

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	96		Gary L.W. Johnson
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The Fifth Petition (Part II)

Lords Day 51

Question 126. Which is the fifth petition?

Answer: "And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"; that is, be pleased for the sake of Christ's blood, not to impute to us poor sinners, our transgressions, nor that depravity, which always cleaves to us; (a) even as we feel this evidence of thy grace in us, that it is our firm resolution from the heart to forgive our neighbour. (b)

(a) Ps.51:1 <<To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.>> Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Ps.51:2 Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. Ps.51:3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Ps.51:4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. Ps.51:5 Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. Ps.51:6 Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom. Ps.51:7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Ps.143:2 And enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified. 1 John 2:1 My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: 1 John 2:2 And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. Rom.8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. (b) Matt.6:14 For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: Matt.6:15 But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

We are told in I John 3:4 that "sin is lawlessness". We learn from Lamentations 3:42 that sin is "rebellion." It is an act of revolt, a neglect of obedience.¹ It includes the idea of *perverseness* and *crookedness*.² Because sin is like this, it does not produce happiness; it produces misery.³ "The sinner," wrote Witsius, "wanders from this mark proposing something else to himself as his end; or not taking his aim aright, as to the object toward which, of the manner in which, he should have aimed. He acts a part, too, contrary to his incumbent duty; for he cannot without crime neglect or condemn the end for the prosecution of which he was created: he renders himself miserable, because he not only deprives himself of his proper god, which consists in attaining the end of his existence; but he brings himself under obligations to restore to Him who is his Chief end and happiness, that glory of which he was robbed him."⁴ For sin is something that is part of everything we are and do. The General Confession of the *Book of Common Prayer* contains these words: "We have erred and strayed from thy ways, like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone things which we ought to have done; and we

have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us.” The major problem with sin is not just that it makes us miserable but that it exposes us to the judgment of God (Romans 1:18). The Bible is very direct and graphic when describing the nature of sin and its consequence both in the present and in the future. But the Bible also speaks with great clarity about the good news – that sins can be forgiven.

I. SUPPLICATION (vv. 1, 2)

The language of the Psalmist is one of anguish. This arises from his deep sense of his sinful condition that only grows more alarmed at the thought of God. “I remembered you, O God and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint” (Psalm 77:3). People who never consider their sin in the light of God’s holiness will never understand the psalmist’s travail.⁵

II. CONSOLATION (vv. 3, 4)

The Psalmist’s cry for mercy (v.2) has to do with his sins (note the plural). No one who is guilty can *stand* before God. On the contrary, the impression gained from texts like Psalm 76:7; Nehemiah 1:6; Malachi 3:2 is that of sinking down under the heavy burden of divine judgment. The Psalmist is acknowledging the absolute hopelessness of his situation if God takes his sin into account.

A. Forgiveness: What is it?

Many people (including Christians) equate forgiveness with “apologizing.” But this is, as Jay Adams has noted, unscriptural. He adds, “When apologizing, someone says, ‘I’m sorry’. What has he done? Literally, all he has done is tell you how he feels. He *has not asked you to do anything*. When someone says, ‘I sinned; will you forgive me?’ he is asking you to make a promise to bury the matter once and for *all*. On apologizing, no commitment is made, the matter is not resolved, and the one who was wronged is not required to put the matter to rest. He is probably glad for the fact because in apologizing, the wrongdoer has not even admitted his wrong. He has simply said he feels sorry about what happened. The principal difference between the two is simply this: God requires a commitment on the part of both parties that brings the matter to a satisfactory end. The world requires no such thing.”⁶ There are three Hebrew words translated in English with words like “pardon” or “forgive.” The first is KIPPER which means to “cover” in the sense of atonement (II Chronicles 30:18; Deuteronomy 21:8; Psalm 78:38; Jeremiah 18:23). The second, NASA, means to “lift up” and “carry away” (Genesis 50:17; Exodus 10:17; 32:32; Psalm 25:18; 32:5). The final word is SALACH, which means to “let go” or “send away” (cf. Numbers 30:5, 8,12; Psalm 103:3; Jeremiah 31:34). This word is used solely of God. Never does this word refer to people forgiving each other.⁷

B. Forgiveness: On What Grounds?

William Barclay highlights the NT words that underscore this OT theme. “The word *lutroun* expresses the ‘redeeming’, ‘rescuing’ of a man from a power or a situation which has him in its grip and from which he is powerless to free himself.

“*Apolutrōsis* is one of the great NT words. It literally means a ‘ransoming’ or a ‘redeeming’, but this time we are dealing with a word which has practically no history. It is only used in very late Greek, and that very rarely. When it is used it is used of the ransoming of captives taken in battle. In the papyri no instances at all are quoted. In the Septuagint it occurs only once – in Dan. 4.30 where it is used of the recovery of Nebuchadnezzar from illness. But in the NT it is used ten times and all its usages are significant. We will look at the most significant of them.

“(i) It is used of our ‘redemption from sin’, and always in connexion with the work of Jesus Christ. In Eph. 1.7 Paul says that the Christian has ‘redemption’ through the blood of Jesus Christ, ‘the forgiveness of sins.’ Exactly the same phrase is used in Col. 1.14. The same idea occurs in Heb. 9.15. The forgiveness of sins is indissolubly connected with the death of Christ.

“(ii) It is used of ‘the new relationship of friendship’ into which man enters with God through the work of Jesus Christ. Paul speaks of the Christian entering into the right relationship with God, freely, by his grace, through the ‘redemption’ which is in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3.24).

“(iii) It implies, not only forgiveness for past sins, but ‘new, changed life for the future’. It implies adoption into the family of God (Rom. 8.23). For us Christ is made wisdom and justification and consecration and ‘redemption’ (I Cor. 1.30). *Apolutrōsis* looks, not only backwards for forgiveness, but forwards to a re-created life.

“(iv) *Apolutrōsis* does not end with this life. It is eschatological. It is the foretaste of a process and a glory which will find their consummation in the coming of Christ and in the heavenly places (Luke 21.28; Eph. 4.30).

“This redemption which was wrought by the death of Christ makes possible for us forgiveness of sins, a new relationship with God, a new life upon earth, and in the end the glory of heaven.

“Now let us enquire what is implied in all these words which have to do with ‘ransom’, ‘redemption’, ‘rescue’, ‘liberation’.

“(i) They all imply that man was in captivity, in slavery, in subjection to an alien power. There was something which had man in its grip.

“(ii) They all imply that by no conceivable means could man have effected his own liberation or rescue. He was helpless in the grip of a power and a situation which he could not mend and from which he could not break away.

“(iii) His liberation was effected by the coming of Jesus Christ who paid the price which was necessary to achieve it.

“(iv) Nowhere in the NT is there any word of to whom that price was paid. It could not have been paid to God because all the time God was so loving the world. It was in fact God’s love that sent Christ into this world. It could not have been paid to the devil for that would put the devil on an equality with God. All that we can say is this – it cost the life and death of Christ to liberate man from the past, the present and the future power of sin. Beyond that we cannot go, but although thought may be baffled, experience shows that it cost the life of Jesus Christ to bring us home to God.”⁸

III. EXPECTATION (vv. 5, 6)

The Psalmist speaks of waiting for the Lord. To what does this refer? The Scriptures, especially the Psalms, often speaks of waiting on God (Psalm 25:3, 5, 21; 27:14; 37:7, 9, 34; 39:7; 40:1; 52:9; 62:1,5; 69:3, 6; 104:27; 123:2). The Psalmist’s attitude is that of patient reliance upon God’s promises. “Were the promises taken away,” says Calvin, “the grace of God would necessarily vanish from our sight, and thus our hearts would fail and be overwhelmed⁹ with despair.”

IV. EXHORTATION (vv. 7, 8)

The Psalmist now bids the reader to “hope in the Lord.” Hope, in the Bible, is never simply vague, wishful desire. Rather, it is a glad certainty. It is rooted and grounded in the character of God and in His Word (cf. Romans 5:5; 8:24; Hebrews 6:19). Note how this is underscored: our God is merciful. With His (the “with” here is used to express a quality as a disposition or nature) is lovingkindness and plenteous redemption. This included not only the forgiveness of sins, which the Psalmist cries out for, but also the breaking of the power of sin and setting the captive free from his bonds (cf. John 8:36; Romans 6:18, 22; 8:2; Galatians 5:1).

CONCLUSION: Wisely did the noted Swiss theologian Emil Brunner once say: “The more seriously guilt is regarded, the more it is realized that ‘something must happen,’ just because forgiveness is not something which can in any way be taken absolutely for granted. The more real guilt is to us, the more real also is the gulf between us and God, the more real is the wrath of God, and the inviolable character of the law of penalty; the more real also the obstacle between God and man becomes, the more necessary becomes the particular transaction, by means of which the obstacle, in all its reality, is removed. The more serious our view of guilt, the more clearly we perceive the necessity for an objective – and not merely subjective – atonement.”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ The Hebrew word PASHA is used repeatedly in the Old Testament of rebellion against God’s law and covenant. It points to a breach of relationship, a casting off of allegiance, of going beyond the limits established by God (cf. Isaiah 1:28; 48:8; Ezekiel 2:3; Hosea 8:1).

² AWEL is the Hebrew word that denotes an act or deed that is against what is right. It points to behavior that is the opposite of righteousness (cf. Isaiah 26:10; 59:3-6; Psalm 37:1; 39:22; 125:3) In Philippians 2:15, the Apostle Paul refers to Christians living in the midst of a “crooked and depraved generation.”

³ The Hebrew word HARA properly signifies “wandering from the mark”; its basic concept is that of “failure” and is the principle word for sin in the Old Testament (Leviticus 4:2; 5:16; Genesis 43:9; 44:32; Isaiah 1:4; 65:20).

⁴ Herman Witsius, *The Apostles’ Creed* II (rpt. P&R, 1993), p. 388.

⁵ This was the complaint Calvin made to the Roman Catholic Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto: “Hence, I observe, Sadoletto, that you have too indolent a theology, as is almost always the case with those who have never had experience in serious struggles of conscience.” *A Reformation Debate: Sadoletto’s Letter to the Genevans and Calvin’s Reply*, ed. J.C. Olin (Baker, 1966), p. 59.

⁶ J. Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving: Learning to Forgive One Another God’s Way* (rpt. Calvary, 2003), p. 59.

⁷ cf. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* II, eds. R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer, Jr., B.K. Waltke (Moody, 1980), p. 626.

⁸ W. Barclay, *New Testament Words* (The Westminster Press, 1967), pp. 194-196. Barclay (1907-1978) was trained in Classical Greek and taught for many years at Glasgow University in Scotland. He described himself as a “Liberal Evangelical.” He was a very accomplished Greek scholar (and this is where I find him at his best) but his theology at times runs wild. Use with discretion.

⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary On the Book of Psalms* V (rpt. Eerdmans, 1945), p. 133.

¹⁰ *The Mediator* (Westminster, 1957), p. 451.