

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Jesus illustrated the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer with the little parable that He taught in our Gospel. We pray, as you know: “And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” That’s how it was handed down to us, and that’s fine. But in Matthew, it gets translated more literally: “*and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*” (Matt. 6:12). That may make the connection a little clearer — some servants owed debts.

Moreover, Jesus emphasizes right after the Lord’s Prayer: “*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*” (Matt. 6:14-15). That sounds a lot like the end of the parable, for without forgiveness, we who “daily sin much . . . surely deserve nothing but punishment.”

The 16th century reformers saw the connection between the 5th Petition and this little parable. Indeed, in the 1545 illustrated edition of Luther’s Small Catechism, the petition was accompanied by a woodcut depicting this parable. I’ve included it as an insert. In the background of that woodcut is the servant on his knees begging the king and then departing unbound . . . forgiven — showing the king’s grace. In the foreground is that same servant — unmerciful — throttling his fellow servant.

How often do you pray the Lord’s Prayer? Once a day? Twice a day? More often than that? You know in the Catechism Luther recommends that we pray it morning, evening, and at mealtimes. We don’t pray the Lord’s Prayer at mealtime in our house, but you could, and, if so, you might pray it three, four, or five times a day. How often do you pray the Lord’s Prayer, that is, how often do you ask “Our Father, who art in heaven” to “forgive [you your] trespasses”?

And when you do, do you expect there to be an upper limit on the number of times that “Our Father” will forgive you? Does He do as He did for the seas, saying, “*Thus far shall you come, and no farther*” (Job 38:11)? Does He say to you, “I’ll forgive this many sins and no more?” Seven times? Seventy-seven times? Seventy times seven times? Let me answer for myself: “God forbid!” For “*[my] transgressions are multiplied before you [O LORD], and [my] sins testify against [me]; for [my] transgressions are with [me], and [I] know [my] iniquities*” (Is. 59:12). And I know that it’s not just I. We have all long ago surpassed even 490 trespasses.

You know that Peter’s question prompted Jesus’ response. “*Lord,*” Peter asked, “*how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?*” In other words, can there be an upper limit on our forgiveness toward others? Jesus here is explicit, with a bit of hyperbole: “not, I say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times plus seven” (my translation). Or even seventy

times seven times. But the point is not that we should be keeping a record of sins. Rather, as with the LORD, forgiveness should come forth from us (Ps. 130:3-4) — without limits.

Jesus illustrates this vividly in the parable before us. A king wanted to settle accounts with his servants. He called in a servant who owed him 10,000 talents, an amount far surpassing anything the servant could expect to pay back in many lifetimes. Today, you could win the billion dollar Powerball and not have enough money to pay this debt. How foolish, therefore — the servant asked the king to be patient with him; he would pay it back! Impossible! *“If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand”* (Ps. 130:3). No one can! You can’t!

All we can do is rely on the grace of the king! That’s what happened in the parable. The servant deserved to be sold along with his wife and children and all he had, and, since that made not even a rounding error in the debt he owed, they all deserved to be thrown into debtors prison until he paid it all. But that’s not what the king did. Instead, he had pity — here’s our *σπλαγχνίζομαι* word again; you remember that from a few weeks ago. The king had pity on the servant, and though undeserved, by his grace, he forgave the servant all of his debt. The servant was free ... free from debt, free from judgment.

You recognize it. We are that servant; we have accumulated an enormous debt of trespass against the Lord; we cannot, by our own efforts, pay the price, but the Lord, by His grace, has forgiven that debt. Of course, we know that debt does not just go away. Someone has to pay it. So who has paid our debt? Our King and our God has paid it Himself — the payment price was the “holy, precious blood” and the “innocent suffering and death” of our Lord Jesus Christ. And, oh, how priceless is that blood, every drop that He poured out for you and me, each of us owing 10,000 talents of debt. It’s why those who handle the chalice are so careful with it, lest even a drop is spilled; that chalice is full of forgiveness being distributed to us. We dare not waste even a drop of what is so graciously given us.

And so, like the servant, we get down on our knees and pray “Our Father.” We pray as believers: “forgive us our trespasses.” And as we do, we are praying “that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them.” We are acknowledging that our debt is too big, that we “are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them.” We are praying not only that our Father would not deny this petition, but that He would not deny our whole prayer. We don’t deserve any of it. Instead, we’re trusting in His grace. As Luther teaches, we’re asking that God “would give them all to us — that He would say ‘yes’ to our whole prayer — by grace,” received by faith. Yes, the Lord’s Prayer is the prayer of the faithful.

Remember, by grace, that servant was set free. He was free ... free to go forth and do likewise ... free to give as he had been given (Matt. 10:8). But he did not. You know this part of the parable. He found a fellow servant, grabbed him by the neck and choked him, and ordered him to pay his debt — a pittance in comparison to what had been forgiven him. This scene proceeded similarly to the forgiven servant's encounter with the king. He begged for patience, for time to pay it back. The wicked servant wouldn't hear it, and he threw his fellow servant into prison.

When the king heard about it, he became angry. He summoned this wicked servant to himself and rebuked him. *"I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?"* Or as I heard it translated earlier this week, "It was necessary, wasn't it, that you have mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" "It was necessary, wasn't it?"

I hope you can hear, by translating it that way, what answer Jesus is trying to draw out from us. "It was necessary, wasn't it?" "Yes, it was ... yes, it is!" Forgiveness is a necessary part of the lives of Christians. We have been forgiven of our great debt. We cannot be unforgiving! Unforgiveness bears witness to unbelief and unbelief leads to judgment. *"in anger his master delivered him to the torturers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*

It's not always easy. Sometimes the hurt is big, and forgiveness is hard to speak. But we must be willing ... it is necessary. Which is why we, who are glad for God's grace, who have been forgiven much, who have been set free, pray: "Our Father" "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Brothers and sisters, pray it often; pray it from your heart, and know that when you pray it, O believers, you are asking the Lord to help you be a Christian, "sincerely [forgiving] and gladly [doing] good to those who sin against" you — without limits.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.