

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Lord's Prayer: The Fifth Petition (Part VI)

Some of you (like myself) were nurtured in the Christian faith by churches that were dispensational. The *Scofield Reference Bible* (still the best-selling reference Bible of all time) was considered indispensable for serious Bible study. This was playfully captured in the little ditty of a jungle based on the first stanza of the hymn *The Solid Rock*, and went like this: "My hope is built on nothing less than Scofield's notes and Moody Press." The first edition of the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) categorically stated that the Lord's Prayer was *not* a Christian prayer, especially the petition that addresses forgiveness. Noted Old Testament scholar and Princeton professor O.T. Allis, in one of the first, and most devastating, critiques of dispensationalism, wrote, "The prayer, being embedded in the Sermon on the Mount, must, they tell us, be intended for the kingdom age, primarily if not exclusively; and the petition rests, according to Scofield, on a legal ground', for the reason that 'Under law, forgiveness is conditioned upon a like spirit in us; under grace, we are forgiven for Christ's sake, and exhorted to forgive because we have been forgiven.' This is to misinterpret the petition. The meaning is not that if we forgive we may expect, as a kind of *quid pro quo*, that God will forgive us. But rather the emphasis is not the fact, brought out so impressively in the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:23-35), that those who have been forgiven much must themselves be ready to forgive. Those who harbor an unforgiving spirit toward their fellow men show plainly that they do not realize that they themselves owe everything to the infinite compassion and forgiving mercy of God. Our Lord gave this prayer to his disciples as a model for prayer with the words, 'After this manner therefore pray ye.' But thousands of dispensationalists refuse to repeat it, mainly because of the words 'as we forgive our debtors,' which they regard as implying a condition and therefore as 'legal ground.'"¹ A contemporary dispensationalist, Charles Ryrie (who produced another best-selling study Bible that goes by his last name), seeks to escape the dispensational dilemma by translating the petition, "'Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors.' In other words, good relations with the Father depend on good relations with His children."² Elsewhere he argues that while the standard dispensational *interpretation* of the Lord's Prayer is addressing the Jewish people, it can have *application* to Christians.³ The reason dispensationalists like Scofield and Ryrie are uncomfortable with this petition is that it appears that while it might be appropriate for Old Testament believers, it certainly is not suited for Christians, because it makes God's forgiveness conditional upon our forgiveness of others.⁴ But this notion is absent from our text. It does *not* read, "Forgive us our debts *because* we forgive others." Nor does it say, "Forgive us on the basis of our act of forgiving." Responding to dispensational arguments, Martin Lloyd-Jones astutely pointed out, "Take that argument which says that because the Lord's Prayer does not say 'for Christ's sake,' and because the atonement is not specifically mentioned it contain no gospel. To be consistent they must never again use the parable of the Prodigal son for it also does not mention atonement. It does not say anything about 'for Christ's sake'. It just gives an amazing picture of God as Father, It simply says that the son came back and that the father freely forgave him everything and showed his love upon him. But such an attitude towards the parable and towards this petition is quite ridiculous and pathetic. As the parable is concerned to point out one great central truth, so our Lord here was simply concerned to remind us of the need of forgiveness and to assure of the fast of forgiveness. He is not so much concerned about he mechanism or the way of forgiveness here any more than He is in the parable of the Prodigal son. We must take our Scriptures as a whole and compare Scripture with Scripture."⁵

I. THE LANGUAGE OF THE TEXT

Some translations have the word "debts" (KJV, NIV, ESV) while others have "trespasses" (Tyndale, Knox). More recent efforts have "sins" (The Living Bible), "wrongs we have done" (Good News Bible, The New English Bible) and "failures" (Philips). The term Matthew used was OPHEILEMA. It always denotes something which is owed, something which is due, something which it is a duty or an obligation to give or to pay. In other words, it means a debt in the widest sense of the term. At its narrowest, it is a money debt; at its widest, it is any moral or religious obligation which a man in duty must discharge. OPHEILEMA is rare in biblical language. In the New Testament it occurs only once (Rom. 4:4), in the Old Testament it

occurs only once (Deuteronomy 24:10), and in both places it has the sense of a money debt. The corresponding verb is *opheilein*, which means *to owe*, and which can be used in all the sense of the English word ought. It occurs more than 30 times in the New Testament, 8 times in the sense of owing money and 25 times in the sense of moral religious obligation.⁶The Greek word is the equivalent of the Aramaic (the language Jesus probably spoke) word HOBA which meant “sin”, a violation of the law. As D.A. Carson observed, “There is therefore no reason to take ‘debts’ to mean anything other than ‘sins’, here conceived as something owed God (whether sins of commission or of omission).”⁷

II. THE INTERPRETATION OF THE TEXT

This is the crux of the matter. How are we to understand the expression “as?” Barclay inquires “Does the ‘as’ express *similarity* or *proportion*? Does the petition mean: ‘Father, forgive us in the same way as we have forgiven others?’ Or does it mean: ‘Forgive us in proportion as we have forgiven others?’”⁸ Barclay has omitted a third possible reading: “The prayer for forgiveness is qualified by *as we also have forgiven our debtors*. This must surely be taken as an aspiration rather than a limitation, or none of us would be forgiven; our forgivenesses are so imperfect.”⁹ Like so many biblical terms, *forgiveness* has been impregnated with a meaning quite foreign to Scripture. In our culture, forgiveness is assumed (like so many things) to be an entitlement. It has become superficial and soaked with sentimentalism that it ceases to bear any resemblance to biblical forgiveness. God’s forgiveness does not come with conditions. “It should go without saying that since our forgiveness is modeled after God’s (Ephesians 4:32), it must be conditional. Forgiveness by God rests on clear, unmistakable conditions. The apostles did not merely announce that God had forgiven men, who should acknowledge and rejoice in the fact but, rather, they were sent forth to preach ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins’ (Luke 24:47; Acts 17:30). The sins of those who repented and trusted in the Savior as the One who shed His blood for them were forgiven *on the conditions of repentance and faith*. Paul and the apostles turned away from those who refused to meet the condition, just as John and Jesus did earlier when the scribes and the Pharisees would not repent.”¹⁰

CONCLUSION: In Matthew 18:23-35, we read of the parable of the Unmerciful Servant, who expects forgiveness for his debts, but at the same time refused to grant forgiveness to his debtors. The point, Stott notes, is that “God forgives only the penitent, and that one of the chief evidences of true penitence is a forgiving spirit. One our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offense against God, the injuries which others have done to us appears by comparison extremely trifling.”¹¹ Finally we must always interpret Scripture with Scripture. There is, in the Bible, a progressive unfolding of redemption. This is especially the case with our text. “Jesus here taught His disciples to pray for forgiveness from their debts without telling them anything about how this pardon would be obtained. This, however, does not conflict with what is said elsewhere in the Gospels, and especially in the Epistles, about the ground for forgiveness. We must keep in mind that there was a gradual unfolding of revelation, and that Jesus, especially at the beginning of His ministry, spoke only in very general terms about the salvation that He would bring. One could even say that the forgiveness of sins is mentioned far less often in His preaching than perhaps could be expected. This is merely a matter of words, however. Since everything still lay in the future both His crucifixion and His return on the clouds of heaven, Jesus preferred to speak not merely of a part of the salvation that He would accomplish, but of all of it at once. The redemption and the forgiveness of sins that He spoke of in such general terms would later be brought to pass in a way that was utterly unprecedented and unexpected. For those who stand later in history, the undivided light of divine revelation that ascended in Jesus is thus refracted, as a prism, into a wondrous variety of colors by His death and resurrection.”¹²

ENDNOTES

¹ O.T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church: An Examination of the Claim of Dispensationalists That the Christian Church is a Mystery Parenthesis Which Interrupts the Fulfillment to Israel of the Kingdom Prophecies of the Old Testament* (P & R, 1945), p. 46.

² C.C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Moody, 1969), p.150.

³ C.C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded* (Moody, 1995), pp.98-101.

⁴ Lewis Sperry Chafer, another prominent dispensationalist (a student of Scofield and founder of Dallas Theological Seminary) wrote that the Sermon on the Mount and the implied conditionality of forgiveness “is directly opposed in principle to the grace ideal as set forth in Ephesians 4:32.” *Systematic Theology V* (Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), p.109. One of the inherent problems with this dispensation approach is that it gives the distinct impression that Old Testament Israel was saved on the grounds of legalism and works. In fact, Scofield said “The point of testing is no longer legal obedience as the condition

of salvation, but acceptance or rejection of Christ.” *Scofield Reference Bible* (Oxford, 1909), p. 1115. The editors of the New *Scofield Reference Bible* (1967) were so embarrassed at this statement that they deleted it.

⁵ M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Sermons on the Mount II* (Eerdmans, 1960), p. 74

⁶ Wm. Barclay, *The Beatitudes and The Lord’s prayer for Everyman* (Harper & Row, 1963), p. 227

⁷ D.A. Carson, Matthew in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 1984), p. 172.

⁸ Barclay, op.cit. p.233. Barclay’s answer is not convincing. He argues that divine forgiveness is conditional in the sense that it depends on our actions of forgiving and not on the basis of Christ’s death. He contends that God’s forgiveness and our forgiveness are indivisible. One reason that Barclay assumes this position is that he was something of a theological liberal. “He was a Universalist, reticent about the inspiration of Scripture, critical of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, and given to views about the virgin birth and miracles which conservatives would find either heretical or imprecise.” Cf. the entry on him in *The New Dictionary of Theology* (IVO, 1988), p. 76.

⁹ C.f. L. Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1992), p.147.

¹⁰ J. Adams, *From Forgiveness to Forgiving*, (Calvary, 2003), p.34.

¹¹ J.R. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (IVP, 1978), p.149

¹² H.N. Riddenbos, *Bible Student’s Commentary: Matthew* (Zondervan, 1987), p. 131.