

How to Pray Part 6

Is This the Most Dangerous Prayer You Will Ever Pray?

When I was in college, my first summer job was the result of my mother being friends with the head of personnel for a large glass factory. My very first week, I was assigned the task of taking boxes of bottles off a conveyor belt and stacking them on a pallet ten tiers high. I had to stretch to reach the top tier to place the boxes of bottles and it was tiring doing all the lifting. The middle of my first week, disaster struck. As I was reaching high to place one of the last boxes of bottles on the top tier, I slipped and fell into all those stacks of bottles and the whole collection of them came crashing down to the concrete floor. Despite how noisy and huge the factory was, you could hear the crash at all ends of the building. People came rushing from everywhere to find out what had happened. There I stood, humiliated before them all, with no excuse for what I had done. I thought I would be sent home immediately and fired. My supervisor merely moved me to another conveyor belt while a staff member swept up all the broken bottles. At the end of the day, even though I was reprimanded and advised on how to not make the same mistake again, I was forgiven and treated as if the accident never happened. Forgiveness is one of the most beautiful transactions in the entire human experience. Our Big Idea is simple. The best thing you can do for yourself is forgive.

You may not realize just what you are getting into when you enter this part of Jesus' model prayer. If you are simply repeating the words from rote memory without giving it any thought, you may not grasp the immensity of what you are voicing but if you take some time to ponder their immense ramifications, you may want to retreat from them until you are ready for their effect on you. Here is what it says. **Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.** (Matthew 6: 12 NIV) Another way to translate it is, "**And put away our debts for us just as we ourselves put away (debts) for our debtors.**" This is a profoundly disturbing part of praying if we take seriously the ramifications. We are commanding God, and it is in the form of a command, to deal with what we owe Him in exactly the same way we deal with all that others owe us. Now debts is sometimes translated "sins" and that very well may be what it intends but that is not precisely the meaning of the word. It is literally debts and debtors rather than sins and sinners.

The same term was used by Jesus when He told His famous story of the two debtors. One servant owed his master an incredible amount of money, a debt he certainly could never repay. Some estimate the debt to have been tens of millions of dollars. When the master decided he would sell the servant along with the servant's wife and children into slavery to pay off a portion of the debt, the servant pleaded with the master for mercy. **The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'** (Matthew 18: 26 NIV) The master took pity on the servant though. **The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.** (Matthew 18: 27 NIV) There are two fascinating aspects to Jesus' description of how the master responded to his servant's plea for mercy. First, the exact same terminology is used to describe what the master did to the debt and Jesus' wording in the model prayer translated "forgive us our debts". What is rendered in one instance "cancel", is in the second "forgive". Second, when it comes to debts, the precise idea is cancel, in regard to sin, it is forgive. Keep in mind that Jesus told this story in response to Peter's specific question about personal forgiveness of sins. **Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"** (Matthew 18: 21 NIV)

If you were to ask, "What does it mean to forgive someone's sin?", you could properly say, it is the same as cancelling a debt. The idea in both is the same. When I forgive someone for what that person has done against me, I decide that person owes me nothing and we both move forward. The issue between us is settled and there is nothing left to resolve, complain about or ponder. The debt is wiped away. The second aspect to the master's response is just as powerful. He didn't just automatically shove the debt aside. The master took pity on the servant which was why he cancelled the debt. Compassion is a part of forgiveness and without it, forgiveness probably won't happen. It is the engine that drives forgiveness. A cold heart won't cancel the debt. It will maintain it and never let it go

There are two reasons for a cold heart. The first is bitterness. It is what Jonah felt after he acquiesced to God's demand that he preach of coming judgment to the people of Nineveh. It wasn't fair he contended that God forgave the sins of the people of Nineveh when they repented. They deserved to die Jonah held. Perhaps he had been hurt or traumatized by deeds done by Assyrians. Maybe he heard so many terrible accounts of Assyrian atrocities that he came to loath them. We can't know what led to Jonah's bitterness, but it was palpable. When He saw that God took

pity on Nineveh, Jonah let his bitterness explode into rage. **But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."** (Jonah 4: 1-2 NIV)

If bitterness is allowed to sink into you, it always leads to self-pity. When Jonah sat down on a sun scorched hillside overlooking Nineveh, waiting for God to change His mind about the Assyrians, the Lord helped out Jonah. **Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine.** (Jonah 4: 6 NIV) That night the Lord caused the vine to die and Jonah was beside himself. **When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."** (Jonah 4: 8 NIV) Jonah felt sorry for himself that he was forced to sit in the scorching heat without shade. We laugh at his self-pity but is that same attitude so foreign to us? Listen to Martha complain about her sister Mary not helping with the chores. **But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"** (Luke 10: 40 NIV) Have you ever had that same attitude, feeling sorry for yourself? "I'm not treated fairly." "I'm not shown enough respect." "I've been mistreated."

Self-pity is of the devil and Christ has no room for it. Self-pity led to Eve taking the forbidden fruit. It was why Cain killed Abel. Self-pity led to King Saul despising David and it ended in his downfall. Self-pity was the reason for the Israelites not going into the Promised Land the first time and it was how Aaron and Miriam wound up getting upset with Moses. Self-pity leads to unbelief in God and all sorts of troubles between people. Almost always self-pity is at the root of arguments, fights and even wars. It was self-pity that led to Germany embracing Hitler and to Japan attacking China and Pearl Harbor. Self-pity, which starts with bitterness wrecks prayer and the model prayer of Jesus is built to crush all self-pity in us. Here is how.

Jesus cleverly worded the prayer so that if there is a lack of compassion in you and self-pity is ruling your heart, you will come up against it if you are thinking as you pray. Here is why. Note carefully the wording of this part of our praying. **And put away our debts for us just as we ourselves put away (debts) for our debtors.** In other words, the degree to which you get rid of your grudges and complaints and issues with others is what you are asking God to do with you. If you are still aggravated with others, frustrated by their behavior, upset by their attitude or response to you, then you command God to treat you that way too. It is really quite bizarre how many trivialize this distinction. It is on us. Our very words set the bar. If you want God to be generous with you, not deal with you as you deserve, forget about the things you have done wrong and ways you have offended Him, then you had better do the same with every person currently frustrating you, disappointing you or angering you. You must be ruthless with self-pity. Treat it as if it is worse than Covid, worse than getting in a car wreck. It keeps you from God's blessings, from His favor. You have a promised land the Lord wants you to enter, a place of peace and joy and contentment. You can't get there though if you don't persistently and aggressively forgive each offence you encounter. How many Christians put the blessings of God on hold because they cling to a grudge, stay upset with someone. It does not make sense to let a moment pass where you just won't forgive.

Think of poor Jonah, sitting in that blazing Middle Eastern heat, burning up because he refused to let go of his grudge against the Assyrian people. Long after God already forgave them, Jonah was still upset. That desolate, miserable hillside is a perfect picture of the state of your soul when you don't let your problems with others go. God holds back so much good from us when we hold back our forgiveness. Pray that prayer of Jesus fearlessly. It is dangerous though. The prayer holds you accountable for your attitude. **Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.** (Matthew 6: 12 NIV) This part of the model prayer is your daily reminder that if you want the blessings of God to flow into your life, then don't feel sorry for yourself. Get rid of your self-pity. You have a job to do if you want Jesus to bless you. Forgive, forgive, forgive and enjoy the goodness of God as it flows in you and through you. Our Big Idea is simple. The best thing you can do for yourself is forgive.