

The Larger Catechism

Question 194

194. Q. What do we pray for in the fifth petition?

A. In the fifth petition, (which is, *Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*, [1265]) acknowledging, that we and all others are guilty both of original and actual sin, and thereby become debtors to the justice of God; and that neither we, nor any other creature, can make the least satisfaction for that debt: [1266] we pray for ourselves and others, that God of his free grace would, through the obedience and satisfaction of Christ, apprehended and applied by faith, acquit us both from the guilt and punishment of sin, [1267] accept us in his Beloved; [1268] continue his favour and grace to us, [1269] pardon our daily failings, [1270] and fill us with peace and joy, in giving us daily more and more assurance of forgiveness; [1271] which we are the rather emboldened to ask, and encouraged to expect, when we have this testimony in ourselves, that we from the heart forgive others their offenses. [1272]

Scriptural Defense and Commentary

[1265] **Matthew 6:12.** And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. [1266] **Romans 3:9-22.** What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.... Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God, etc. **Matthew 18:24-25.** And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. **Psalms 130:3-4.** If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared. [1267] **Romans 3:24-26.** Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. **Hebrews 9:22.** And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission. [1268] **Ephesians 1:6-7.** To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace. [1269] **2 Peter 1:2.** Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord. [1270] **Hosea 14:2.** Take with you words, and turn to the LORD: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips. **Jeremiah 14:7.** O LORD, though our iniquities testify against us, do thou it for thy name's sake: for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against thee. [1271] **Romans 15:13.** Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost. **Psalms 51:7-10, 12.** Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.... Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. [1272] **Luke 11:4.** And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. **Matthew 6:14-15.** For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. **Matthew 18:35.** So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

Introduction

Many years ago, someone asked me if I ever run out things to pray for. The person seemed pretty convinced that more often than not, we will face periods of sheer dumbness. It seems reasonable – all the bases are covered, there is nothing else to pray for. We are done for the day; the list has been prayed through, the matter is concluded, we go on to the next thing scheduled for the day. Will believers run out of things to pray for? Our inability to pray, this “dumbness,” may in fact come from several factors.

It can come from our *carnality*. We are so caught up with the ways of the world or simply living in disobedience that we remain speechless before God. The soul is not interested in addressing God because it refuses to forsake its love affair with sin. Another reason may be *insensibility*. The “sense” of want or the awareness of one’s deep spiritual need does not press in on the mind and heart. There is no feeling, no sense of urgency, no sense of dread, etc. This spiritual numbness creates dumbness.

Still there is the *conviction of sin* that might prevent a person from praying. He is so overwhelmed and feels so guilty, he cannot even groan. Though this is a better situation (since he is sensible of something important), it can easily lead to despair and will issue in full unbelief if left in this condition.

Perhaps a far too common condition among the saints of God is that we tend to be *too busy, preoccupied, and distracted*. Running too fast and furious with many interests and concerns have crowded out our need for prayer. Some of these concerns may be legitimate, some perhaps neutral, etc. but in the end, our hearts have plunged themselves into those diversions so thoroughly that when it comes to praying, we can say little to nothing because the “other” concerns have grabbed our attention and affections.

These are all spiritual problems and most likely, the same person could (after giving up on prayer) speak energetically about anything else. That reveals much and speaks volumes regarding the spiritual decay.

Now coming back to the question. Theologically speaking, we should never be speechless because the fifth petition assumes something about our real problem. “**And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.**” (Mt. 6:12) We have enough sins to compel us to pray and enough to preoccupy our prayers. If nothing else comes to mind, surely there is something to confess! If we are not unacquainted with ourselves and not strangers to God’s holy standards, then we can (and should) confess our sins.

Thomas Ridgley beautifully connects this petition with the fourth. This flow in the Lord’s Prayer ought to be remembered:

Having been directed, in the former petition, to pray for outward blessings, we are now led to ask for forgiveness of sin. It is with very good reason that these two petitions are joined together; inasmuch as we cannot expect that God should give us the good things of this life, which are all forfeited by us, much less that we should have them bestowed on us in mercy and for our good, unless he is pleased to forgive those sins whereby we provoke him to withhold them from us. Nor can we take comfort in any outward blessings, while our consciences are burdened with a sense of the guilt of sin, and we have nothing to expect, as the consequence of it, but to be separated from his presence.¹

Debts or Trespasses?²

Matthew 6:12 uses the word that must be translated as “debts” — “and forgive us our *debts* (ὀφειλήματα), as we also have forgiven our *debtors* (ὀφειλέταις).”³ Almost every translation uses “debts” but the Catholics in the English speaking world continue to use

¹ Thomas Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity, Volume 2* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855), 633.

² I had originally stated that the KJV used “trespasses” in v. 12. One of our members pointed out that I was mistaken and it appears I had looked at v. 14 in the KJV and drew an incorrect conclusion. I have since then corrected this section.

³ Luke 11:4 has “sins” (τὰς ἀμαρτίας).

“trespasses” (even though the Vulgate has “*debita nostra*” as well as their Douay translation). *The Book of Common Prayer* (1559) used “trespasses” while John Wycliffe early on used “debts” (dettis) in 1382. William Tyndale’s New Testament translation (1526) however ended up with “trespasses” and he maintained the same translation of v. 12 in 1533 in his exposition upon Matthew chs. 5-7.⁴ Perhaps his influence through Coverdale came into *The Book of Common Prayer*?

Modern Catholics recognize that the word ought to be translated as “debts” but ever since they began to pray the Lord’s Prayer in English (as opposed to Latin), it was “trespasses.” Even the most recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* uses “trespasses.”⁵ Nevertheless, it is more accurate to translate it as “debts.”

Apparently the Greek word for debt was equivalent to the Aramaic word for sin as a debt.⁶ The Targums used the Aramaic word to mean sin or transgression.⁷ Clearly our sins place us in an indebted situation, as something owed to God. Something has to be done to clear our debt created by our sins (“debtors to the justice of God”).

Acknowledging our Guilt, Debt, and Incapacity

In this petition, we are in fact “**acknowledging, that we and all others are guilty both of original and actual sin, and thereby become debtors to the justice of God; and that neither we, nor any other creature, can make the least satisfaction for that debt...**” Three things are mentioned in this clause. *One*, we are acknowledging our guilt. An “uneasiness” should pervade our hearts as we come to Him (as we ponder ourselves). We know we are guilty for our “original and actual sin.” That is, we recognize we are tainted by a sinful nature and that we are also guilty on account of our actual sins against God. Rom. 3:9-22 clearly and emphatically teaches that we are “all under sin.” Though we may not “feel” it, we acknowledge it since it is a fact. Our inability to sense and feel this sin and its corresponding guilt indicates how deeply sin has infected our judgment and sense. Vos makes this helpful observation:

The guilt of sin is an unpopular idea today; the man-centered religion of recent decades has tried to avoid this idea or explain it away. Sin is regarded as a misfortune or calamity, rather than as something deserving blame and punishment. Consequently, many modern people regard themselves as quite righteous; or if they think of themselves as sinners, they feel that they are to be pitied and consoled rather than judged and condemned. (Vos, 566)

Two, we are also admitting that we are in debt to God — “**debtors to the justice of God.**” Acknowledging our guilt means that we have become debtors to God. God requires holiness and we have fallen short of His glory (Rom. 3:23). Jesus tells a most searching parable of the unmerciful or unforgiving servant in Mt. 18:21-35. In it, Jesus equates the debt with sin. He concludes, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive

⁴ G. E. Duffield, ed., *The Work of William Tyndale*, The Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 261.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994), 682.

⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (WBC 33A; Accordance/Thomas Nelson electronic ed. Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 150: “The concept of sin as a “debt” owed to God has an Aramaic background (in the rabbinic literature, חֲבֵרָה, *hōbā’*, is sin construed as a debt).”

⁷ D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (EBC 8; ed. Frank E. Gaebel and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), n.p

your brother from your heart.” (v. 35) Jesus is teaching us that our debts have been forgiven and we should in turn forgive others. The debt in v. 24 is likened to something over a billion dollars in our currency; selling the family into slavery to pay of the debt would have perhaps cover one talent (nothing in comparison to the ten thousand talents he owed [ὀφειλέτης]). Similarly, our guilt and sin has placed us in debt to the justice of God. We must see our offense and debt to be as they really are. Is it not true that we minimize our sins against God and maximize people’s offense against us?⁸

Three, we are acknowledging that we are incapable of paying for that debt. Our incapacity does not minimize our obligation — **and that neither we, nor any other creature, can make the least satisfaction for that debt.** The Psalmist said, “If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?” (Ps. 130:3) If God holds us accountable (and He does), we cannot stand before Him. His holy righteousness opposes us and we cannot satisfy Him of this debt. Always remember this! We are infinitely indebted to Him on account of our sins; we are incapable of satisfying that debt. We cannot repay what we owe!

Why is this necessary? Are we once again pressing for a “worm theology” that is neither healthy nor helpful? Not at all! Rather, this posture must always regulate and drive our prayers because it truly reflects our condition. The fifth petition helps us to come to terms with our need for pardon and that we cannot take care of the sins we have committed! We must remember we cannot satisfy divine justice so we must flee to Him who alone can pardon and justify us. We must rid ourselves of that “legal” spirit that always rears its ugly head in our prayers: “I’m so sorry; I’ll never do it again. I will from now on do this and that and promise to always [insert your promised works of righteousness]!” No, we acknowledge **that neither we, nor any other creature, can make the least satisfaction for that debt.** We cannot make the least satisfaction much less a full satisfaction — that is what we must always remember in our prayers. We possess infinite demerit and come to God incapable of satisfying divine justice — in knowing and believing this, we have the right posture to seek pardon from our gracious heavenly Father. It is most safe to be most honest before our heavenly Father. (Though we must not think that even this “posture” merits his approval and thus earn our forgiveness and satisfy divine justice. Remember John Newton’s words, “My best is defective and defiled, and needs pardon before it can hope for acceptance; but through mercy my hope is built, not upon frames and feelings, but upon the atonement and mediation of Jesus.”)

We and All Others...Ourselves and Others

Confessing our own sins is a very personal and private matter. Yet the prayer requests pardon for “*our* debts.” None of us stand above another before God. We are all guilty and we all need pardon. Witsius says that “all are oppressed by the load [of sin], no one is able to discharge his own debt, much less that of others.”⁹ So “**we pray for ourselves and others...**” Prayer must include the infirmities of others.

⁸ N. T. Wright gives an interesting interpretation to the word “debt” here. He argues that this alludes to the Jubilee command. It is more than individual guilt but a yearning for something more cosmic. He says, “The Lord’s Prayer makes sense, not just in terms of individual human beings quieting their own troubled consciences, vital though that is, but also in terms of the new day when justice and peace will embrace, economically and socially as well as personally and existentially” (N. T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* [London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996], 55). There may be something to that but Wright tends to minimize the salient aspect of this petition, viz., our own troubled consciences!

⁹ Herman Witsius and William Pringle, *Sacred Dissertations on the Lord's Prayer* (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark, 1839), 316.