

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—
Lesson 61—What do we pray for in the fifth petition? Q. 105

Prayer for Pardon

- I. We're *indebted* to God by our sins.
 - A. A *debt* is that which we owe, that which lays a man under obligation and liability to another. But the liability created by our sins is not a debt to men—which can be put off with money or trade, but a debt to God, which can't be put off by any means of our own—but can only be put off by God Himself, if He pleases, Mk 2.7.
 - B. The debt created by sin is to God's law and justice. The faults we're guilty of before God oblige us and bind us to punishment. The original debt we owe is obedience, but having defaulted in that, we now owe punishment, Gal 3.10. Flavel, "Wherefore are sins called *debts*? Because they are a non-payment of God's dues, a non-performance of our duty, which makes us liable to the arrest of death, and to the prison of hell."
 - C. *In praying this prayer* we acknowledge the debt with God incurred by our sins and we ask God to acquit us of the curse and punishment which we know we deserve at His hands.
 1. Sin is an infinite debt against an infinite God that requires infinite satisfaction, which no finite creature can ever render.
 2. That's why hell is eternal, because the debt into which the damned toss the coins of their "daily sufferings" is a bottomless, boundless pit which, after a million years of suffering, will be no more full than if nothing had ever been thrown into it.
- II. This indebtedness naturally *drives us from God* in helplessness and hopelessness, Gen 3.8-10.
 - A. Without the hope of mercy and pardon in God, our sins cannot but drive us from God into utter ruin. The more we sin, the more need we have of God's forgiveness, but the more we sin, the more fearful we are to come before Him because *He's the One* we've wronged and owe. We can't look Him in the face because we have no means of paying our debt. And we can't bear His countenance because we know He can see the blackness, emptiness, and bankruptcy of our soul.
 - B. *In praying this prayer* we acknowledge the absolute helplessness of our condition because of our sin, but we *also* acknowledge that we refuse to seek our refuge in any other but in God, because we have come to know and believe that *there is forgiveness in Him* for those who ask for it, Ps 130.4.
- III. It is the *gospel* of God that *He* has provided a remedy in Christ, Isa 55.6-9.
 - A. The good news of God is that there is forgiveness on hand in Him. Forgiveness is possible with God because He's been pleased to pay the debt we owe in order that we might be forgiven for ever having incurred it.
 - B. This payment is in Christ and His work, who became sin for us, died for us, paid what we owe, and purchased our full and free pardon, 2Cor 5.21; Rom 4.25.
 - C. *In praying this prayer* we acknowledge the hope of forgiveness God gives us in His promises and in His Son's work.
 1. This forgiveness is given to us, not for anything in us, but solely for the sake of Christ, who became our Surety, assumed our debt, and paid it in full, in order that we might be fully absolved, Isa 53.6-8, 10-11, 12.
 2. Only God can forgive sins, Mk 2.7. And sins can be put off in no other way than by His forgiveness. Since He can't exact from us anything in the way of payment, either in the *matter* or the *measure*, there's no other way to separate us from the debt we owe than by a gracious and free pardon. Of course, though it's free to us, it's not free to God. It cost Him greatly to pay what we owe in order to forgive us for ever having incurred it in the first place, Eph 1.7.
 - D. Augustus Hare, "It is *hope*, the *hope* of being forgiven for Christ's sake, the *hope*, if we turn to God, of being received mercifully, as the prodigal son was received by his forgiving father, it is this firm *hope* that bears a man up through, the dark and dreary season of repentance. For repentance, true

repentance, is oftentimes a dark and stormy season. Were it not for the unfailing promises of Christ which, like the rainbow in the clouds, are a sure sign to the sinner that his trials shall have an end, and that the flood of his sorrows and iniquities shall not swell so as to drown his soul,—were it not for those comfortable promises which Jesus Christ in his Gospel makes to all such as will truly turn to him, many a sinner’s heart would fail. He would say within himself “This repentance is too painful for me: I will go back to my former sins.” But his promises and invitations are so clear and gracious, that many a poor soul is encouraged by them to persevere in the work of repentance, painful as it may be: until at length God causes his mercy to shine forth on him, like a sunbeam from a stormy cloud, and speaks peace to his wounded spirit: and so the sinner knows himself to be forgiven, and hastens on his way rejoicing.”

- IV. We’re taught to pray for *daily* forgiveness because God knows we daily sin.
- A. This is a prayer put into our mouths as often as we pray for provision. “Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our [daily] debts.”
 - B. The only way to find God hiding and covering our sins is for us not to hide them. The way to be acquitted at God’s hands is for the soul to accuse itself before Him with humility and grief. Therefore we must daily pray for God to show us our sins, Ps 139.23-24.
 - C. *In praying this prayer* we acknowledge that we live entirely upon the mercy and grace of God, before whom, if He counted iniquities we could not stand, but in whom we hope for pardon, because He’s *promised*, 2Chr 7.14; Ps 86.5; 103.3; 130.4; Isa 33.24; 43.25; 55.6-7; Lk 5.24; 24.47-48; Acts 10.43; 26.18; Co 2.13; Js 5.15.
 1. A God who offers forgiveness is no longer a terrible God from whom we run in fear, but a merciful God to whom we’re drawn in love and gratitude.
 2. And what does God forgive, but *all* our sins. Owen, “The forgiveness that there is with God is not like that narrow, difficult, halving, and manacled forgiveness that is found among men; but it is full, free, bottomless, boundless, absolute, such as becomes His nature and excellencies.” In other words, He forgives like a God.
- V. An encouragement that we are and will be forgiven is to be found in our ability by His grace to forgive others.
- A. They that do not forgive their brethren turn this petition into a most heavy curse and in effect daily pray, “Lord never forgive me my sin.”
 - B. *As we forgive our debtors* does not imply that our mutual forgiveness is the cause or ground of God’s pardon. Rather, it’s the effect and evidence of His grace to us. Nor is our forgiveness of others the measure of what we’re to expect from God’s forgiveness of us. Our forgiveness is always imperfect; but God’s forgiveness is always immediate and perfect. And yet, the two facts are intimately connected: if God has forgiven, we must, and if we forgive, God has, 1Jn 1.9-10; 3.14.
 - C. *In praying this prayer* we acknowledge our *obligation*, by His grace, to forgive others as He’s forgiven us; and we acknowledge that if we *withhold* forgiveness from others and harbor resentment, bitterness, anger, and revenge, we cut ourselves off from one of the most important and comfortable *evidences* that God has forgiven us.
 1. But if we find our hearts comfortable with hatred, anger, and revenge, then we can take it as a sure sign that we’re not forgiven by God.
 2. Hare helps us see what the condition in this petition means by offering us the prayer of the unforgiving man. “Conceive a revengeful, unforgiving man repeating this prayer, conceive a man with a heart full of wrath against his neighbour, with a memory which treasures up the little wrongs and insults and provocations he fancies himself to have received from that neighbour; conceive such a man praying to God most High, to forgive him his trespasses, as he forgives the man who has trespassed against him. What in the mouth of such a man do these words mean? That you may more fully understand their meaning, I will turn them into a prayer, which we will call the prayer of the unforgiving man: “*O God, I have sinned against thee many times, from my youth up until now. I have often been forgetful of thy goodness. I have not duly thanked thee for*

thy mercies. I have neglected thy service. I have broken thy laws. I have done many things utterly wrong against thee. All this I know. And besides this, doubtless I have committed many secret sins, which in my blindness I have failed to notice. Such is my guiltiness, O Lord, in thy sight. But deal with me, I beseech thee, even as I deal with my neighbor. He has not offended me one tenth, one hundredth part as much as I have offended thee; but he has offended me very grievously; and I cannot forgive him. Deal with me, I beseech thee, O Lord, as I deal with him. He has been very ungrateful to me, though not a tenth, not a hundredth part as ungrateful as I have been to thee. Yet I cannot overlook such base and shameful ingratitude. Deal with me, I beseech thee, O Lord, as I deal with him. I remember and treasure up every little trifle, which shews how ill he has behaved to me. Deal with me, I beseech thee, O Lord, as I deal with him. I am determined to take the very first opportunity of doing him an ill turn. Deal with me, I beseech thee, O Lord, as I deal with him.” Can anything be more shocking and horrible than such a prayer? Is not the very sound of it enough to make one’s blood run cold? Yet this is just the prayer which the unforgiving man offers up every time he repeats the Lord’s Prayer. For he prays to God to forgive him in the same manner in which he forgives his neighbour. But he does not forgive his neighbour; so he prays to God not to forgive him. God grant that his prayer may not be heard! For he is praying a curse on his own head.”

Inferences

- I. The privilege of forgiveness belongs only to repenting and returning sinners. God’s forgiveness is not a license to sin and won’t be used by a child of God as one. Rather, His forgiving disposition is primarily our *encouragement* to go to Him when we sin—because He’s so *forgiving*, and secondarily a *motive* to strive with His help to never sin against Him—because He’s so *good*.
- II. We’ll never be able to forgive others—in the manner and measure—as God forgives us. But the fruit of true, Christlike forgiveness is the sincere desire and prayer to forgive our debtors like God forgives us. God’s people are to *make no peace in their hearts with* anger, malice, hatred, resentment, bitterness, or vengeance, but are to be ever battling against and mortifying *everything* that violates the Sixth Commandment, Ex 20.13; Mt 5.21-24; 18.21-35; Eph 4.31-32; Col 3.5-17.