

“On Debt and Debtors”
Mallory Everhart
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As a child, my father, who did not attend church, would ask us at Sunday lunch what we learned in church that day. I knew the question was coming, so would listen hard for some small fact or idea that I could glean to bring back to him. Two of those conversations still stick in my mind over twenty years later: The day my dad asked me what “grace” meant and the day he asked me a question that made me think harder about this section of the Lord’ Prayer. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us, or in another translation, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. In my upbringing, where I was raised to believe that god forgave our sins, I assumed that prayer was simply asking for forgiveness. It was just part of the big cosmic arithmetic problem – Jesus died to pay for our sins and all I had to do was ask and all the bad things I had done would go away. I didn’t give much thought to the second clause – “as we forgive those who sin against us,” even though I said this prayer at least once a week. It just kind of rolled into the next petition. No one ever taught me to slow it down, think it through, and ponder “wait – what does this actually mean?”

Maybe you are like me and you grew up thinking about forgiveness from God as a sort of magic spell – I said I was sorry and God forgives me because I believe in Jesus and Jesus paid my sin tab in advance, so it doesn’t really matter what I do, as long as I keep saying I’m sorry. Obviously, that’s simplified and tongue-in-cheek, but it represents a theology that probably isn’t unfamiliar to most of us. It’s the kind of theology we get if we only pay attention to the first part of the sentence. For me, it took my atheist dad to draw attention to that second half – and boy, did it bend my little third-grade noodle.

That “as” is a funny little word. In the English, it’s functioning as conjunction between the two clauses – how God forgives us and how we forgive others. Merriam Webster’s definition might be useful as we think through the meaning of this clause.

1. Used to indicate by comparison the way that something happens or is done.

It’s interesting, isn’t it, that the way this is written (both in the Greek and in the English), is that Jesus is telling us to ask God to forgive us in the same way we forgive other people. A literal translation of the Greek, without being cleaned up for English readers, reads this way: excuse our debts just as we have excused our debtors. Now, that’s a really funny order, isn’t it? Wouldn’t it make more sense if it was “help us forgive our debtors the way you have forgiven our debts?”

But it’s not. And I don’t know about you, but that makes me really uncomfortable. Instead of God setting the standard for human behavior and us asking to grow to be more like God, in this clause, Jesus is teaching us to pray for the shoe to be on the other foot. We are asking God to allow us to set the standard. This is a bit of a tone shift from the first half of the prayer, isn’t it? This isn’t just abstract imaginings about God’s will for the world or asking to be sustained out of the abundance of the earth. This requires something of us and, honestly, it makes me really nervous.

It gets uncomfortable, doesn’t it? If we take this prayer seriously, suddenly, it isn’t just about asking for and receiving forgiveness. Suddenly, it isn’t just about me and my personal relationship with a God who loves me. Suddenly, there’s an expectation. Not only do we receive forgiveness, but we are supposed to give it, too. Suddenly, this has implications for how I treat people around me. It prompts me to shine

light in places that I would much rather keep in the dark. It asks me to dig deep and answer questions I would rather pretend weren't being asked. Questions like "what do I find unforgiveable?" and "who am I still holding a grudge against?" "Who are the villains in my story that I refuse to let be fully human and what would it be like to forgive them?"

I have another suggestion – maybe it's a description of a spiritual truth: What if, by refusing forgiveness and reconciliation among the human community, we are actually cutting ourselves off from our own experience of God's grace? The way we conceptualize our relationship with God often models the way our human relationships play out. The idea that we are indebted to God and that other people are indebted to us implies that the main way we know how to be in relationship with one another is a relationship of power. If I owe someone something, they have power over me. If they owe me something, I have power over them. That's a human way of looking at things and, honestly, it's tough for us to believe that it could be any other way.

We say we believe in a God who loves us unconditionally and continues to forgive us and draw us back into relationship, even when we make the same mistakes over and over. But do we really believe it to be true? Can we even imagine what that would feel like?

Maybe this petition is pointing out the idea that the way we experience God's forgiveness is contingent on the way we forgive others. Notice, I am not saying that the quality of God's forgiveness is contingent on the way we forgive others. God is always calling us toward reconciliation, love, and relationship. That is a quality of God's character that does not change. Instead, how we experience God's forgiveness is contingent on the way we forgive others. When we pray this petition of the prayer – that we are forgiven the way we forgive others, we are asking to be taught about our relationship with God through our relationship with other people.

If we hold grudges and find someone or something unforgivable, we make our fellow human disposable and do much to diminish their holy worth. It's another power relationship – we have the power to pass judgment on them. They are the villains in our story – irredeemable and unworthy. After all, our resentments are justified, aren't they? They've hurt us! They've harmed us! They're wrong! They owe us! They are indebted to us! We know only the binary – it's either them or it's us. One of us is right and has to win. The other of us is wrong and must lose. This church isn't big enough for the both of us. One of us needs to have the power and the only way we know how to do that is at the expense of the other.

There is, perhaps, a tender truth at the bottom of this – if we are willing to do that to other people, that leaves room for a small, fearful part of us to believe that we, too, are disposable and that there is, on some level, something about us that is unforgivable or unlovable. What is stopping God (or other people) from throwing us away? Holding grudges against each other can only hold us back from truly experiencing love and grace, not only from each other, but also from God.

If we hang onto our resentments, we miss out on the mystery of reconciliation and the joy of restoration and this – this is not the vision God has for us. This is not what we have prayed for in the preceding petitions of this prayer. We have prayed for God' will to be enacted among us. We have prayed for our community to thrive and be sustained. And, now, we have prayed to experience the forgiveness of a glorious God who wants nothing more than to restore us to relationship. God is waiting for us to repent – to return – and commit to being in relationship, not only with god, but with each other.

This prayer has been said over and over by Christians of all types for thousands of years. Today, we join them in praying for our own hearts to be opened and softened even just a little bit, so we can experience the awesome power of forgiveness. If we allow this prayer to do its work, it is nothing short of life-changing. You see, it is the logic of the world which insists on debts and debtors and other such binary systems of power. By praying to be forgiven as we forgive, we open up a different kind of possibility, one which offers each of us back our sacred worth, restores us to right relationship, and grants us a fuller experience of the mercy of God we experience through the life of Jesus, who we call the Christ. Amen.