

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Matthew 6:12-13, “Forgive Us and Deliver Us”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 10/22/2017**

Our series on the Lord’s prayer is on its last leg,  
and there are two petitions for us to consider. These are heavy matters.  
And so we will do well to dispense with a cute introduction  
and get right to it!

First off: **“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”**

In the Rabbinic teachings,  
each sin a person commits is thought of as a demerit.  
Each sin is a debt, it’s a lack of conformity to the Law of God,  
it’s digging the hole you are in a bit deeper.  
Thus, they reasoned, it requires works of righteousness  
to fill that hole back up, to make up for the deficit.  
That’s the perspective Jesus has in mind when he prays,  
“forgive us our debts.”

*Forgiving a debt* means erasing your records of it,  
putting someone back on level footing with you,  
pulling a person out of the pit they have dug for themselves.  
Debt forgiveness acknowledges the thing that is owed  
and then eliminates it entirely and permanently,  
setting the relationship right.  
And right relationship is...righteousness.

And what is it that we owe? More than we are able to know.  
We owe more than we can bear to acknowledge.  
Earl Palmer, my former pastor,  
describes the crisis of sin as a cumulative crisis.  
Imagine that you are on a cruise boat  
in the middle of the ocean.  
If you were dancing on the 3<sup>rd</sup> deck of the ship  
and you fell over the edge onto the second deck,  
that would be a crisis. You could have some serious injuries.  
But it wouldn’t be a cumulative crisis,  
because it would be contained right there.

If you fell off the whole boat,  
but landed in a row boat with some other people,  
that would be a crisis.  
But it wouldn't be a cumulative crisis,  
because you could row toward the ship  
and use the survival equipment on the boat until help arrived.

But if you fell off the 3<sup>rd</sup> deck of the ship  
and landed in the water with no equipment at all,  
you'd have more than a crisis.

Your crisis would always be growing,  
because every second that passed,  
the ship would get that much further away,  
and you would get that much colder,  
and there would be nobody who knew to help.

That's a cumulative crisis.

No matter how fast you swam,  
you couldn't come close to narrowing the gap.  
Michael Phelps couldn't close the gap.

That's the kind of crisis humanity is in.

It's not just a static number,  
it's a state of indebtedness that continues to grow  
with every moment that passes.

So Jesus teaches us to tell God to do what only God can do:  
Forgive us our debts!

The apostle Paul describes this act in Colossians 2:13-14,  
"And when you were dead in your transgressions  
and the uncircumcision of your flesh,  
God made you alive together with Christ,  
having forgiven us all our transgressions,  
having canceled out the certificate of debt  
consisting of decrees against us and which were hostile to us;  
and he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross."

Forgive us our debts.

When you consider the debt that each one of us has amassed,  
it's an astounding thing to pray.  
You get 130 people here in the room  
and the spreadsheet of what that collective debt  
would consist of would be pretty unbelievable.

Let's say it together, "Forgive us our debts."

Wipe everything clean.  
Put us on equal moral footing with you, God.  
Pull us out of the pit we've dug for ourselves,  
because we cannot possibly get out.

Now we're praying with Jesus.

But that's not the only thing Jesus teaches us to tell God.  
**"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."**

Here we see again why it's important for us to *learn* how to pray from Jesus.  
This is not the way I would pray this line on my own.  
I would simply say, "Forgive me my debt—  
the interest alone is killing me!"  
Please forgive...*me*."

That's how I would pray. But that would be cheap grace.  
Cheap grace leaves us the same as we were before,  
and fails to call us to be like Jesus.

But Jesus teaches us to pray for transforming grace:  
"Forgive us our debts *as we forgive our debtors*."

What is Jesus teaching us here?

He expands it right after the prayer.  
This is the only petition in the prayer  
that Jesus gives immediate clarification on.  
He says this, **"For if you forgive others when they sin against you,  
your heavenly Father will also forgive you.  
But if you do not forgive others their sins,  
your Father will not forgive your sins."**

If you forgive others? But my not forgiving others is part of my debt!  
That's what I need forgiveness for!  
Has the gospel of Christ become the curse of Christ?

It's not a curse. Jesus is leading us into God's costly and transforming grace  
by teaching us to pray that God would forgive us *in the same way*  
we forgive others.

That's a dangerous thing to pray if you hold a grudge!  
Praying like that implies a huge transformation of our character.

If we seek the transforming grace of the Living God,  
then we are led into a life that looks like God's life.

Forgiveness of our debts doesn't just clear our tab with God.  
It infuses us with God's debt-clearing life  
that washes through the canyon of our soul and strips away  
everything that would stand in the way of God's Kingdom.

In light of that, how else could we pray than,  
"Forgive our debts as we are led into  
your debt forgiving way of life."

The ability to imagine ourselves  
as truly forgiven is indispensable for overcoming  
the walls of division in our church and in our city.  
We have to know how deeply we are forgiven  
if we will ever be able to embrace the other,  
the one we are told to despise and reject.

**"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."**

Now we come to the final petition:  
**"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."**

A real temptation tells us we deserve something  
that God isn't going to give us, because he's stingy,  
or he's unreliable, or he's unpredictable,  
or maybe he doesn't really notice...  
so we'll have to take it.

A real temptation, at the core of it, will invite us to ignore God—  
to play make-believe that God isn't there,  
or it will invite us to distort the character of God—  
to get us to think that God isn't really on our side.

A temptation is something that intends to bring down our faith.

Would a good God *ever* lead us into temptation?

The God that I project out of my human fears and neuroses,  
that God could lead me into temptation.

The premise behind such a request *seems to be*  
that God might just lead us into temptation if we didn't ask him not to.

But that is not what Jesus has in mind when he teaches us to pray like this.

Our greatest help comes when we realize that the word for “temptation”  
in Greek is very different from our word for temptation.

The Greek word, *peirasmos* can mean “temptation,”  
but it can also mean, “test.”

For instance, consider how the word is used in the book of James:

**“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,  
whenever you face trials of many kinds,  
because you know that the testing of your faith  
produces perseverance.”**

Interesting, right?

Trials and tests are meant for our betterment.

Temptations are meant for our destruction.

In light of that kind of distinction,

Darrell Johnson suggests that Jesus' intention in this prayer  
can be summed up like this:

“When the time of testing comes, don't let the test become a temptation.”

REPEAT.

God will lead us into tests and trials,  
because tests and trials are meant to make us better.  
But he would never lead us into a temptation  
that is intended to make us less like him.  
The difference is all in how we see the *intention* behind the situation.  
So we pray, “Our Father who is just like Jesus,  
when the time of testing comes,  
keep us from being drawn into a temptation  
*by the evil one.*”

Ah...this is where things get even more interesting.

You may have noticed that I just said,  
“Deliver us from the evil one,” instead of “deliver us from evil.”

The reason is that the grammar of that line in Matthew 6:13  
is identical to that of Matthew 5:37  
where Jesus teaches us not to swear  
by anything on heaven or on earth,  
but **“simply to say, “Yes,” or “No,”;  
anything beyond this is from the...evil one.”**

In both verses the Greek literally says, “the evil.”  
“Anything beyond this is from *the evil*,”  
and “deliver us from *the evil*.”

But that doesn’t make very much sense. The implication in *both* cases  
is a reference to the Evil *One*, our Adversary, Satan,  
the Devil, the Great Deceiver.

Praying that God would deliver us from the Evil One  
makes a lot more sense out of this part of the Lord’s prayer.  
The Evil One would twist a situation  
which God would use for our betterment  
into a temptation.

Nobody has done a better job of describing how this Evil One  
works than C.S. Lewis in his book, *The Screwtape Letters*.

Those of you who've read this book know that it's a series of letters  
from one demon named Screwtape to his nephew, Wormwood.

Both are agents of Satan assigned to tempt Christians  
away from life with Christ.

Here's a section that describes

the way that we can be tempted *especially*  
when we are involved in religious activity:

**One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread but through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans.**

**All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print.**

**When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like "the body of Christ" and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy's side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to Our Father below, is a fool.**

**Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous. At his present stage, you see, he has an idea of "Christians" in his mind which he supposes to be spiritual but which, in fact, is largely pictorial. His mind is full of togas and sandals and armour and bare legs and the mere fact that the other people in church wear modern clothes is a real—though of course an unconscious—difficulty to him. Never let it come to the surface; never let him ask what he expected them to look like.**

**Keep everything hazy in his mind now, and you will have all eternity wherein to amuse yourself by producing in him the peculiar kind of clarity which Hell affords.**

**I have been writing hitherto on the assumption that the people in the next pew afford no *rational* ground for disappointment. Of course if they do—if the patient knows that the woman with the absurd hat is a fanatical bridge-player or the man with squeaky boots a miser and an extortioner—then your task is so much the easier.**

**All you then have to do is to keep out of his mind the question "If I, being what I am, can consider that I am in some sense a Christian, why should the different vices of those people in the next pew prove that their religion is mere hypocrisy and convention?" You may ask whether it is possible to keep such an obvious thought from occurring even to a human mind. It is, Wormwood, it is! Handle him properly and it simply won't come into his head.**

**He has not been anything like long enough with the Enemy to have any real humility yet. What he says, even on his knees, about his own sinfulness is all parrot talk. At bottom, he still believes he has run up a very favourable credit-balance in the Enemy's ledger by allowing himself to be converted, and thinks that he is showing great humility and condescension in going to church with these "smug", commonplace neighbours at all. Keep him in that state of mind as long as you can.**

**Your affectionate uncle,  
SCREWTAPE**

There's some real insight there. A person in that situation  
is tempted to believe that God has all the same weaknesses  
of the people who worship him.

They come to church and get so irritated by the silly people there  
that they can hardly worship God.

Hmm...Nobody wants to shout Amen on that one!

But God can deliver us.

And he really wants to deliver us.



He wants to deliver us from the kinds of thoughts  
that belittle those who are different from us.  
He wants to deliver us from congregations  
that are more segregated than our cities and workplaces.  
He wants to deliver us from the anxiety that we don't have enough.

God—who is just like Jesus—  
wants you to experience the new kind of life  
which this prayer opens up to you.

God—who is just like Jesus—  
knows that you are strong, but also that you cannot  
do the things that only God can do.

According to this prayer,  
God wants us to experience life  
in a world in which his name is hallowed;  
where his kingdom wipes out  
all other claims to our loyalty;  
where his will is done right here on earth as it is in heaven;  
where we need not worry about what we will eat or drink or wear,  
for he will provide our daily bread;  
where we can sing and dance  
and give generously in all our relationships  
because he has cancelled the certificate of debt against us.

If we're seeking to really address  
the issues that keep people us being reconciled to God  
and to one another...there will be trials,  
there will be temptations.

If we're seeking to join the Living God  
in his mission in the world...there will be trials,  
there will be temptations.

Even if we're just seeking to get through our ordinary lives  
there will be trials, there will be temptations.

But God's promise to us is that when the time of testing comes  
he is able to keep us from temptation  
and deliver us from the Evil One.

If that were not true, why would Jesus teach us to pray that way?

Jesus has given us in just 57 words,  
a prayer that encompasses all of life.  
It's a prayer that begins with the life of God  
and ends with God right in the midst of our lives.

Is that good news to you?

Then let's praise him for it.