

# “Forgive Us Our Debts as We Forgive Our Debtors”

A Meditation on [Matthew 6:12](#)

By John Piper January 1, 1978

## [Matthew 6:12](#)

[Matthew 6:14-15](#) “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your father who is in heaven will forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your father forgive you your trespasses.”

[Mark 11:25-26](#) “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your father who is in heaven forgive.”

[Matthew 18:34-35](#) “And the master was angry and he handed him over to the jailers until he pay back all he owed. So will my father who is in heaven also do to you if each one of you does not forgive his brother from your hearts.”

*There are no unforgiving people in the kingdom of God.* But then who can be saved? With men it is impossible, but not with God ([Mark 10:27](#)). But then does God make us perfect in this life so that we *never* fail to forgive? Does he bring us to the point immediately where our response to every personal insult or injury is *never*, not for a moment, resentment, anger, vengeance or self-pity?

To answer this let us ask: Is forgiveness a *unique* virtue among all the qualities Jesus demanded in his disciples? That is, is it alone the quality on which the father’s forgiveness depends? No! *All* of Jesus’ commands must be met lest we perish. It is not just an unforgiving spirit which cuts a person off from God; it is *sin*. If your right eye causes you *to sin*, pluck it out, or your father will not forgive you your trespasses ([Matthew 5:29](#)). If you call your brother a fool, your father will not forgive your trespasses ([Matthew 5:22](#)). If you do not love your enemy, your father in heaven will not forgive your trespasses ([Matthew 5:44](#)). Whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble will not be forgiven by my father ([Matthew 18:6](#)). Over every command of Jesus stands the saying, “If you do not do this, you will not enter the kingdom,” which is the same as saying the father will not forgive you ([Matthew 7:21-23](#)).

So the command, “Forgive that you might be forgiven,” is just one instance of the whole ethical demand of Jesus. It is not the exception; it is the rule. As Jesus says in [John 8:34ff](#), “Everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. The slave does not continue in the house forever.” Or as John says in his first letter, “You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins. No one who sins has either seen him or known him... Everyone who is born of God does not sin because his seed remains in him, and he is not able to sin because he is born of God” (3:6, 9; cf 3:14, 16, 4:7, 8, 12, 16). Or as Paul says, “The works of

the flesh are plain...enmity, strife, jealousy, anger...those who do such things shall not enter the kingdom of God ([Galatians 5:19-21](#), cf. [1 Corinthians 6:10](#); [Romans 8:13](#)). Or as the writer to the Hebrews says, "Pursue peace with all men and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (12:14 cf. 10:26ff; 6:4ff). Therefore, when Jesus says, "If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your father forgive you," he is saying nothing different from what the whole New Testament affirms.

Is it a demand for sinless perfection without which we will not be saved? If it were, then what sense would the petition, "Forgive us our debts," have? Or what sense would the admonition to confess our sins have ([1 John 1:9](#))? If a disciple were by definition one who never committed sin, then why would Jesus instruct him to pray, "Forgive us our sins" ([Luke 11:4](#))?

What "debts" or "sins" did Jesus imply that we would keep on committing? Did he mean all kinds of sins except the failure to forgive? No, he does not classify sins like that. But then one of the "debts" for which we should ask forgiveness is our unforgiving spirit, i.e., our failure to forgive. But notice what happens if we substitute "our failure to forgive" for "debts" in the Lord's prayer. It would go like this: "Forgive us *our failure to forgive* (a specific debt) as we forgive our debtors." But this seems to be a contradiction: "as we forgive our debtors" implies that we *do* forgive; but our petition, "Forgive us our failure to forgive" implies that we do not forgive. The solution to this apparent contradiction is to recognize that the clause, "as we forgive our debtors," does not mean that the disciple *never* has moments when an unforgiving spirit has the ascendancy. If Jesus said that we should pray that our debts be forgiven, and if one of those debts is a failure to forgive, then the phrase "as we forgive our debtors" cannot be absolutized to imply that only a *perfectly* forgiving spirit can receive forgiveness from God.

When Jesus told his disciples to pray for forgiveness as they forgive others did he not, then, mean that I should pray something like this: "Father, forgive me for my failure today to forgive Tom. I was irritable and wrapped up in myself and when he said what he said I flew off the handle at him and held a grudge all day, savoring in my mind how I might show him up, and keeping count of all the times he wronged me. My conscience smote me this afternoon when you reminded me of your constant mercy toward me. So I went to him and apologized ([Mark 11:25](#)). I do not desire to hold the grudge any longer. You have rid me of my selfish indignation and so I pray you will forgive my failure to forgive Tom today and let me not fall into that temptation again."

In other words, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" does not mean that we are lost if the old unforgiving spirit raises its head just once. It means: No one who cherishes a grudge against someone dare approach God in search of mercy. God treats us in accordance with the belief of our heart: if we believe it is good and beautiful to harbor resentments and tabulate wrongs done against us, then God will recognize that our plea for forgiveness is sheer hypocrisy—for we will be asking him to do what we believe to be bad. *It is a dreadful thing to try to make God your patsy by asking him to act in a way that you, as your action shows, esteem very lowly.*

Forgiveness is not a work by which we earn God's forgiveness. It flows from a heart satisfied with the mercy of God and rejoicing in the cancellation of our own ten million dollar debt

([Matthew 18:24](#)). With man it is impossible, but not with *God*. “Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” ([Matthew 7:19](#)). But the plant which endures does so because it is planted by *God* ([Matthew 15:13](#)). No one can boast in his self-wrought merit before God ([Luke 17:10](#)); and it is not the rigorous following of rules but a poor spirit and a total reliance on God’s mercy which attains a standing before God ([Luke 18:9-14](#); [Matthew 5:3](#)).

But one thing is certain: the person who has, through mercy, been born from above cannot be the same any more. He *cannot* go on sinning as before since “the seed of God” is in him ([1 John 3:9](#)). He walks not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit ([Romans 8:4](#)), for he is led by the Spirit ([Romans 8:14](#); [Galatians 5:18](#)). God is at work in him to will and to do his good pleasure ([Philippians 2:13](#)). When we “forgive from the heart,” it is the fruit of the *Spirit* ([Galatians 5:22](#)). We have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer we who live, but *Christ* who lives in us ([Galatians 5:20](#)). We are a new creation ([Galatians 6:15](#)); and the mark of our newness is not yet perfection, but a persistent inclination to forgive, a hasty repair of our failure to do so and a steady petition for God to disregard the sin that we are abandoning.

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