

BEING FORGIVEN AND BEING FORGIVING  
Matthew 6:12, 14-15

What makes a congregation a church? How can you distinguish a true church from a false one? What does it take for a local church to be the church of Jesus Christ? THE BELGIC CONFESSION OF 1561 is one of the best answers to that question. It outlines three distinguishing marks by which the true church is known.

- The faithful proclamation of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.
- The faithful administration of the baptism and the Lord's Supper.
- The faithful exercise of church discipline.

All too often, we judge churches on the basis of size, prominence, and resources. But that is just another testament to the truth of Isaiah 55:8: God's thoughts and ways are not like our thoughts and ways. God does not judge a church by how much money it has or how beautiful its facilities are or how many people attend. God looks for fidelity of doctrine, purity of life, and unity of fellowship. These are the marks of a true church. I want to focus your attention on what AL MOHLER has called "the missing mark": CHURCH DISCIPLINE. What is church discipline? It is the spiritual process of confrontation, rebuke, confession, forgiveness, and restoration. Most simply, church discipline is about being forgiven and being forgiving. We cannot be the church of Jesus Christ and erase this mark. Jesus Christ himself has given us a great strategy for making sure the mark of church discipline is never missing from the church in the model prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray: "and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

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The first word of this petition is the conjunction "and," which connects verse 11 to verse 11. In verse 11, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Then Jesus connects the request for bread to this request for forgiveness. How do the two go together? I think the connection is this: they are both fundamental needs of human existence. Forgiveness is to the soul what food is to the body. I submit to you that most of the major spiritual problems we have are somehow connected to the fundamental issue of forgiveness. Think about it. When we have a problem properly relating to God, others or life itself, it is usually because of one of two reasons:

- GUILT - the expression of our need to receive forgiveness.
- BITTERNESS - the expression of our need to extend forgiveness.

Forgiveness is to the soul what bread is to the body. Our bodies starve when we do not eat. And our souls starve when we do not receive and extend forgiveness. Our daily bread does nothing but feed us as long as our sins are not pardoned. The Greek word translated “forgive” (aphiemi) simply means to send away. It was used to refer to cancelling a debt, discharging an arrow, dismissing a criminal proceeding, divorcing a woman, ending a meeting, or loosing a ship into the sea. This is what forgiveness does. It sends away guilt and bitterness. Christianity is not just about what will come into your life if you follow Jesus. It is also about what is sent away from your life if you follow Jesus Christ. It is about the constant process of sending away guilt and bitterness. We are most like beasts when we kill. We are most like men when we judge. We are most like God when we forgive. For citizens of the kingdom of heaven, forgiveness is both essential and beneficial. We pray for daily forgiveness, just like we pray for daily bread. Christians approach God desiring to be reconciled to God and others. We pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.”

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The point of this petition is illustrated in THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT recorded in Matthew 18:23-35. As a certain king reviewed his servants’ stewardship, a servant was brought before him who owed him millions of dollars. So the king ordered the man – along with his wife, children, and possessions, to be auctioned off at the slave market. The poor wretch threw himself at the king’s feet and begged for mercy. And the king forgave him and released him from the debt. But no sooner than he was out of the room, he came upon a fellow servant that owed him ten dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded, “Pay up now, you bum.” This fellow servant begged for mercy. But he would not do it. He had him put in jail until the debt was paid. When the other servants saw it, they were outraged and reported it to the king. The king summoned the man and said, “You evil slob. I forgave you your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn’t you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?” The king then puts that servant in jail to be tortured until he could pack back the debt he owed. Notice the three key facts of this story.

- The servant had a debt to the king that he could not ever repay.
- The servant had his debt freely and graciously forgiven by the king.
- The servant had to learn – the hard way – that the forgiveness you receive is tied to the forgiveness you extend.

Those three key facts illustrate the principle Jesus seeks to get across in this fifth petition of the model prayer. They are the fundamental dynamics of Christian reconciliation.

## I. ACKNOWLEDGE THE NEED FOR FORGIVENESS.

It is said that JOHN WESLEY was talking to a man who proudly commented, "I never forgive." "Then, sir," Mr. Wesley wisely replied, "I hope that you never sin." The first reason why we as Christians are forgiving people is because we recognize that we are people who are always in need of forgiveness. Proverbs 20:9 says, "Who can say, 'I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin'?" None of us. We are sinners. We have iniquity. We commit transgressions. F.F. BRUCE said it well: "There is something in man - even regenerate man - which objects to God and seeks to be independent of him." So, first and foremost, we pray this petition to help us remember that we need God's grace, mercy, and love.

I do not believe there is a better picture of sin than the one given in this petition: It says we have debts. What an incredible picture of sin! It is a debt. We are debtors to God. Because God created us and sustains us, we are ultimately accountable to God. And because God is holy, he demands total, complete, and perfect obedience from us. It is an equitable deal, seeing that God created us and sustains us. But it also means that whenever we disobey God we put ourselves in debt to him. Romans 6:23a teaches us that the wages of sin is death. Sin is a costly debt that keeps accumulating painful interest. Where can you hide when you owe heaven's bank? What kind of acceptable payment-plan could you come up with when you owe heaven's bank? What court can grant you bankruptcy protection from heaven's bank? We are debt-ridden sinners who must come to God with the humility of a beggar, not the haughtiness of a banker. We deal with God by throwing ourselves on his mercy, pleading for his amazing grace, and hoping for his steadfast love. We approach God in prayer, saying, "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors."

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Do not forget that Jesus taught this model prayer to his disciples. This is not a petition that lost people can make. This prayer is for the saints. Only those who can pray, "Our Father in heaven," can pray, "Forgive us our debts." Yet as those who can address God as Father, we still need to pray for forgiveness. Though we are saved, born-again, and justified, we still need to be forgiven.

There was a time when my prayer was like a rollercoaster. When I was doing good, I felt more confident about praying. It was a pleasure to tell God about what was going on in my life. But when I knew that I had sinned, I was reluctant about prayer. I felt so unworthy. My prayer life became more consistent when I realized that I could never be worthy in and of myself to approach the holiness of God in prayer. That is, before I was saved I was a sinner who needed to be forgiven. And now that I am saved, I am still a sinner who needs to be forgiven. How is that? Christians are saved by grace. Christians have the hope of glory. Christians have eternal security. So why would we need to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors"?

Know that there are two types of forgiveness that God extends: JUDICIAL and PARENTAL. Judicial forgiveness is the once-and-for-all forgiveness of our sins that God graciously bestows upon those who put their trust in his Son, Jesus Christ. Parental forgiveness is the regular forgiveness of our sins that God graciously bestows upon those who have already put their trust in his Son, Jesus Christ. Judicial forgiveness is about salvation. Parental forgiveness is about fellowship. Judicial forgiveness establishes our personal relationship with God. Parental forgiveness maintains our intimate fellowship with God. Before we are saved God is our Judge. And we must seek his forgiveness, so that we will not be eternally condemned. Once we are saved, God becomes our heavenly Father. Yet we still must seek his forgiveness so that we may live in his favor. We pray, "Forgive us our debts," not as criminals who need to meet God, but as children who need to stay on speaking terms with God.

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Jesus explains it better in John 13:1-11. The scene is THE UPPER ROOM. It is the night Jesus will be betrayed by Judas. After THE LAST SUPPER, Jesus got a towel and basin and began to wash his disciples' feet. Peter said, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "What I am doing you do not understand now. But afterward you will understand." Peter said, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus said, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Peter was still confused. But he submitted. In fact, he said, "Not my feet only, but my hands and my head!" Jesus responded by saying, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." In those days they did not have closed-toe shoes or paved roads. So when they arrived at a destination, it was customary for them to wash their feet, even though they had just taken a bath. Likewise, we have already been washed clean by the blood of Jesus. But as we travel along life's journey, our feet get dirty. When that happens, we do not need to get saved all over again. We just need to get our feet washed. We do not need judicial forgiveness. We need parental forgiveness. We need to come to our heavenly Father and pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors."

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## II. APPROPRIATE THE GIFT OF FORGIVENESS.

Notice that this petition does not teach us to pray, "Teach us to forgive others, so that we might be forgiven." This would leave us in control. From our great storehouse of righteousness, we could reach out in love to those who had injured us and wronged us. But it does not work that way. We are taught to ask to be forgiven first. That takes us out of control. It means that we are suddenly at the mercy of someone else's account of our lives, rather than our own. Thus, our forgiveness of others begins as a response to our being forgiven. It is not an act of generosity toward our fellow human beings who have offended us. It is an act of

gratitude toward our forgiving God. If we control the forgiveness we receive, then we have a right to control the forgiveness we receive. But if we are to forgive and love one another the way Christ commands, we must first be recipients of God's grace. We must appropriate the gift of forgiveness.

This petition does not say anything to us about forgiving ourselves. That is a popular concept these days, even in the church. There are actually professing Christians who would dare say, "I believe God has forgiven me. Now I have to forgive myself." That is nonsense. The Bible does not tell us how to forgive ourselves. The Bible does not tell us that we should forgive ourselves. Of the more than 125 direct references to forgiveness in scripture, the idea of forgiving ourselves is not mentioned once. We cannot forgive ourselves. That is not a Christian way of thinking. To forgive yourself would make you the God that you offended. The thought of that is almost blasphemous. It is another attempt of the enemy to get us to depend upon our own righteousness, rather than the grace of God. True forgiveness is rooted in God. Forgiveness is a gift from God. We are taught to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors," in order to help us appropriate the gift of forgiveness.

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1 John 1:5-10 give two options for how to deal with the reality of your sin. You can lie. You can lie to God, others, and yourself about your sins. Or you can be honest with God about your sin. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 2:1 tells us why God is faithful and just to forgive us: "But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."

- It is through Christ we are forgiven.
- It is through Christ we are reconciled with God.
- It is through Christ we are adopted into God's family.
- It is through Christ we are born again.
- It is through Christ we are declared righteous.

Thank God for this indescribable gift! People are often reluctant to forgive. But Psalm 86:5 says, "For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you." People forgive but don't forgive. Yet Isaiah 43:25 says, "I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins." People forgive minor annoyances but may refuse to pardon major hurts. However, Isaiah 1:18 says, "Come now, let us reason together says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." People put special stipulations on their forgiveness. But Isaiah 55:7 says: "let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will

abundantly pardon." People forgive but still hold it against you. But Psalm 30:5 teaches, "For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

A family was on vacation in Washington D.C. And while on a sightseeing tour, their young son became fascinated with the Washington monument. So he went up to a guard, pointed to the monument, and said, "I want to buy it." The guard asked, "How much do you have?" The boy reached into his pocket and pulled out a quarter. The guard said, "That's not enough." The boy replied, "I thought you would say that." So he pulled out nine more cents. The guard was then forced to explain. Listen son," he said, "let me explain a few things to you. First of all, thirty-four cents is not enough. In fact, thirty-four million dollars is not enough money to buy the Washington Monument. Second, the Washington Monument is not for sale. And third, if you are an American citizen, the Washington Monument already belongs to you."

It is the same way with the forgiveness of God. You do not have enough to pay for God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness is not for sale. And if you are a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, forgiveness is already yours.

JESUS PAID IT ALL. ALL TO HIM I OWE  
SIN HAD LEFT A CRIMSON STAIN. HE WASHED IT WHITE AS SNOW.

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### III. ACCEPT THE CONDITION OF FORGIVENESS.

This petition contains a confession: we are debtors. It makes a petition: forgive us our debts. But it also sets a condition: "forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors." R.T. Kendall wrote: "I suppose this petition has made more liars out of more people than any document in history." I agree. But I think many people lie because they do not know what they are praying in this petition. So let me paraphrase it for you. "Father, I need your forgiveness. But I request that you treat me the way I treat those who have wronged me." Are you aware that this is what you are saying to the Father? Give me what I give them. Grant me the same peace I grant others. Let me enjoy whatever tolerance I offer. Did you get that? God will treat you the way you treat others. It is as if God sends you to a market for your neighbor's groceries and says, "Whatever you get your neighbor, get also for yourself." For whatever you give him is what you will receive." We pray for the Father to pardon us. But this petition is inseparable from our willingness to forgive. I know that there are debtors in your life.

- Your parents should have been more caring.
- Your children should have been more appreciative.
- Your mate should have been more faithful.
- Your friends should have been more supportive.
- Your church should have been more attentive.

You have debtors. And note the plural terms in this petition. It says we have debts. And we also have debtors. But you must let them off the hook. That is, you must forgive them, unless you do not expect to need any forgiveness yourself. Because all of us have a tendency to sin, you better forgive your debtors. When you come to God with an unhealed breach or an unsettled quarrel, you are really just asking God not to forgive you. You must be able to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors." Jesus is so serious about this issue of forgiveness that he makes it the only petition that has explanatory commentary associated with it. In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus enforces the seriousness of this petition with a stern warning: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

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Why is the forgiveness we receive equated with the forgiveness we extend? Forgiveness is like a coin: it is a single unit with two sides. The attitude that enables us to accept forgiveness is the same attitude that compels us to extend it. If we are unable to forgive others, our hardness will prevent us from accepting God's forgiveness.

It is like being in love. You become vulnerable to that which you truly love. When you give your heart to someone, you open yourself up to both the joy and pain that love brings. You cannot say, "I just want the joy that love brings. But I do not want any pain" That is not love. When you give someone your heart, you put yourself in a position where that person can bring you both incredible joy and excruciating pain. It is the same way with forgiveness. You can hold a grudge, nurse your hurts, and vow to never forgive those who have wronged you. But when you close your heart so that forgiveness is not extended, your heart is also closed off from receiving forgiveness. If your heart is going to be open to receive the forgiveness of God, your heart must also be open to extend forgiveness to those who have wronged you.

Joseph's brothers plotted; fearing that Joseph would take vengeance out on them for all that had been done to him. But in Genesis 50:19, Joseph raised a great question: "Am I in the place of God?" Think about that. You must remember that you are not God. You must forgive, let your debtors off the hook, and leave them in the hands of the Lord. Now, I am not saying that is as easy as "forgive and forget." Some things you cannot forget. And some things you should not forget. But if you forgive and give it to God, God is able to take the pain out of your memories.

There is definitely a place in our faith for confrontation, truth-telling, and rebuke. At the same time, we are called to be forgiving, longsuffering, and gracious. We are to hate the sin but we are to love the sinner. I read that there was a time in the life of C.S. LEWIS, when he deemed that concept to be ludicrous and impossible. He couldn't see how you could hate sin without that hatred extending to the person who committed the sin. He couldn't understand, until he

looked in the mirror. He noted that he had absolutely no problem loving himself, in spite of the hateful things he did. Isn't that like most of us? We minimize our own sins, faults, and mistakes, but we exalt the sins, faults and mistakes of others. We need to learn how to be more appalled by our own sins and to be more patient with the sins of others. Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." The Bible does not say that your debtors have to admit they are wrong or say they are sorry for you to forgive. They need to do that for there to be reconciliation, but not for there to be forgiveness. All you need to in order to forgive is to know that God has forgiven you.

In a rural village lived a doctor who was noted both for his professional skill and his devotion to Christ. After his death, his books were examined. Several entries had writing across them in red ink: "Forgiven - too poor to pay." Unfortunately, his wife was of a different disposition. Insisting that these debts be settled, she filed a suit before the proper court. When the case was being heard, the judge asked her, "Is this your husband's handwriting in red?" She replied that it was. "Then," said the judge, "not a court in the land can obtain the money from those whom he has forgiven."