18. Matthew, chapter 18, at verse 21. Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? After seven times, Jesus answered, I tell you not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a man who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

The servant fell on his knees before him. Be patient with me, he begged, and I will pay back everything. The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt, and let him go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. Pay back what you owe me, he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him. Be patient with me, and I will pay you back. But he refused.

Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in.

You wicked servant, he said, I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? In anger, his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my Heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

Well, good evening everyone and my grateful thanks to Andrew for the very kind welcome to this wonderful conference. I have very happy memories of a previous visit here a number of years ago and it's a great joy and a privilege too to be able to return on this occasion. And can I say that in Christian ministries we support and commend the stand that EMW take in seeking to extend and glorify God in the setting up of his kingdom here in our needy land.

Let us pray together. Our gracious Father, we bow before you because we need your help as we have your word open before us. We thank you for it and we ask this evening for an understanding of what you would say to us.

Not merely that we might understand the words that we read, but that we might hear and understand your word as it comes to each one of our hearts. And for that we need the help of your Holy Spirit. And we thank you for the promise from your Son that he was the one who would lead us into the truth.

And we pray therefore this evening that you will give to us that ability to be able to hear and to understand. And as we hear and understand, even that greater grace of being able to obey your voice. Hear our prayer.

We offer it in Jesus' name. Amen. You and I are much more than mere animals.

We have been created in the image of God. We are unique. And that phrase, the image of God, occurs in the Bible.

And I believe means, amongst other things, that you and I have been created with a spiritual dimension. It makes us unique in the whole of creation. And at least provides the potential for us to experience and enjoy the most wonderful relationship with a loving Creator God.

One thing has spoiled that. And that is sin. The significant letter in the English word sin is the middle letter.

The word I. I'm always grateful to my wife for this little illustration because for many years she worked in an office and they knew that she was married to a vicar. And on one occasion in the midst of a busy office day, they said to her, what is sin? And she drew this word on a piece of paper in large letters. And then circled the middle letter.

And said, essentially, that is what sin is. I. The essence of sin is self-centeredness and independence toward God that separates us from Him. Sins, many of those things that even we would disapprove of, are the symptoms.

Sin is the disease. And it is impossible to enjoy that relationship which God has planned and purposed until this sin has been dealt with. This is by far the most serious consequence of sin in every individual's

life.

No individual is excluded from this particular problem. But the repercussions of sin go beyond, if you like, our vertical relationship with God. Sin is also the major cause of breakdowns in personal relationships.

Our horizontal relationship with those around us. The smallest argument to the most terrible war is evidence of sin in our lives. And when that sin remains unconfessed and unforgiven, sin can also affect us in our minds and in our bodies.

Shakespeare, in his play Macbeth, illustrates the fact that sin that remains unforgiven can produce all kinds of psychosomatic problems. Lady Macbeth was greatly troubled because of the part she had played in murdering King Duncan. She called a doctor who told Macbeth, Not so sick, my lord, as she is troubled with thick coming fancies that keep her from her rest.

Macbeth responded, Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, Raise out the written troubles of the brain, and with some sweet oblivious antidote, Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart. But alas, there is no natural medicine for the sin-sick soul. With sin in our lives, it will be impossible to find true peace and lasting happiness.

Sin is the greatest crisis of the human heart, and so forgiveness of sin is the greatest need. In Matthew chapter 9, Matthew records the occasion when some friends let a paralyzed man down through the roof in order, they had planned, that Jesus might heal that man. In Matthew chapter 9, we find that the very first thing that Jesus does is to forgive the man his sins.

Now his friends, and surely all of those who were looking on, if they had been asked, What is this man's need? would have replied, He needs to be healed of his paralysis. But it was obvious that Jesus saw a greater need. And so we look this evening at the greatest need of the human heart.

Would you turn in your Bible again to Matthew, and on this occasion to chapter 6 please. Matthew chapter 6. Now let me just remind you of the context of the particular verse that I want us to look at this evening. The religious leaders in the day of Christ were very proud of their religious practices, as many are today.

But in particular they were proud of their giving, of their praying, and of their fasting. And you will notice even by glancing here at Matthew chapter 6, that Jesus takes these three activities of which they are so proud, and he makes it clear that executed in the way they performed them, they were totally inadequate. In presenting as Jesus is at this particular time, the rules of the kingdom, Jesus told them how they should give, how they should pray, how they should fast.

And the middle section is that section on prayer. And right there in the center of everything, Jesus presents what are now surely the most familiar words in the whole of the Bible. What we call the Lord's Prayer.

And in the middle of that prayer is a petition that addresses our greatest need. Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors. The Lord's Prayer is a remarkable prayer.

It was Martyn Lloyd-Jones who said that at the end of his prayer times he always used to recite the Lord's Prayer. Because he felt that by doing that, if he hadn't covered anything in his personal prayers, he was sure to have covered it by praying the Lord's Prayer. And that's one of the wonders of this prayer.

That the Lord Jesus in these few sentences provides us with a model prayer. And I don't believe that there is ever a prayer that has been prayed that could not be in some way covered by one of these petitions. So every part of the Lord's Prayer is vital.

But, no petition in the Lord's Prayer is more relevant than this one. Of what value is it to have our temporal needs met in the provision of our daily bread and yet to be left with this great need for our souls. Sometimes when I'm in a situation where I know that there are perhaps a majority of people who are not believers, they're not Christians, I may suggest that I know what their greatest need is.

Which must sound rather surprising to them. Because they know that I've never met them. We've never spoken.

And yet I'm telling them that I know what their greatest need is. The greatest need of the human heart is that we might have our sins forgiven. It is a primary need because sin has such serious repercussions.

Above all, it separates us from God in heaven. Now, and will do forever. I want us to notice three things this evening.

Firstly, what I've called an important debt. An important debt. The word translated debts here in Matthew's Gospel is a noun and it implies ingratitude to God.

Which is always the motive behind our sin. So that when we sin, we owe God a consequence. A debt because His holiness has been violated.

And more than that, our transgression of God's law and the word of God tells us that that is what sin is. Our transgression of God's law, by implication, also includes a spirit of rebellion. There is a sense in which our breaking of any law, even a man-made law, includes that, doesn't it? If I drive faster than the speed limit allows me to, that is a sign, it's a signal, it signifies rebellion.

Far more serious when we break the law of God. Indeed, there's a word in the Old Testament which is translated sin in our Bible that pictures the shaking metaphorically of the fist in the face of God. It is mutiny, it is rebellion, it is saying no to God.

Now if that were not a serious enough problem, our problem is then compounded because we neither have the ability or the wherewithal to pay this debt that we've referred to. Now we read earlier in our service from Matthew chapter 18, the story of the unmerciful servant, and it's a graphic illustration of this particular problem. For here was a servant who owed his king today's equivalent of millions of pounds.

Now if there were any who were listening to Jesus with half an ear at that moment, then they would certainly have sat up and listened at this particular moment in time. Today's equivalent of millions of pounds. He couldn't pay it.

Well, that's hardly surprising. We could almost commend him because he asks for time to pay. Well, at the rate of pay for that time, he'd need many, many lifetimes in order to repay the debt.

Of course, it was not only an important debt, it was an impossible debt. And Jesus deliberately tells the story in that way. And he does that to illustrate that my debt to God, your debt to God, is not only an important debt, it is an impossible debt.

God demands righteousness. Now that's a word that we use. We're familiar, many of us, with that word.

We use it in our churches. We may even use it in our conversation. We certainly sing about it in our hymn book.

What are we talking about? We're talking about obedience to God's laws. A right standing before God. And our sinful nature makes it impossible for us to carry out those demands that God places upon us.

That is, in terms of righteousness, by nature, you and I are bankrupt. The Apostle Paul puts it in this way. There is no one who is righteous.

Well, I realize that he's quoting from elsewhere in the Scripture, but he could actually have stopped there, couldn't he? To say, there is no one who is righteous, surely, says it all. I almost wonder whether it's there, because there may just be someone who would say, except me. So, for that very person, the Scripture says there is no one who is righteous, not even one.

The Scripture says, all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. The kind of currency that we possess can never satisfy God's demands. If you're playing a game of Monopoly, and you have a wad of Monopoly money, you may feel very wealthy.

For that moment in time. But you try going down to Tesco the following morning, and using that to pay for your groceries. It's the wrong kind of currency.

And this is one of the problems that we have by nature. That there are those, who without an understanding of the Gospel, feel that they do have something that they can offer God, that will provide some merit as far as He is concerned. And what I'm trying to make clear this evening is this.

Any kind of currency that we feel we may have can never satisfy God's demands. And I suppose if it were only one sin, we might excuse it or put it into perspective. But it's plural.

Forgive us our debts. And you and I cannot begin to measure how much we owed God. But without God in our lives, we are continually failing to reach His glorious standards.

That's what Paul means when he says, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. So that in our sinful state, our sins are multiplying all the time. That if for one moment we do not reflect the holiness of God in all that we do, if we just once omit to do what God's will desires us to do, then we sin.

Again, the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah speaks for God when he writes, can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Listen, neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil. So we cannot pay. Nor can we shift this debt that we owe God to a friend.

We cannot even be freed from this debt at death, as would be the case in other circumstances. We cannot escape from our creditor by leaving the country and living in a country where the long arm of the law cannot reach us. We can try, and many do, to evade God now.

But He's told us that every one of us must give account to Him one day. I love the story of the little boy who upset his mother. And knowing that he was much younger than her and that he could outrun her, she chased him around the kitchen table, down the hall, but he got ahead of her, out through the front door and across to the other side of the road.

And there he waited. Mother came to the front door and simply stood at the front door and said, You have to come home one day. Men and women may flatter themselves that they appear to be escaping God's

judgment because in His patience, God is waiting for repentance.

But let me tell you this evening, God's forbearance, for that's what it is, is no substitute for His forgiveness. And if those sins are not forgiven, then you and I are without excuse. The whole world, the Scripture tells us, is accountable to God.

There is no excuse and there is no escape that we personally can engineer. It is an important debt. I owed a debt of obedience to my Maker and I failed to keep it and disobedience has incurred a debt that will result in what the Bible tells us is the ultimate punishment.

The wages of sin is death. We have chosen to live this life without God and God underscores that choice for the whole of eternity. An important debt.

But then secondly, notice an incomparable deliverance. An incomparable deliverance. I said earlier, if sin is the problem, then forgiveness is the only solution.

You remember the story? The servant was forgiven his debt. Huge, unbelievably huge though it was. Jesus in telling the story said, the Master took pity on him, cancelled his debt and let him go.

Here is a wonderful picture of God forgiving however great the sin. And God does not only forgive the greatest of sinners, He forgives all of their sins. He doesn't leave any to settle up later.

David in the Old Testament was aware of that. Oh, there was one particular sin that brought everything to a head. But when David confessed his sin, it was confessing his transgressions.

And when he blesses God for what he has done for his soul, he says we are to praise God because he forgives all our sins. These trespasses are debts that we cannot repay and only the creditor can cancel the debt. Now there are some that you would meet today who maybe will make the ridiculous situation that it is possible to use an intermediary that someone other than God can forgive you your sin.

That is nonsense. You imagine someone having offended you in some way, taken some of your property and then coming back to you a little later on and saying, Oh, by the way, concerning that particular issue between us, I want to tell you that the situation is resolved. A third party has forgiven me for stealing that from you, for offending you in that way.

We would look at him and wonder whether he had lost his mind. Just a moment, just a moment. I'm the one you offended.

What were you doing going to a third party to seek forgiveness for what you had done to me? If that is true in regard to offenses committed against you and me, how much more is that the case when God is the offended party? In that story that occurs in Matthew chapter 9, which we referred to earlier on, and particularly in Mark chapter 2, which is the parallel passage, the story of the paralyzed man, even the narrow-minded religious leaders got it right when they said, Who can forgive sin except God alone? Of course, their complaint was that they didn't believe that Jesus was God. Therefore, he didn't have the right to do so. But in fact, their statement was right.

Who can forgive sin except God alone? Sin is the transgression of God's law. God is the one against whom we have sinned. God is the one to whom we confess and ask for forgiveness.

And when God forgives us, it is of His grace. Which means that it is entirely undeserved. Of course, all of the benefits that we receive from God are undeserved.

But nothing more so than the forgiveness of sins. And you may ask, Well, how can God do that? How is it possible that God can forgive my sins in that way? Surely a debt has to be paid in some way. Well, this is the wonderful good news of the Christian gospel.

What God has done is simply this. God has stopped the execution of justice on you and me personally having already executed punishment in His only and dearly loved Son. Wounded for me.

Wounded for me. There on the cross, He was wounded for me. Gone my transgressions.

And now I am free. All because Jesus was wounded for me. There is the ground or the basis for our forgiveness.

It required nothing less than the death of one whose life was of infinite value to deal comprehensively with my guilt. Some years ago when my mother-in-law was alive, I used to pop in there a few times a week just to make sure that she was alright. And on one occasion I went in and saw that she had a plague of wasps in her garden shed.

We could see them swarming around and it was left to me to dispose of them. So I went to the supermarket and I bought one of these large aerosol cans of horrible white foam that fortunately you can fire from some distance. And I returned to her home and just opened the garden shed door a little, saw the nest in the corner and fired the entire canister in that direction.

Shut the door very quickly and went home. I went back the next day. There were no wasps swarming around outside the shed.

And when I looked inside there was not one wasp, at least most of them were on their backs, but there was not one wasp that was flying. Now, I didn't have a visit a day or two later from the law enforcement officers who said, We understand that you have murdered hundreds of wasps at 93 St. Peter's Rise. And this may sound rather foolish, but what I'm really saying is this, you see, I could kill hundreds of wasps and not commit a crime.

But I'm not able to kill one human being without breaking the law. And that means one thing in particular. It means that the value of one human life is far, far greater than all of those wasps put together.

That's why I can't do it. Therefore, what is the value of the life of the Son of God laid down for you and me? The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity, sin, of us all. Or that marvelous verse from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us.

Jesus was never a sinner. Not even when He hung on that cross was Jesus a sinner. Though the Scripture is very accurate, it says He was made sin.

My sin was taken and laid on Him. And He was punished in my place. And the moment I trusted in Christ, His righteousness was placed on me.

And this wonderful transfer took place. My sin had been given to Him. His righteousness had been given to me.

And because He has paid my debt, God is satisfied to look on Him and to pardon me. Micah, the Old Testament prophet, cries out in wonder, Who is a God like you who pardons sin and forgives transgression? You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy. And the 18th century hymn writer Samuel Davis picks up that thought and writes these words, Such vile offenses to forgive.

Such guilty, reckless souls to spare. This is your grand prerogative. And in the honor, none shall share.

In wonder lost, with trembling joy, we take the pardon of our God. A pardon granted from on high. A pardon sealed with Jesus' blood.

Who is a pardoning God like you? With grace so free, so rich, so true. But there's more. So comprehensively does God forgive that He not only pardons, but in addition, He promises not to remember our sins.

He blots them out. He wipes the record clean. He says, I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

It's like that C button on a calculator. You know, after you've done all of your calculations, you press the C button and everything disappears. I can't understand how God is able to do that, but there's the promise.

But an important word. And I want you to understand this evening that these wonderful blessings that come from the grace of God come to us only as we repent of those sins. Now I guess that when this prayer, what we call the Lord's Prayer, is recited week by week, I guess that it's not always offered with a spirit of repentance.

It may include some sorrow because of the repercussions that have followed from our sins. But you see, sorrow isn't sufficient. That's not true repentance.

Let me put it like this. In the right spirit of repentance, we will be full of remorse for our sin even if there were no punishment attached to it. Can I say that again? In a spirit of true repentance, you and I will be full of remorse for our sin even if there were no punishment attached to it.

In a true spirit of repentance, we recognize sin as dishonoring to God. That's the remorse that we have and we resolve to forsake it. In repentance, therefore, there is not only the forgiveness of sin, but there is a turning from sin and there is a turning to God.

Isaiah, another Old Testament prophet, put it so clearly. Let the wicked forsake his way. Let him turn to the Lord and he will have mercy on him and to our God for he will freely pardon.

And I underline that this evening. Sin cannot and will not be forgiven unless and until we repent of it. Now this petition in the Lord's Prayer and the one to whom we pray reminds us that this is the family prayer.

And I think it's important to mention that. Indeed, I believe that the Lord's Prayer is a prayer that every Christian should pray. But I do believe it's a prayer for Christians.

Because I believe as you read some of the petitions, it is impossible for someone who is outside of Christ to pray those prayers because they have no intention that they should be true even within their own hearts. So this one already is our Father in Heaven as we pray this prayer. And this petition therefore is primarily the kind of forgiveness that restores the intimacy of our relationship with our Heavenly Father.

Oh yes, all that I've said about sin, all that I've said about forgiveness of sin, is applicable to every person here in this great hall this evening. But I do want to say that in the context in which these words appear here in the Lord's Prayer, it is a prayer that is offered in order that the intimacy of our relationship with our Heavenly Father might be restored. David had sinned grievously against God.

David had committed adultery and murder. He was distraught as Nathan the prophet reveals his sin to him. And David when he later confesses his sin in Psalm 51 says, Have mercy on me, O God.

Blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sins. I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. And in the narrative of the story, the prophet Nathan was able to say to David, The Lord has taken away your sin, you're forgiven, and you're not going to die. So that not only the guilt, but also the punishment of sin had been dealt with.

David's greatest need had been met. And so he cries out, Restore to me the joy of your salvation. David had not lost his salvation.

He had lost the joy of fellowship with God. And confession of sin restores that intimacy. And then again in John chapter 13, you remember when the Lord Jesus washes the disciples feet.

One of the most intimate moments that Jesus shared with these often wayward and sinful men. Peter objects to what the Lord is intending to do. But then he relents.

Not just my feet, but my hands and my head as well. To which Jesus replies, A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet. His whole body is clean.

In other words, the person who has bathed in the morning only requires the means to wash the dust from his feet. There in that eastern society. And the spiritual application that Jesus was applying to his disciples was that these disciples did not need the entire bath again.

They had had, if you like, their spiritual bath. They needed daily cleansing in order to retain the fullness of their relationship with Christ. And so I say that because if tonight we were coming to Christ for the first time for the forgiveness of sins, or if we were coming to Christ for the fiftieth time, God doesn't tire of hearing our confession.

You are a forgiving God, said Nehemiah. Gracious and compassionate. Slow to anger and abounding in love.

You delight to show mercy, says the prophet Micah. What an incomparable deliverance this is. Devils are beyond hope.

Sinful men and women only have to ask and the pardon is there. An incomparable deliverance. And lastly, an implicit duty.

Because this petition in the Lord's Prayer closes with a challenge to those who believe they are already within the family. Jesus said, when you pray, say, forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. This is no optional extra.

It's part of the petition. And that second part of the prayer is as important as the first part of the prayer. And it is most interesting that Jesus, as we have it in verses 14 and 15, amplifies that petition.

Something that he doesn't do on any of the others. If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive.

And the first question that prompts me to ask is, is that the way I want God to forgive me? Do I want God to forgive me as I forgive others? Literally in proportion to. That's what I'm praying. And here again, the parable of the unmerciful servant reveals the truth behind the prayer.

The first servant delivered that huge debt of, well, today's equivalent of millions of pounds, finds another servant who owes him the equivalent of a few pounds and insists on being repaid. And is judged by his master for not showing similar mercy as was shown to him. Jesus is not suggesting that our forgiveness of others is so meritorious that because of that fact God will forgive us our sins.

We're not saved because of any good work including our forgiveness of others. And incidentally, nor are they saved because of our forgiveness of them. They still need the greater forgiveness of God since ultimately, as we saw, it is against Him they have offended.

What our forgiveness of others does is to remove any barrier to our experiencing God's forgiveness. The natural man is so inclined to revenge. People almost regard it, don't they, as a right.

That the ordinary man is surprised when someone doesn't want revenge. But here is the uniqueness of the faith that as a Christian, you and I are able to forgive whatever grievances you may have against another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Says Paul. How is that possible? Let me make three suggestions as we close. The first is this.

If we are able to do that, it is evidence of God's grace in our lives. Christians are to be characterized as those who forgive. In the previous chapter in Matthew, Matthew chapter 5, Jesus said, as part of his Sermon on the Mount, you have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

Well, that's what the world says. Jesus said, but I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons of your Father in Heaven. It is evidence of grace in the life.

I was asked only last week by some friends from Northern Ireland about the forgiveness of those, particularly in their context there, who are not prepared even to acknowledge their sin. How do you forgive those who are not even prepared to acknowledge that they have sinned against you? Well, isn't this verse that I've just read a clue, an answer to that? To love your enemies and to pray for them is the equivalent of forgiving them and demonstrates that you and I are sons of God. Paul says we're to be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

But not only is it evidence of grace in our lives, secondly, an unforgiving spirit will exclude us from Heaven for this reason, because our forgiving others is a sign that God has forgiven us. If we cannot illustrate that in our lives, if we continue, to put it bluntly and in today's language, if we continue to hold a grudge, then there has to be a question mark over our own forgiveness. Get this into perspective.

However much we feel it costs us to forgive someone who has offended us, our forgiveness of others will never be as costly as God's forgiveness of us. Thomas Watson in his lovely commentary on the Lord's

Prayer says, No man can do so much wrong to us all our life as we do to God in one day. The unforgiving servant was imprisoned until his debt was paid, which would mean he was there forever.

And Jesus concludes the story with the warning, This is how my Heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive from your heart. That's what the believer is able to do because of the change of heart that has occurred there by the miracle of God's grace. And then thirdly, forgiving others also reflects the example of Christ.

Jesus wept over his enemies. Men beat him, spat on him, abused him, forced a crown of thorns onto his head. And yet whatever men did, the response was, Father, forgive them.

And when we forgive others, we reflect the example of Christ. An unforgiving spirit is a sinful spirit that will bring the Lord's discipline on us. How could you and I ask for and expect mercy and forgiveness from God when we're not prepared to give it ourselves? Now this parable that we've been looking at arose from Peter asking how many times should he forgive a brother? I say, well done Peter for knowing that forgiveness was the right thing to do.

Peter had learned that and we commend him for that. And Peter now thinks he's being generous by suggesting seven times because the Pharisees only taught three times. So he's going over the top.

Seven times Lord? Jesus said no, 77 times or maybe alternatively 70 times 7. And what Jesus meant by that figure was that we are to forgive with time without number. Why? We are to forgive because in Christ God forgave you. And how much will He forgive us? 77 times? No, an infinite number of times.

Our Father, forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. Forgive me for putting it in this way. The Lord's Prayer is not a shopping list.

Every petition, every petition is there to exalt and to honor God so that you and I hallow God's name. You and I advance God's kingdom. You and I do God's will as we forgive those who are our debtors and enjoy the forgiveness of our own debts.

And perhaps that's something that we need to put right tonight. Certainly with God and with a brother or a sister. Might mean a telephone call to someone this evening.

There's an unusual epitaph on a large headstone in a cemetery outside New York City. It's unusual because there is no name on the grave. There is no mention of the person's age.

There is nothing that says anything about the person lying there being a beloved mother, father, wife, husband, brother, sister, son, daughter. There's only one word on the headstone. It's the word forgiven.

Someone wanted to show others that he died in peace because he was forgiven. Do you know that assurance tonight? Have you ever known that assurance? Could that word be written across your life tonight? Forgiven. If you have a doubt, if you're not sure, let me tell you this.

You can know that tonight. You can experience the forgiveness of God. As firstly, you acknowledge your sin.

And secondly, you repent of your sin. Acknowledging and forsaking. And then thirdly, putting your trust and faith in Jesus Christ alone.

The Savior of sinners. He's the only one that can meet the heart's greatest need. You can know tonight that you're forgiven.

John Stocker of the 18th century, thrilled to the mercy of God in his life. And he wrote these words. Your mercy, my God, is the theme of my song.

The joy of my heart and the boast of my tongue. Your free grace alone from the first to the last has won my affections and bound my soul fast. Your mercy in Jesus has freed me from hell.

Its glories I'll sing and its wonders I'll tell. This Jesus, my friend, when he hung on the tree, there opened the channel of mercy for me. Great Father of mercies, your goodness I own.

And the covenant love of your crucified Son. All praise to the Spirit whose whisper divine seals mercy and pardon and righteousness. Our Father, forgive us our debts.

Let's pray together. Our gracious God, we thank you for your word. And we ask again that by your Spirit you will apply that word to our lives this evening.

We confess that we have been participants so often in causing pain to others because of a lack of forgiveness. And we pray that you will teach us these great truths this evening. And remind us of the greatness of your mercy toward us.

The forgiveness that we have experienced for a debt that we could not possibly repay. We thank you for your grace and for your mercy. And pray that you will help us to reflect that in our relationship with others and especially our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And we pray particularly for any here this evening who are just unsure whether they are right with you, whether they truly have been forgiven. By your Spirit, we pray, deal graciously with them, grant to them the gift of faith and enable them to rejoice in a wonderful Savior. Hear our prayer and accept our praise in His name.

Amen.

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