

Forgive us Our Debts as We Forgive Our Debtors

A senior monk and a junior monk were traveling together. At one point, they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a very young and beautiful woman also attempting to cross. The young woman asked if they could help her cross to the other side.

The two monks glanced at one another because they had taken vows not to touch a woman.

Then, without a word, the older monk picked up the woman, carried her across the river, placed her gently on the other side, and continued his journey.

The younger monk couldn't believe what had just happened. After rejoining his companion, he was speechless, and an hour passed without a word between them.

Two more hours passed, then three, finally the younger monk could contain himself any longer, and blurted out "As monks, we are not permitted a woman, how could you then carry that woman on your shoulders?"

The older monk looked at him and replied, "Brother, I set her down on the other side of the river, why are you still carrying her?"

This simple story has a beautiful message about living in the present moment. How often do we carry around past hurts, holding onto resentments when the only person we are really hurting is ourselves. How hard is it to put issues down?

Today, we continue our reflections on the Lord's prayer and we come to what is arguably the most important petition for our spiritual well-being and even survival as human beings.

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

This is at the heart of the prayer as it is at the heart of Christian discipleship and our human lives.

From the moment that we are born to the moment that we pass from this life, we are all in need of forgiveness.

What do I mean?

The King James translation, has “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” and it’s a good translation because it accurately tells us what the problem is.

It literally means *Lord forgive us what we fail to do*, it is a failure in duty. Barclay writes, “that there can be no person who will ever dare to claim that he has perfectly fulfilled his duty to man and to God. Such perfection does not exist among humans.”

Of course, we know one who perfectly fulfilled this petition in his life and who had no need of God's forgiveness, Forgive us our debts... How do we receive forgiveness? Through God's Son Jesus Christ, who is at the heart of our forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the heartbeat of our Christian faith. It is where we meet God and our fellow human, without it we are less than what God intended us to be, with it we are truly human and aspire to be like Christ.

We all go through times in life when other people say things or behave in a way that is hurtful towards us. We can choose to ruminate over past actions or events, but it will ultimately weigh us down and sap our energy.

Instead, we can choose to let go of what doesn’t serve us anymore and concentrate on the present moment. Until we can find a level of peace and happiness in the present circumstances of our lives, we will never be content, because ‘now’ is all we will ever have.

Jesus wants us to find His peace – His *Shalom*, more than anything, and this petition is about finding peace with God and peace with our neighbour.

If we are to have Christian forgiveness in our lives that Jesus spoke about, three things may be necessary.

Willie Barclay suggests three pointers that will help us to forgive.

Firstly, we must learn to understand. There is always a reason why a person does something and the word that we use is the word empathy. The old saying, “Don't judge someone until you have walked a mile in their shoes,” is so true.

This week, I watched an excellent video, presented by the Templeton Foundation and its subject was forgiveness. In the video they had some distinguished speakers, who were experienced in the world of forgiveness.

Juan Manuel Santos served as President of Colombia, and received the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize for leading peace negotiations to end over 50 years of intractable civil war. So he has a lot of practical experience on forgiveness. He shared this remarkable story about forgiveness:

"I was advised by a Professor from Harvard that during the peace process I should hear the stories of the victims to reenergise me and give me the strength to continue on a very difficult path. Here is one of those stories: Pastor Amira lives in the coffee regions in Colombia. Her father had been killed by the war, her two brothers had been killed, her husband was killed and her son was tortured and killed about three or four years after her husband was killed. About 15 days after her son was buried, somebody came to her house seeking help. He was wounded and she opened up her house, helped him and cured him. When he was cured, he was going out again to continue the war and he saw a photograph of her with her son. He was shocked and asked her if that was her son. She said yes and he started crying and said, 'Forgive me but I was the one who tortured and killed him.' She was shocked but about 20 seconds later, she embraced him and he was even more shocked about her attitude. 'Why are you embracing me? Why are you saying thank you to me? I killed your son. I tortured him.' She said, 'Well by what you just did, telling me what you did and by crying, you liberated me from hating for the rest of my life.' That was a story that really had a profound effect on me personally of how powerful it is to forgive."

In the video President Santos said that personal stories and role models of forgiveness should be held up as shining examples. Stories such as these are truly inspiring and they say, if she can do it, so can I.

The woman who forgave the lad who murdered her son when she came face to face with him just maybe saw him as someone of the same age as her son, and she had pity on him.

So before rushing to condemn someone or to judge someone by our own standards, maybe we need to understand a little bit more about the person and the situation that drove someone to do such a thing.

Forgiveness is a deeply personal choice but it is for our wellbeing, it is scientifically proven that it improves our physical health, mental wellbeing, and relationships across all ages.

Secondly, we must learn to forgive and forget. As long as we brood upon a slight or an injury, there is no hope that we can forgive.

Forgiveness can be difficult and forgiveness is often a process, it takes time and progress isn't always linear or clear. It's a voluntary gift that only can be given by one person to another. So we must learn to put down the issue and, yes, try and forget; to ask for grace from our Lord, to help us lay it to one side. As Jesus said, before you take the speck out of someone else's eye, make sure you take the plank out of your own.

So it teaches us to look into our own lives and to know that we are less than perfect, and when we begin to catch a glimpse of this then forgiveness just becomes a little bit easier. To forget may take a long time, but as we lay things down and move ahead the issue will become smaller.

If we continue to say words like, "I will never forget what so-and-so did to me or I will never forget how I was treated by such-and-such a person or in such-and-such a place." These are dangerous sayings because they print the memory indelibly on our minds. We must let go and trust that in time we are able to erase our memories.

Thirdly, we must learn to love. Love conquers all. *Love is the greatest of all gifts*, said the Apostle Paul. When Christ comes to dwell in our hearts, he imparts his gift of love and he cannot come until we invite him in.

Forgiveness is a powerful tool that can improve mental and physical health. It's for our own good – that's why Jesus wants us to make it our prayer each day.

Mary Robinson served as the first woman President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and is an advocate for gender equality, women's participation in peace-building and human dignity. She shared a story on the forgiveness video:

These are her words, "I'll begin with a quote that I love which is, 'Forgiveness is the best form of love.' It takes a strong person to say sorry and an even stronger person to forgive"

In 2011, she said, Queen Elizabeth came to Ireland and she stood on the first day in a formal ceremony with our then President, Mary McAleese. It was at the Garden of Remembrance which commemorates all of those who fought in the struggle against Britain for freedom and independence. She bowed her head - a symbolic gesture. Her symbol was to bow her head and seek forgiveness in that way, and that if anything was more impactful.

It was the start of a rather troubled visit but that bowing of the head began a visit that ended up with her laughing with a fishmonger in Cork and being surrounded by crowds who were celebrating her and helping relations between our peoples."

It's a wonderful story, how one symbolic gesture in love can create the right atmosphere for peace to begin.

But the greatest role model that we have is Jesus himself – who not only taught forgiveness but lived it out.

He who committed no evil was sentenced to the most horrendous death. A death fit for the worst of criminals, after being severely flogged and rejected and betrayed, on the cross his final words were a perfect statement of who he was and what he came to do – "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

Forgiveness lies at the heart of our Christian faith. To be a true follower of Jesus is to know his forgiveness in our lives and to receive his spirit in our hearts that will enable us to live as he lived – a life of forgiveness.

Jesus came to earth to help people make wise choices about forgiveness. *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*

Yes, it's a beautiful and powerful prayer that not only needs to be said but needs to be lived out each and every day of our lives.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Amen