Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Do We Have Authority to Forgive Sin?
Scripture: Matthew 6
Code: BQ032812

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (6:12)

Opheilma (debts) is one of five New Testament Greek terms for sin. *Hamartia* is the most common and carries the root idea of missing the mark. Sin misses the mark of God's standard of righteousness. *Paraptma*, often rendered "trespass," is the sin of slipping or falling, and results more from carelessness than from intentional disobedience. *Parabasis* refers to stepping across the line, going beyond the limits prescribed by God, and is often translated "transgression." This sin is more conscious and intentional than *hamartia* and *paraptoma*. *Anomia* means lawlessness, and is a still more intentional and flagrant sin. It is direct and open rebellion against God and His ways.

The noun *opheilma* is used only a few times in the New Testament, but its verb form is found often. Of the some thirty times it is used in its verb form, twenty-five times it refers to moral or spiritual debts. Sin is a moral and spiritual debt to God that must be paid. In his account of this prayer, Luke uses *hamartia* ("sins"; Luke 11:4), clearly indicating that the reference is to sin, not to a financial debt. Matthew probably used **debts** because it corresponded to the most common Aramaic term (*ôb*) for sin used by Jews of that day, which also represented moral or spiritual debt to God.

THE PROBLEM

Sin is that which separates man from God, and is therefore man's greatest enemy and greatest problem. Sin dominates the mind and heart of man. It has contaminated every human being and is the degenerative power that makes man susceptible to disease, illness, and every conceivable form of evil and unhappiness, temporal and eternal. The ultimate effects of sin are death and damnation, and the present effects are misery, dissatisfaction, and guilt. Sin is the common denominator of every crime, every theft, lie, murder, immorality, sickness, pain, and sorrow of mankind. It is also the moral and spiritual disease for which man has no cure. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to do evil" (Jer. 13:23). The natural man does not want his sin cured, because he loves darkness rather than light (John 3:19).

Those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ have received God's pardon for sin and are saved from

eternal hell. And since, as we have seen, this prayer is given to believers, the debts referred to here are those incurred by Christians when they sin. Immeasurably more important than our need for daily bread is our need for continual forgiveness of sin.

Arthur Pink writes in An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), pp. 163–64:

As it is contrary to the holiness of God, sin is a defilement, a dishonor, and a reproach to us as it is a violation of His law. It is a crime, and as to the guilt which we contact thereby, it is a debt. As creatures we owe a debt of obedience unto our maker and governor, and through failure to render the same on account of our rank disobedience, we have incurred a debt of punishment; and it is for this that we implore a divine pardon.

THE PROVISION

Because man's greatest problem is sin, his greatest need is forgiveness-and that is what God provides. Though we have been forgiven the ultimate penalty of sin, as Christians we need God's constant forgiveness for the sins we continue to commit. We are to pray, therefore, **forgive us**. Forgiveness is the central theme of this entire passage (vv. 9–15), being mentioned six times in eight verses. Everything leads to or issues from forgiveness.

Believers have experienced once-for-all God's judicial forgiveness, which they received the moment Christ was trusted as Savior. We are no longer condemned, no longer under judgment, no longer destined for hell (Rom. 8:1). The eternal Judge has declared us pardoned, justified, righteous. No one, human or satanic, can condemn or bring any "charge against God's elect" (Rom. 8:33–34).

But because we still fall into sin, we frequently require God's gracious forgiveness, His forgiveness not now as Judge but as Father. "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us," John warns believers. But, he goes on to assure us, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8–9).

During the Last Supper, Jesus began washing the disciples' feet as a demonstration of the humble, serving spirit they should have as His followers. At first Peter refused, but when Jesus said, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me," Peter went to the other extreme, wanting to be bathed all over. Jesus replied, " 'He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and

you are clean, but not all of you.' For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, 'Not all of you are clean' " (John 13:5–11).

Jesus' act of footwashing was therefore more than an example of humility; it was also a picture of the forgiveness God gives in His repeated cleansing of those who are already saved. Dirt on the feet symbolizes the daily surface contamination from sin that we experience as we walk through life. It does not, and cannot, make us entirely dirty, because we have been permanently cleansed from that. The positional purging of salvation that occurs at regeneration needs no repetition, but the practical purging is needed every day, because every day we fall short of God's perfect holiness.

As Judge, God is eager to forgive sinners, and as Father He is even more eager to keep on forgiving His children. Hundreds of years before Christ, Nehemiah wrote, "Thou art a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness" (Neh. 9:17). As vast and pervasive as the sin of man is, God forgiveness is more vast and greater. Where sin abounds, God's grace abounds even more (Rom. 5:20).

THE PLEA

Asking forgiveness implies confession. Feet that are not presented to Christ cannot be washed by Him. Sin that is not confessed cannot be forgiven. That is the condition John makes plain in the text just quoted above: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). To confess means basically to agree with, and when we confess our sins we agree with God about them that they are wicked, evil, defiling, and have no part in those who belong to Him.

It is difficult to confess sins, and both Satan and our prideful nature fight against it. But it is the only way to the free and joyful life. "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion" (Prov. 28:13). John Stott says, "One of the surest antidotes to the process of moral hardening is the disciplined practice of uncovering our sins of thought and outlook, as well as of word and of deed, and the repentant forsaking of them" (Confess Your Sins [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1974], p. 19).

The true Christian does not see God's promise of forgiveness as a license to sin, a way to abuse His love and presume on His grace. Rather he sees God's gracious forgiveness as the means of spiritual growth and sanctification and continually gives thanks to God for His great love and willingness to forgive and forgive and forgive. It is also important to realize that confessing sin gives God the glory when He chastens the disobedient Christian because it removes any complaint that God is unfair

when He disciplines.

A Puritan saint of many generations ago prayed, “Grant me never to lose sight of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the exceeding righteousness of salvation, the exceeding glory of Christ, the exceeding beauty of holiness, and the exceeding wonder of grace.” At another time he prayed, “I am guilty but pardoned. I am lost but saved. I am wandering but found. I am sinning but cleansed. Give me perpetual broken-heartedness. Keep me always clinging to Thy cross” (Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975], pp. 76, 83).

THE PREREQUISITE

Jesus gives the prerequisite for receiving forgiveness in the words, *as we also have forgiven our debtors*. The principle is simple but sobering: if we have forgiven, we will be forgiven; if we have not forgiven, we will not be forgiven.

We are to forgive because it is the character of righteousness, and therefore of the faithful Christian life, to forgive. Citizens of God’s kingdom are blessed and receive mercy because they themselves are merciful (Matt. 5:7). They love even their enemies because they have the nature of the loving heavenly Father within them (5:44–45, 48). Forgiveness is the mark of a truly regenerate heart. Still we fail to be consistent with that mark and need constant exhortation because of the strength of sinful flesh (Rom. 7:14–25).

We are also to be motivated to forgive because of Christp’s example. “Be kind to one another,” Paul says, “tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32). John tells us, “The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (1 John 2:6).

Because it reflects God’s own gracious forgiveness, the forgiving of another person’s sin expresses the highest virtue of man. “A man’s discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression” (Prov. 19:11).

Forgiving others also frees the conscience of guilt. Unforgiveness not only stands as a barrier to God’s forgiveness but also interferes with peace of mind, happiness, satisfaction, and even the proper functioning of the body.

Forgiving others is of great benefit to the whole congregation of believers. Probably few things have so short-circuited the power of the church as unresolved conflicts among its members. “If I regard wickedness in my heart,” the psalmist warns himself and every believer, “the Lord will not hear” (Ps. 66:18). The Holy Spirit cannot work freely among those who carry grudges and harbor resentment (see Matt. 5:23–24; 1 Cor. 1:10–13; 3:1–9).

Forgiving others also delivers us from God’s discipline. Where there is an unforgiving spirit, there is sin; and where there is sin, there will be chastening (Heb. 12:5–13). Unrepented sins in the church at Corinth caused many believers to be weak, sick, and even to die (1 Cor. 11:30).

But the most important reason for being forgiving is that it brings God’s forgiveness to the believer. That truth is so important that Jesus reinforces it after the close of the prayer (vv. 14–15). Nothing in the Christian life is more important than forgiveness-our forgiveness of others and God’s forgiveness of us.

In the matter of forgiveness, God deals with us as we deal with others. We are to forgive others as freely and graciously as God forgives us. The Puritan writer Thomas Manton said, “There is none so tender to others as they which have received mercy themselves, for they know how gently God hath dealt with them.”

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