

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: February 22, 2015  
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“AS WE ARE FORGIVEN”**

**Matthew 6:12, 14-15**

**“All have sinned...”** (Romans 3:23).

‡ Do we believe this to be true?

Of course we do. Scripture teaches, consistently and forcefully, that every human being has missed the mark, lost their way, fallen down, gone out of bounds, sold themselves into slavery, become polluted, and been infected with deadly disease.

Many outside the Church bristle at the *language* of sin; but most agree that the *concept* is true. Between the horrific headlines and our own run-ins with liars, thieves, and abusers it takes real effort (and perhaps some degree of delusion) to deny that **“all have sinned.”**

‡ Do you and I believe it of ourselves? Do we accept that we are among the **“all”** who **“have sinned”**?

Certainly, if I polled us individually we would all answer “Yes, I have sinned.” It is not that difficult to admit our spiritual and moral failure in general terms.

But no one exists “in general terms.” We think specific thoughts, speak specific words, do specific deeds, and interact with specific people.

And when I observe myself in the nitty gritty of day-to-day life I discover an awkward truth: it is easy, when someone does me wrong, to define their offense as *“sin”*; but when the shoe is on the other foot – when I wrong

*someone else* – I am inclined to categorize it as a “mistake” or a “slip up.” And occasionally, when I am acting in a spirit of vengeance, I go further and tell myself, “It’s not an accident or a blunder; it’s ‘justice’!”

‡ **“All have sinned...”** Do we believe this to be true? Do we believe it of ourselves, not merely as a general principle but as a concrete reality?

■ Please turn with me to Matthew 6:12: **“And forgive us our debts...”**

📖 The verb *οφειλω* [ofeílō] means *to owe something*. A debt can be financial (take out a loan, and you owe the lender money) or material (borrow the neighbor’s snow blower, and you owe them a machine of that make and model) or positional (e.g., parents owe their children care, and children owe their parents honor) or moral (we owe God undivided worship and devotion, and human beings *αγαπη* [agapē] love).

📖 Messiah typically uses the more abstract *ἁμαρτια* [hamartía] for *sin*. But here in the Lord’s Prayer he uses the noun *οφειληματα* [ofeílēmata], **“debts”** (*that which is owed*). Why this word?

★ Maybe Jesus uses *οφειληματα* because the image of debt is inescapably relational.

Granted, in English we can say, “I [you] owe it to myself [yourself].” However, that idiom is a synonym for *deserve*; and *deserve* is the opposite of *owe*.

Actual indebtedness always involves a creditor and a debtor. Debt invariably links one to the other.

{Mt 5:28; Ex 20:1-7} So it is with sin: if I “[look] **at another woman lustfully**” and thereby “[commit]

**adultery with her in [my] heart**” I have sinned against Beth even if she never finds out; if I **“covet”** something **“that belongs to [my] neighbor”** I have sinned against him even if he never knows it. All sin is relational.

★ Maybe Jesus uses *οφειληματα* because the image of debt allows for degrees of intent.

No one unknowingly takes out a new mortgage. (There are too many forms to sign for that to happen!) Similarly, we often cheat or gossip or lie on purpose.

{Ex 20:7} On the other hand, if I am in a china shop and I clumsily knock over a single piece and all the others on the shelf topple like dominoes and shatter, I owe a hefty sum. Likewise with sin: it is easy to ignorantly idolize money or unthinkingly **“misuse [God’s] name.”**

★ Maybe Jesus uses *οφειληματα* because the image of debt emphasizes consequences.

Debt is not free. Sometimes the benefits are worth the fee; still, every kind of debt has its price – and if we fail to pay it, the penalties can be ruinous.

Sin is like that. It promises pleasure or profit or protection, and sometimes it delivers; but unlike other kinds of debt, it is never worth the price. The interest rate and fees are so high no mere mortal can pay it off. Hence the penalty – what Paul calls **“the wages of sin”** (the deserved end result, the merited outcome, the earned consequence) – **“is death”** (Romans 6:23).

? Do we believe this to be true?

Surely, we do. We have witnessed the costs of sin, up close and personal. We have seen – some of us

have felt – the pain, alienation, bondage, and degradation it

inflicts, not only on the debtor but also on their family and friends as the impact ripples out.

? But do you and I believe it of *our* sin? Are we convinced that **“the wages of” our “sin is death”**?

No doubt, everyone here who understands this message would say “Yes.” We want to be consistent with Scripture and orthodox Christianity.

But something strange happens to me when I am sorely tempted. It is as though I get tunnel vision: the potential advantages of that sin fill up my sight, looming so large I might not see the costs at all; or if I do notice them, they look so trivial as to be irrelevant.

Thank God, I do not always give in to temptation! But in those moments when I do, I don’t fully believe that **“the wages of” my “sin is death.”** Lord, have mercy!

? Am I alone in this? I did not think so.

**“All have sinned.”** Sin is the most pernicious, heaviest, costliest debt conceivable. It is too much for us to pay back, and the consequence of default **“is death”**!

{Mt 6:9} Our only hope is the cancellation of our debt, and only the Triune God, under the headship of **“Our Father in heaven,”** is qualified to do this. So the Son begins this petition with, **“And forgive us our debts.”**

■ Christ Jesus starts there, but he does not end there! Continuing in verse 12 he modifies the petition: **“...as we also have forgiven our debtors.” “And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven”**

those who owe us a moral debt because they have sinned against us.

✎ That brings us to the bigger point: there is a direct connection between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others. I know no other legitimate way to read "**And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.**"

★ Some contend that the connection is one of *causality*. They argue that God forgives us precisely *because* or *if* we forgive others. Divine forgiveness is, if not exactly an earned wage, than a deserved reward.

★ Others contend that the connection is one of *correlation*. God forgives *as* or *when* we forgive – but not because we forgive. Guilt and death are wages, but divine pardon is a gift.

Each line of reasoning has its merits. I used to fully embrace causality as an interpretation. Now I lean more toward the concept of correlation.

I have no definite proof text. However, *correlation* is more consistent with the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. In addition, it more closely fits the character of the Living God as he has revealed himself through his Son.

■ But what about his chilling words in verses 14-15? Jesus warns: "**For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.**"

? At first glance, this appears to be a cut-and-dried corroboration of causality. Yet that conclusion

begs the crucial question of ability: how are we *able* to forgive others *in the first place*?

Surely, human volition is essential to the process. We must will ourselves to forgive. But that is not the whole answer. Anyone can forgive a minor offense; but what about horrendous, life-altering sins like rape and murder?

Yes, I said "rape and murder." Neither Messiah nor any New Testament author ever moderates this command. There is no exemption for especially heinous sins.

{Lk 23:34} Messiah himself is our example. How did he pray for those who betrayed him, abandoned him, arrested him, convicted him on false charges, mocked him, spat on him, scourged him, and nailed him to a cross? "**Father, forgive them.**"

(Please hear me: forgiveness is not reconciliation. Forgiveness is releasing an offender from their debt, and it can be entirely one-sided. God calls me to forgive even if the offender never repents.

Reconciliation is restoring the broken relationship, and it is always two-sided. The offender must confess, seek forgiveness, and prove repentance by their changed behavior. Until they do, reconciliation is not possible.)

? How are we able to forgive monstrous sins?

It is God's nature to be merciful and kind. If we are his children through the ministry of his Son, than we have inherited that capacity – it is in our spiritual DNA. We "**forgive others when they sin against**" us

because we have been and are being forgiven by our Father.

{Jn 1:13} If, by contrast, we refuse to forgive, it is because we are not **“born of God.”** The Lord has offered us pardon but we have not accepted it; hence, the Father has not forgiven our sins.

I am not saying that Christians *effortlessly* or *instantly* forgive their debtors. We are tempted to step outside of grace, and sometimes we do.

I *am* saying that God is giving us every resource we need to deliberately forgive even the worst offenders. And I am confident that, in the end, we will!

? {Eph 2:8} In the meantime, when I am inclined not to forgive it helps to consider a series of questions:

Do I believe I am one of the **“all”** who **“have sinned”**?

Do I believe **“the wages of”** my **“sin is death”**?

Do I believe **“it is by grace [!] have been saved”**?

■ **“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”**

Matthew 6:12, 14-15 is the Word of the Lord.