

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS

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### Matthew 6:12

In the Lord's Prayer, in Matthew 6:12, the Lord Jesus asks us to pray to our Father in heaven in this way.

*Matthew 6:12. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.* Have you ever pondered about these words of our Lord Jesus? If you have, you probably scratched your head. It is indeed a puzzling phrase. What does this as mean? *As we forgive our debtors.* Is forgiveness conditional?

### A conditional forgiveness?

The Lord Jesus is certainly saying that when we sin, we don't just go to God and pray, 'God, forgive me my sin.' He is saying, 'When you sin, pray like that. You pray, 'Forgive me my sin as I forgive other people's sins.' In other words, we don't have the right to ask God for any kind of forgiveness until we ourselves have forgiven whatever anyone has done against us.

So important are these words that having finished His teaching on prayer, the Lord Jesus comes back immediately to these words again in vv. 14-15, and He says this.

*Matthew 6:14. For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.*

*15 But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.*

This is becoming more and more complicated. If you don't forgive men, then God will not forgive you either. What does it mean that God will not forgive us? Today, we are going to look at this important teaching regarding forgiveness.

### A parable on forgiveness

Forgiveness is of the essence of the Christian life. It is of extreme importance for God, for the Lord Jesus. So important is forgiveness that the Lord Jesus devoted an entire parable to help us to understand it. This parable is known as the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. In fact, this parable is often used, and rightly so, to explain the meaning of Jesus' statement on forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer. And we are going to do the same thing.

This parable is found in Matthew 18:21-35. In order to save some time, we are not going to read it. I will just tell you the story. This parable speaks of a king who has a servant. The servant in the story is not a slave, but a high government official who is responsible to the king for the administration of his kingdom. This means that large amounts of money passed through his hands. We are told that this servant is in big trouble. He had mismanaged the money of the king to the point that he now owes the king 10 000 talents. This was a huge amount of money. By comparison, Josephus, this famous Jewish historian, tells us that the annual revenue of Herod the Great for his entire kingdom was about 900 talents. Compare that with the 10 000 talents of the parable.

So the king calls his servant to account. This poor fellow had to give an account to the king of 10 000 talents. And of course, there is no way he could produce that much money from anywhere. Therefore the king commanded that he would be sold off, as well as his whole family, to slavery. It was a custom in Eastern nations of the time to be sold because of debt.

So this poor man, in desperation, fell upon his face before the king and begs for time. He said that he would do everything necessary to earn back his money. This was of course a totally unrealistic promise. How could he ever earn back 10 000 talents? But the king had mercy upon him. He saw his desperate condition and forgave him. The debt was cleared. What a joy! What a tremendous act of mercy!

Then the parable goes on to say that this forgiven servant goes out and sees a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii. This was nothing compared with the 10 000 talents that he owed the king. That man said, 'Please, have patience with me. I will pay you back every dollar.' But the forgiven servant refused and threw him into a jail until he pays back his debt.

The news came back to the king and the king called back this servant. 'I forgave you all your debt', the king said, 'when you asked me to forgive you. I freely forgave you. Should you not (notice the word), *as* I forgave you, forgive him? Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just *as* I had pity on you (Matthew 18:33)?' The king was angry with his minister. This man was put in jail until he should pay off to the last penny of those 10 000 talents. In other words, he would never be able to come out of jail.

Then the Lord Jesus concludes this parable with these words. *So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother...* This is a very hard statement. As Christians committed to the truth, we want to face it plainly and squarely.

## **Our spiritual debt**

Now first, notice the nature of sin. Sin is spoken of as a debt that is owed. In what way is sin a debt? Whenever we commit sin, we have inflicted damage on somebody else. Sin is negative in its nature. It is destructive in its character. And therefore sin is always subtracting from what there is already.

Some people have asked, 'Why would God not forgive our sins without Jesus going to the cross?' When you understand the nature of sin as a debt, you will know why. You see, if we have caused harm on somebody, we are in debt to that person. If I smash somebody's window, I have inflicted the cost of that window upon the person. It is not good enough to say to this person, 'Please, forgive me.' The loss is not restored by saying, 'I forgive you.' There is a debt to be paid, a cost to be covered. The window has to be replaced. And the person who forgives you that debt is the person who himself bears the cost.

You see why Jesus died on the cross. It is not a case in which God can simply say, 'I forgive you your sins.' A price had to be paid. The debt of our sins had to be covered. That is why Jesus had

to go to Calvary. By dying on the cross for our sins, God bore on Himself the cost of the spiritual debt that we owe in our relation to Him.

The parable speaks of a debt of 10 000 talents, a sum that is impossible to repay for one person. This indicates that sin is not something that we can free ourselves from. Our sin to God is a debt that we can never pay off ourselves. No amount of good works will save us.

This parable tells us also that God is always ready to forgive, provided there is genuine repentance of heart. No matter how big is your debt, God will never hold any sin against you if you are ready to repent sincerely.

### **Worthy of the gospel of Christ**

This high official was forgiven 10 000 talents. But then what happened? He goes out, grabs hold of this fellow servant and demands his 100 denarii back. His unforgiveness eventually caused him to be put in jail. 'How could you be so unforgiving when I forgave you such a big debt?', the king said. What it means for us is this. When God forgives us, He expects something from us. He expects the forgiven sinner to do the same. As we benefit from the privileges of forgiveness, we are commanded to live according to the responsibilities of that forgiveness.

This is the biblical teaching regarding worthiness. This servant who had been forgiven proved unworthy of that forgiveness. If you look at the references where this word 'worthy' appears, you will discover that the Bible keeps exhorting us to live 'worthy' of the grace of God. For example, in Philippians 1:27, Paul says this. *Let your conduct be **worthy** of the gospel of Christ...* Being a Christian is not a matter of saying with your lips that you believe in God. It means that as a result of your experience of God's forgiveness, there is a genuine change in your attitude towards other people. That as God forgave you, you also forgive those who do harm against you. Unless such a transformation happens, you can call yourself a Christian to the end of your days, God will not know who you are.

### **Reaping what we sow**

Now what happens if you choose not to forgive? As uncomfortable as this question might be, it is a reality that we must face. Understand this principle. That God is going to deal with you in the same way as you deal with other people. That is why we have the word 'as'. 'Forgive our debts as we forgive.' God expects us to deal with other people in the same way that He deals with us.

The Bible puts this truth in many ways. In Galatians 6:7, Paul says, *... for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.* What a man puts into life is what he gets out of life. He receives what he gives.

The Lord Jesus uses the same image in Luke 6:37. *Judge not and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.* This principle is true of God and generally true of men. If I judge a person harshly, I am going to be judged harshly. If I judge a person kindly, I am going to be judged kindly. If I don't judge at all, I won't be judged at all.

Why is that so? Luke 6:38. *For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.* The measure that I use is the measure that I get. In the measure that you are kind to people, that is the measure that you prove worthy of the grace of God. O, the wisdom of God! Can you understand this? God makes you the judge of how you are going to be judged. You are the one who puts the sentence on yourself. Insofar as you judged the other people, you have judged yourself. That is the point of loving your neighbor as yourself. Whatever you do to him, you have done to yourself.

In other words, you end up being your own judge. Jesus said in Luke 19:22, in the Parable of the Pounds, *Out of your own mouth I will judge you*. Your words, your attitude towards God and men will determine your own judgment. If we forgive, we will be forgiven. If we don't forgive, we won't be forgiven. This shows how we ought to walk worthy of the Lord.

### **Forgiveness and the believer's eternal security**

Now, is it possible to be so unforgiving that we will not be saved in the end? This raises the problematic issue of the security of the believer. Is it possible for a genuine Christian to lose his salvation? This is a very emotional issue and I don't want my opinion to be a source of division among the Christians. If it does happen, let me tell you, we would have failed to walk worthy of the grace that God granted to us. Because the issue is not one of heresy. You will find support from reputable theologians for both positions, those who believe that it is possible and those who say that it is impossible.

When you expound the Word of God, you have to take position. And my opinion on this subject is that it is possible, for a person who has been forgiven his sins by God, to lose the gift of salvation. Look at this parable again. Some say that the unforgiving servant proved not to be a genuine Christian by the very fact that he was so unforgiving. I don't agree with that and let me explain why. A good way to approach any parable is to look for the points of reference. This parable has three major points of reference: the king, the servant and the debt. The king represents God. The debt represents sin.

Who does the servant represent? That's where there is a disagreement. The servant, in my opinion, represents the genuine believer. If we want to be consistent with our interpretation of this parable, I just don't know how else it can represent. This servant had his 10 000 talents debt being canceled by the king. In other words, this servant, this sinner who owed so much spiritually to God, has been forgiven. He represents the person who, like any Christian, comes to God and repents of his sin. Was he sincere? Well, it is not up to us to decide. God is the final judge. But however sincere he was, God forgave him. His debt was completely cleared. In v. 27 the text says, *The master...was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt*. 'You are a free man now. You can go. You don't owe anything to me anymore.' In v. 32, the king himself says, *I forgave you all that debt because you begged me*. If that doesn't describe the experience of forgiveness of a believer, I just don't see how else we can interpret this parable and be true to the Word of God.

### **The torments of hell**

Then what happened? He treated a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii in a very unforgiving way. When the king heard that, v. 34, *he was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him*. In other words, his debt, which had been forgiven before, was revoked. The debt of 10 000 talents is back on his head. He will stay in jail until the whole debt is paid back. And since he will never be able to do it, this means that he has been condemned to eternal punishment. God's forgiveness will be revoked from the believer if he has hardened his heart so much that he is unwilling to forgive his fellow men.

This word 'torturer' or 'tormentor', and its related words, we find it in its highest concentration in the book of Revelation. And there, it is connected with the judgments which God will issue at the end of time and with the torments that this world will have to go through at that time. It is also found in another parable, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Lazarus was said to be in Abraham's bosom, the place where you want to be as a believer. But the rich man, when he died, went to a place of torment. And in that parable, it means that he went to hell.

## God's forgiveness' revoked

*So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother.* That is Jesus' own words. The forgiveness of God is granted to us out of compassion, in pure mercy and grace, to undeserving sinners. But this divine forgiveness cannot be separated from an appropriate response to that grace on the part of the believer. And what God expects from the person whom He forgives is a forgiving spirit toward others. But it is possible to refuse to walk according to God's expectation of us. It is possible for the believer to refuse to walk worthy of that forgiveness. And there will come a point, if the person continues to live in this unforgiving manner, when the initial forgiveness of God will be revoked.

This is based on the principle that in whatever way we have dealt with others, that is the way in which God is going to deal with us. Becoming a Christian is not simply a matter of a personal and private affair between you and God, and that it doesn't concern anybody else. On the contrary, when you become a Christian, you become involved with anybody else. And God tells us that the way we deal with others determine how God is going to deal with us.

This is what is implied in Matthew 6:12. *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.* A believer has no right to ask for forgiveness from God if he, himself, is not willing to forgive his fellow men. Because when you refuse to forgive, you are judging the other person as being unworthy of your forgiveness, putting yourself spiritually above the other person. And in doing so, you show that you have no real sense of need for the forgiveness of God. And as James says in James 2:13, *Judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.*

## Let God be the judge

But when you forgive a person, what have you done? You have passed down the judgment to God. You are not the one who is judging. You have shown mercy. And this will be the measure that will be applied to you on the day of judgment. Our forgiving attitude will count as the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

The gospel of Mark does not record the Lord's Prayer. But it does repeat what Jesus says about forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer. For in Mark 11:25-26, the Lord Jesus says this.

*Mark 11:25. Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.*

*26 But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.*

Let us remember always these important words of our Lord.