

Matthew 6:12  
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Hampton Baptist  
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## Sermon Series on The Lord's Prayer

### "The Double-Hinged Door"

A woman once came to St. Francis of Assisi and confessed that she had spread slanderous remarks against people in her community. She asked the great spiritual leader how she could undo the damage. Francis told her to pluck feathers from a goose and then lay one feather on the doorstep of each household against which she had wronged. When the woman completed the task, she returned to Francis. He told her to go back and gather up the feathers, and then the project would be complete. The woman returned in tears. She cried, "The wind came and scattered the feathers. I can never recover them all."

St. Francis gently admonished, "Do you realize now what you have done, my daughter? Only God can forgive such sin." (C. Douglas Weaver. A Cloud of Witnesses. Macon: Smyth & Helwys. 1993 p. 51-52)

Every time we pray the Model Prayer, we are asking God to forgive us of our sins. Most of us pray for forgiveness more than once a week; the reality is that we are all sinners. Sin is not a popular subject from the pulpit; people would rather *experience* it. It seems to be ok to discuss sin from the perspective of "Our world is becoming an awful place," point of view, but it is a different story for us to converse about sin on a *personal* level. We don't want to be holding a mirror in our hands when talking about sin, because then we have to think of ourselves and admit to the fact that we don't measure up to God's standard.

Many Christians in our society have an erroneous conception of sin. They would readily agree that the murderer, thief, adulterer, drunkard or foul-mouthed person is a sinner. But most Christians are not guilty of these sins; most live decent, ordinary, respectable lives. Most Christians are not in danger of appearing in court for a heinous crime. Most Christians will not make headlines for their notorious behavior. Therefore many of us feel that we are pretty good people, and there maybe even some who don't think that they sin.

We have classified sin into two categories: big and little sins. The big sins, those actions that are viewed as non-acceptable behavior, would be the major offences such as murder, rape, stealing big items, you get the picture. But most of *our* sinful behavior falls into the other category of little sins, those actions that are deemed acceptable by society: gluttony, lustful thoughts, hurtful words (even when stated in anger), disregard for other's feelings, prejudicial statements, racial slurs, etc.

We sin every day; we do not want to admit it, because that may mean that we are not perfect. We realize that we aren't *perfect*, but if we *admit* to sinning, some of us may classify ourselves as *failures*, and we hate to fail or to be wrong. We have been conditioned that to fail or to be wrong is synonymous with being unacceptable, and because we have such a strong need to be *accepted*, we refuse to feel *unacceptable*. So we have a dilemma. We sin, but we don't want to admit it.

The dilemma continues because everytime we pray the Model Prayer, we say, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Before we can honestly make this petition, we must realize that we *need* to pray it. Therefore, we all need to realize our status before God. We all do things, say things, think things with which God is not pleased. We all are sinners.

Some of you may already know this, but each time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are praying the version from the Church of England Prayer Book. The words *trespasses* and *trespass* are not the actual Greek words; instead the words are *debts* and *debtors*. The word actually means "a failure to pay that which is due, a failure in duty." My guess is that no one would ever claim that he/she has perfectly fulfilled his/her duty to God or to humanity. Knowing that God is our Creator and that Jesus

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sacrificed his life for us leaves us in a position of debt. We owe God our lives; we owe Jesus our dedication and service. Therefore, we are debtors to God.

But the word also refers to a person's spiritual and moral debts to God for the wrongs an individual has committed. And given our behaviors, our list of debts grows everyday. We are morally and spiritually bankrupt, because we can *never* repay God for the goodness shown us. We can *never* provide adequate retribution for the amount of love that Jesus exhibited for us when he died on the cross for our sins. We can *never* reimburse the Holy Spirit for times of comfort and peace provided when life's road was the roughest.

Yet we *can* request forgiveness; we can ask that God have mercy on us and pardon our transgressions. Not that long ago, when someone was bankrupt, when they had no more resources to pay their bills, they were placed in the poorhouse or thrown into jail. They had to pay off their debt. God, through Jesus' death on the cross, has provided us with a route of forgiveness. Hebrews 9:22 states, "Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin." In other words, without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness granted.

In the Old Testament, offenders had to provide sacrifices to remove their sin. Jesus became the sacrifice for our sins; he shed his blood so that we could gain forgiveness. Being spiritually bankrupt, we all need to ask for forgiveness for our debts. Only God can grant that forgiveness; God is the jailer who sets us free from the prisons that enslave us.

Forgiveness is an act that we all need . . . and desire. I don't think it was an accident that in addressing humanity's needs in the Model Prayer, *give* (as in "give this day, our daily bread") was followed by *forgive* ("*forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*"). Jesus knew that mankind had a deep spiritual hunger to be forgiven, to be in tune with God. Sin separates us from God, and we all have a need to be connected to the One who created us. And there is only one way to be forgiven; only God grants forgiveness of sin.

When we pray, *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*, we are asking God to restore a right relationship with us. And maybe the greatest beauty of divine forgiveness, the most significant attribute about the pardon we receive from the Almighty for our unpaid debts is this: God forgives and forgets. Once we ask for forgiveness for an offence, we never have to ask again. Once God grants the forgiveness, the case is closed.

One of my favorite mental pictures from Scripture relates to the "forgive and forget" policy of God, which Chris read earlier. Psalm 103:12 states, "How far has the Lord taken our sins from us? Farther than the distance from east to west." How far is the east from the west? The distance is infinitesimal. Had the author written "the north from the south," then that would not have been so far, comparatively. One can continue traveling north until reaching the north pole, and then by maintaining the same direction, the person will go south. But if a person begins going east, he/she will circle the globe and never go west. The person will always be going east. So when the Psalmist stated that God has taken our forgiven sin as far as the east is from the west, he was saying that they will be removed from us forever. God will never remember them again.

Clara Barton, one of the great humanitarians of the nineteenth century, was widely recognized for her service as a nurse during the Civil War. She provided direct aid to soldiers on the battle lines and became known as the "angel of the battlefield." She continued her life of service after the war, and in 1881, founded the American Association of the Red Cross.

While working for the Red Cross, Barton was once reminded of a wrong committed against her some years before. "Don't you remember?" inquired a friend.

"No," replied Miss Barton emphatically, "I distinctly remember *forgetting* that." (*A Cloud of Witnesses*, p. 109)

God does better than that. God removes our forgiven sin and wipes the slate clean. Our relationship is restored; once the forgiveness is granted, it is like the sin never happened.

Unfortunately, for us, when it comes to forgiveness, if we forgive someone, we tend to have memories like *elephants*. We can recall the details of the conflict, the harsh words that were stated, and the feelings of hurt and anger.

Forgiveness is almost never easy. It is a process that sometimes takes years, depending on the seriousness of the offence committed. But it is important to note that Jesus' word for forgiveness has as its root meaning *letting go*. It may be that the most, and best, any of us can do is to release the anger we feel over the debts held against us. Forgiveness does not mean that the offender is no longer held accountable for his/her actions. It means that the one *offended* no longer takes responsibility for the *accountability* of the offender. The energy required to hold a grudge and remain personally committed to correcting a personal injustice is strong enough to impede our ability to receive anything from God.

The petition in the Model Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," literally means "forgive us our debts in *proportion* as we forgive our debtors." It is important for us to realize that in order to receive God's forgiveness for our sins, we have to forgive those who sin against us. We have to pardon those who hurt and abuse us, those who belittle and ridicule us, and those who steal from us. We have to forgive those who owe us debts, and I am not speaking about finances. Plainly stated, we have to forgive those who do us wrong, whatever the wrong might be.

When we lived in Kenbridge, the door that separated our kitchen from our dining room opened both ways; it was a double-hinged door. It could be pushed open from either side. God's forgiveness can also be described as a double-hinged door. God's forgiveness flows through one side, and we should be forgiving others from the other side. We cannot receive the forgiveness of God if we are unable to forgive others.

Archibald Hunter once wrote, "God cannot enter the heart of a person who hates." (Archibald Hunter. [A Pattern for Life](#), Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1965. p. 76) Many times in Scripture we find where Jesus insisted that "the *inward* flow of God's forgiveness is impossible without the *outward* flow of forgiveness to others."

Corrie ten Boom lived a life unknown to the world until the outbreak of World War II when her family home became "the Hiding Place" for Jews who were attempting to escape Nazi terror. As a result, she spent time in a concentration camp and lost her father and sister to cruelties of the Nazi regime.

After the Netherlands had been liberated in 1945, Corrie was told the name of the man who turned her family over to the Gestapo. This letter shares the message of God's love and the true meaning of forgiveness. The first portion reads:

Dear Sir:

Today I heard that most probably you were the one who betrayed me; I went through ten months of concentration camp. My father died after ten days, my sister after ten months of imprisonment.

What you meant to be harmful, God used for my good. I have become closer to Him. A severe punishment is awaiting you. I have prayed for you that the Lord will accept you if you will turn to him. Think about the fact that the Lord Jesus also carried your sins on the cross. If you accept that and will be His child, you will be saved forever.

I have forgiven you everything; God will forgive you everything also, if you ask Him. He loves you, and He Himself has sent His son to earth to forgive you your sins, that is, to bear the punishment for you and me. From your side an answer must be given. When He says: "Come to me,

give me your heart," then your answer must be: "Yes, Lord, I will. Make me your child." (A Cloud of Witnesses, p. 151)

If we say, "I will never forgive \_\_\_\_\_ for what he or she has done to me" or "I will never forget what \_\_\_\_\_ did to me," and then continually ask God to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those trespass against us," then we are deliberately asking God *not* to forgive us. The forgiveness that we extend to others and God's forgiveness of *us* cannot be separated. If we pray the Model Prayer, while not forgiving someone for a wrong committed against us, we are asking God not to forgive us as well.

God's forgiveness is like a double-hinged door. Is there a person that you have not forgiven? Is there someone who has wronged you and you have vowed never to forgive them? If so, you have barricaded the double-hinged door of forgiveness shut from your side, keeping God out also.

Today is the day to release your anger toward that individual. Today is the day to forgive those who have wronged you. As a result, today is a day that you could fully realize God's forgiveness for you.