



CHAPTER FIVE SUMMARY

There are three important biblical dimensions of forgiveness: release, restoration, and redemption. One who has been forgiven a debt has been liberated from a burden; the forgiven one is also restored to a former state; the one who forgives has paid a price for the other's freedom. Forgiveness is both individual and social. The Bible insists on the salvation of both the individual and society.

BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES

Leviticus 25
Matthew 18:21-35

WORD LIST

Day of Atonement
Levites
parable
redemption
statutes and ordinances
talent



*And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors*

CHAPTER FIVE

Writing It Off

Prayer is an exercise in freedom. No one on earth can compel our prayers; no one on earth can prevent us from praying. Also, we have great latitude in what we ask of God in prayer. We are at liberty to tell God whatever is in our hearts.

The psalmists show few inhibitions in their prayers. They ask God for vengeance on their enemies:

Rise up, O LORD!
Deliver me, O my God!
For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;
you break the teeth of the wicked. (Psalm 3:7)

They seek God's sympathy:

My companion laid hands on a friend
and violated a covenant with me,
with speech smoother than butter,
but with a heart set on war;
with words that were softer than oil,
but in fact were drawn swords. (Psalm 55:20)

They confess to utter desolation:

Wretched and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.
Your wrath has swept over me;
your dread assaults destroy me.

They surround me like a flood all day long;
from all sides they close in on me.

You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;
my companions are in darkness. (Psalm 88:15-18)

Reciting from memory those dreadful words of Psalm 88 was an exercise in freedom for Laurence Frayne, an Irish convict in the penal colony on Norfolk Island in the last century. In his diary he tells how night after night he recited this psalm. It was the only passage of Scripture, memorized in his Roman Catholic boyhood, that made sense to a man now chained in solitary confinement, his back scarred with lashes, and with no hope of release. Frayne's story is evidence that no human being is so cribbed and confined, with real or imaginary bars, as to be unable to pray. It demonstrates also the liberty we have in choosing how we shall pray.

Freedom of Choice

We even have a choice as to how we shall pray the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer. We may say any of the following:

And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors

(or the more familiar version,
Forgive us our debts
as we forgive our debtors).

Forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

All three variations have biblical warrant. Matthew 6:12, 14 reads, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors...For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." And in Luke's version of the prayer we read, "And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." (Luke 11:4)

Those who have been raised in the Anglican and Methodist traditions will, of course, be accustomed to using "trespasses." And those who belong to the Reformed tradition will use "debts." Others will have their own preferences.

A man from Illinois, who visited Scotland and heard "trespasses" used in a Presbyterian service of worship, wrote to my column in my denominational magazine: "Why do American Presbyterians use 'debts' in the Lord's Prayer, and when did we divert from

our Scot brethren?" I wrote back as follows: "If we are guided by Scripture, we may choose either 'debts' or 'trespasses.' However, John Calvin [the founding father of Presbyterians and other Reformed churches], writing about the Lord's Prayer in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, says, 'Sins [Christ] calls debts, because we owe the penalty of them.' *The Heidelberg Catechism*, which dates from 1563, uses 'debts.' So also does the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, dating from the mid-seventeenth century. That would establish 'debts' as the clear Presbyterian/Reformed preference."

Without insisting that one choice is better than another, let us consider the merits of the phrase, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." One advantage of the use of debts is that it clearly implies three important biblical dimensions of forgiveness: release, restoration, and redemption. One who has been forgiven a debt has been liberated from a burden; the forgiven one is also restored to a former state; and the one who forgives has paid a price for the other's freedom.

Release, restoration, and redemption are all combined in one of the most extraordinary concepts of the Bible, that of the Jubilee Year. It is described in **Leviticus 25**, in the Holiness Code that was discussed in Chapter Three. Turn to the passage now. This is how the Jubilee Year was supposed to be carried out:

At the end of every forty-nine years (seven years times seven), the next year was to be proclaimed a Jubilee Year—a year of liberty. The year was to be announced with the blast of a trumpet. (The Hebrew word "jubilee" comes from a word meaning a trumpet blast.) The following are some of the liberating acts that were to happen in that fiftieth year:

Each Israelite was to return to the family and family homestead—the assumption being that every family among the tribes had its allotted land. (The exceptions were the members of the tribe of Levi, the priestly caste, who were allotted houses instead of lands.)

All farmland was to lie fallow all that fiftieth year. There was to be no sowing or harvesting.

If there was any land that during the preceding forty-nine years had not been redeemed (bought back by or for its ancestral owner), it was to be returned.

Israelites who because of debt had become indentured servants were to be set free to return to their family and lands. (The redemption price for property or a bonded servant was to be computed with the Jubilee Year in view. If only a few years remained until the Jubilee Year, a comparatively low amount was required for redemption.)

The provisions of the Jubilee Year were grounded in several convictions. One was that the land originally belonged to God. Each farm was a freehold, graciously granted by God. Another was that those who work the land are God's servants. Therefore neither could an Israelite be alienated forever from the land, nor be made a slave.

Although there is no evidence that the instructions for a Jubilee Year were ever actually carried out, the notion of the Jubilee combines three very significant biblical concepts. One is that of liberation. The Jubilee Year was the occasion for indentured servants to be set free from their masters. Also, it was a time of restoration, when that which had originally been granted by Yahweh was deeded back to the recipient. And the Jubilee Year also figured in the process of redemption, by which lands or persons could be bought back for a price.

All three concepts—release, restoration, redemption—may come into play when we pray “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” For to forgive another a debt is to lift a burden, liberate from an obligation. Those who are heavily in debt are not their own persons; they belong in some sense to the person or institution to whom money is owed.

The forgiveness of a debt is also an act of restoration. One is restored to a prior state of well-being and self-sufficiency. A mark is erased from the record. One can begin again with no demerits. And with all true forgiveness, a price is paid. The one who forgives agrees to forgo either a repayment or a penalty.

Thus the Jubilee Year, which combines the ideas of release, restoration, and redemption, provides us with a three-dimensional model of what it means to forgive.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

It is quite possible that Jesus had the Jubilee Year in view when he taught his disciples to pray, “Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.” For in **Matthew 18:21-35** we have a dialogue between Jesus and Peter about forgiveness, followed by a parable that features the remission of a great debt. Locate this passage in your Bible now.

According to the Gospel account, Peter asks Jesus, “If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” And Jesus answers, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.” And then Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant. It is the story of a slave who owed his king an enormous debt—way, way beyond the possibility of repayment. The king thought to have the slave and his wife and children sold as partial payment. But when the slave begged for mercy, the king forgave him the entire debt. That same slave, upon leaving the king's company, happened on a fellow slave who owed him a small debt. And when that luckless fellow

could not pay, the first slave had him thrown into prison. When the king heard of it, he was understandably outraged. He set aside mercy and had the first slave handed over to be tortured.

Appended to the parable are these most dreadful words: “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” (v. 34) They are a harsher version of the appendix to the the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:14-15: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

The Bible does not flinch from the awful mystery of the hardened heart. It acknowledges that some persons seem to have souls of stone, which the gentle rain of mercy cannot penetrate. That is the reality behind the Russian fable of the mean old woman who went to hell and found herself up to her waist in a lake of fire. In her torment she pleaded with the avenging angel for release. The angel asked her if she could remember just one act of mercy. She thought and thought—and said that she remembered once giving an onion to a hungry beggar. The angel held out an onion, told the woman to catch hold, and began to draw her out of the fires of hell. Several of her fellow sufferers, seeing her rising to heaven, seized her by the legs to join her escape. But she began to kick and struggle, shouting, “It’s my onion. It’s my onion.” And when she did, the onion broke and she fell back into the lake of fire.

Slavery in the Bible

Rather than try to solve the mystery of human hard-heartedness or soften the harsh words from Jesus, we would do well to reflect on some of the harsher aspects of the society in which he lived—and of the society to which Leviticus 25 was addressed. In both societies, human slavery was an accepted fact of life. In fact, Leviticus 25 gives explicit permission to Israelites to hold slaves—so long as they were acquired from the surrounding nations or from aliens residing within the territory of Israel. And as many of us were reminded by the PBS series, “I, Claudius,” the Roman Empire was based on the holding of slaves.

It would be pointless—even mischievous—to ask if the Bible teaches that chattel slavery is the will of God. But certainly we ought to pause and reflect upon the meaning of indebtedness in our society. Most of us would agree that a financial debt is a solemn obligation, properly underwritten by social sanctions. If we lend money to another, with the other’s signed agreement to repay, that is an honorable arrangement. The money ought to be repaid as promised, no matter what the cost to the borrower. A debt is a debt. If debtors have to hire themselves out as servants to earn the money to repay us, we do

not feel any fault. Even if they have to deny their children proper healthcare or a college education, we do not feel responsible.

In our small town in northwestern Pennsylvania there was an elder in our church who had been left heavily in debt by the dishonesty of a law partner. Elder Mackay devoted his entire life to the repayment of those debts. During the years of the Great Depression some of the payments were no more than fifty cents. He was held up to us young persons as a model of integrity, although we looked on him with dread—like a prisoner who carried his jail with him wherever he went.

So when we pray “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,” we do so as those entangled in a system that exacts harsh penalties from those who borrow and cannot repay. Although in our prayer we employ “debts” as a figure of speech—representing sins, trespasses, crimes, betrayals, and disobedience to God’s law—we must not forget the wretched slave in Jesus’ parable. Like him, we ask that the awful penalties be set aside, that we be restored to family and social life, and that we not have to carry through life a great burden. And implicit in our asking this for ourselves is our willingness to grant it to others.

A Debtor’s Prison

When we pray the fifth petition, how might we imagine ourselves? It is too much to ask that we imagine ourselves as villagers in ancient Israel or as slaves of an oriental monarch. There is a model much closer to home. It is the state or federal prison, where men and women have been sent “to pay their debt to society.” We might well imagine ourselves as put away for some financial miscalculation. We never intended to commit a crime, only to get through a bad patch. But we got caught, and there we are in the company of a host of others who have sinned against the system. With us in prison are welfare cheats, embezzlers, inside traders from Wall Street, con artists, counterfeiters, money launderers, price fixers, Savings and Loan sharks, and those luckless ones who failed to file federal income tax returns. And on their behalf as much as our own, we pray, “Forgive us our debts,” which is a plea for release, restoration, and redemption.

Biblical Spirituality

This discussion of the fifth petition has focused on the implications of the concept of debts forgiven. An equally useful discussion might have been conducted on the alternatives, “Forgive us our trespasses” or “Forgive us our sins.”

However, the discussion of any of the three variations would have led to the same conclusion about biblical spirituality. It combines concern for individuality with concern

for social relationships. Biblical spirituality does not sacrifice the personal to the corporate, nor the corporate to the personal. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we take others with us. And when they pray, they take us with them. A debt or a trespass is a social concept. It implies at least two parties, with some kind of social sanctions surrounding them. We pray alone; but we are never "lone rangers" when we pray.

In each of these discussions on the Lord's Prayer, we have tried to show that biblical spirituality avoids the extremes of contemporary spiritualities: self-actualization and self-effacement, optimism and pessimism, passivity and heroics, otherworldliness and hedonism. Here the two dangers to be avoided are individualism and socialism (with a small "s").

At the time of the Civil War in the United States the Presbyterian Church split—north and south. The General Assembly of the new Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America promulgated the doctrine of "the spirituality of the church," according to which the church's mission is to be conceived and carried out in wholly spiritual terms. The church, the Assembly said, is not to meddle in social, political, or economic matters. The southern wing accused the General Assembly of the pre-war denomination of improper intermeddling in civil affairs by its voting to support the Union cause.

Does that have the ring of familiarity? A comparable debate goes on today between those who describe spirituality solely in individualistic terms and those who promulgate a social gospel. The first side argues that society can be saved only as individuals are saved, one by one. The other side argues that society must be redeemed, else there can be no hope for the poor and oppressed.

Scripture, however, knows no such distinctions between individual and social salvation, nor individual and social spirituality. It resists every effort to drive a wedge—however thin—between the believers and the society of which they are a part. It insists on the salvation of both persons and society.

Pressing Questions

Those who are weary of ecclesiastical battles over evangelism vs. social action may rightly ask, "But how can we avoid taking sides without sitting on the sidelines?" Surely the answer lies in the biblical teaching of forgiveness as this relates to freedom. Christian liberty is more than the freedom of individuals to do whatever pleases them. Martin Luther said that the Christian is a free person, the master of all and the servant of all. You may want to read the chapter entitled "Costly Grace" in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* (MacMillan, 1963). It is a masterful interpretation of how the forgiveness of sins is to be lived out in this world.

You might also read *Habits of the Heart*, by Robert N. Bellah and others, (Harper and Row, 1986). It shows how the radical individualism of our present American society is a departure from the biblical understanding of humans in society.

For Further Study and Reflection

Memory Bank

1. Leviticus 25:10
2. Matthew 6:14, 15

Research

1. There is a three-fold process involved in the forgiveness of debts: release (from the burden of the debt), restoration (to freedom from debt), and redemption. Probe the meaning of redemption (which ordinarily means “buying something back” or “paying the penalty”). In Christian forgiveness, who is being bought back? From what? What is the penalty being paid? By whom? With what?
2. The text emphasizes the dynamics of the forgiveness of debts. Probe the meanings of trespasses and sins and their forgiveness. What insights does this add to “Forgive us our debts”?
3. An essential part of public worship is the confession of sin, followed by the assurance of pardon. Investigate: Why is this done publicly? How does repentance figure in the process? What form does a meaningful assurance of pardon take? Who can give such an assurance? By what authority?

Reflection

1. Consider the condition, “...as we also have forgiven our debtors,” and Matthew 6:14, 15. This has to mean more than a mere bargain between God and us. What, then, is implied and involved in the condition?
2. What is the place of pastoral counseling in the forgiveness of sin?
3. What is there about the forgiveness of sin that makes it a necessary process so frequently?
4. Use the hymn “Lord Jesus, Think on Me” reflectively, and as a prayer.