

Fourth Midweek-the Lord's Passion and the Lord's Prayer

March 9, 2016

St. Matthew 18: 23-35, Fifth Petition

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Dear Friends in Christ,

God's Word has reminded us over the past weeks that the Lord's Prayer and the Lord's Passion are intimately connected. Only through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as both priest and lamb do we have the privilege to pray and the assurance "Our Father in heaven," will hear and answer; not only this prayer, but all our prayers. Jesus' redemptive work has released us from the great debt we owed God on account of our sin, eternal separation from him in hell as punishment.

My release from the debt of sin brings an obligation. That obligation is I forgive the sins my neighbor commits against me. I have no other option. I have no other choice. There is no time limit. There is no limit to the number of times. God has graciously wiped all our sins away and gives us all we ask him in prayer. This moves us to forgive all who sin against us.

Our Savior preached this many times and in many ways. One way was in the parable of the unmerciful servant. "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants." One servant owed an unpayable debt of what would be equivalent to millions and millions of dollars today. The servant fell down and worshiped the king, appealed to his patience, or big heartedness, begged him for time to pay the debt rather than lose his family. The king out of compassion for his servant cancelled the debt; literally, released the servant from his obligation to pay anything.

The day of reckoning led the man to see the debt he owed was huge. It terrified him to have to pay even as he deluded himself that he even could. So it is in the kingdom of heaven, or kingdom of God. Our God demands a reckoning from us on account of our failure to perfectly obey his will. That reckoning makes us see how great that debt of sin is. It causes us great fear even as we delude ourselves into thinking we can pay the debt off with our meager attempts, our daily failures to keep God's law perfectly. We are completely bankrupt standing in the presence of our holy God. Only then do we experience how great the compassion of our God is to release us from the debt of sin.

In the economy of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus paid our debt with the suffering and death of his perfect blood. Because of the Lord's Passion, we appeal to our Father in heaven "**not to look upon our sins or because of them deny our prayers.**" We seek only his grace that grants us forgiveness and all the things for which we pray. We need that grace daily because "**we daily sin much and sure deserve nothing but punishment.**" You know that harsh and impatient tone you use with members of your family. You know the pride and arrogance that makes you speak unlovingly about fellow Christians who don't agree with you. You know the lust of your heart that desires what you do not have, and the selfishness of your heart that keeps you from giving up what you do have.

It is for that daily forgiveness of our sins, the releasing us from of our debts through Jesus Christ that we pray in the Fifth Petition, "**Forgive us our sins.**" We know we have it. "Thy strong Word bespeaks us righteous; Bright with thine own holiness," we sing. In the Fifth Petition we ask "Our Father" for forgiveness. In the Word of Christ, our King releases us from any requirement to pay the debt of sin we owe. Our Lord Jesus' Passion paid the debt in full.

The servant in Jesus' parable showed he actually had not appreciated how great his own debt had been and how great was the king's mercy. He ran into a fellow servant who owed him a few dollars. The servant was unmerciful. He refused to match his king's compassion. He required of his fellow servant the very punishment from which the king had released him. "Instead he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay his debt." Which, course, the man could not do since he would be in prison.

The unmerciful servant was not like his king. In the Fifth Petition we pray that we be like our King and forgive as he has forgiven us. You remember from catechism that the English can be misleading. "**Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.**" We are not saying to God that our forgiveness of others must come first as some kind of condition or cause for him to forgive us. We know that could never be the case. We are asking him that in our faith we faithfully forgive others. God releasing us from our obligations to him causes our forgiveness of others.

One of Jesus' words on the cross is his asking his Father to forgive those who crucified him. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." [Lk. 23:34] The soldiers knew what they were doing in the sense of crucifying him. They were not aware the one they crucified was their Savior from sin and death. Their ignorance was no excuse. Nor was it an excuse for all who were involved directly in Jesus' death on the cross. It is not an excuse for all generations who would oppose Christ. According to our Old Adam, we all are enemies of Christ and therefore Jesus words apply also to us.

Here Jesus verbally expressed the redemption he was accomplishing in his actions on the cross. He thought nothing of himself. He harbored no bitterness, no resentment, and no lurking desire for revenge. That is a good description of our forgiving from the heart the same way God has forgiven us in Christ. The Mediator of the entire world before God made intercession for his foes. He prayed for forgiveness for them to give them a chance for repentance and faith. Jesus' words fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy, "He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." [53:12]

In Jesus' parable, the unmerciful servant ended up in prison because he did not take to heart his king's compassionate forgiveness. Jesus tells us this will happen to those who in unbelief do not forgive others. They are cast into the eternal prison not because they did not forgive, but because of the lack of trust in being forgiven their great debt which led to their not forgiving others.

And so we pray, "**Our Father, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.**" On account of the Lord's Passion, our Father does not look upon our sins or on their account deny our prayer. What a compassionate King we have. Because of his big heartedness that has released us for our debts, we are big hearted toward others and release them from their debts to us. God does not forgive us because we forgive. We forgive our neighbor from the heart because God has in Christ forgiven us. Amen. <SDG>