



Forgive Us, As We Forgive (Matthew 6:12)

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In Commemoration of Ernst Lohmeyer in the 50th Anniversary Year of His Death¹

THE FIFTH PETITION OF THE LORD'S PRAYER IN ECUMENICAL USAGE AMONG English-speaking people reads as follows:

Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.²

The wording is the work of the International Consultation on English Texts, and it reflects two major departures from the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew (6:12). First, it asks for forgiveness of "sins," rather than "debts," thereby

¹Ernst Lohmeyer (1890-1946), outstanding New Testament scholar and opponent of the Nazi regime, was appointed rector of the University of Greifswald after the war in 1945. But during the night prior to the reopening of the university, he was arrested by the Russian secret police. It has been established that he was executed "in Russian custody," September 19, 1946. Among his works is an important study of the Lord's Prayer published the year of his death (1946), cited several times in its English version in this essay. Biography: Wolfgang Weiss, "Lohmeyer, Ernst," *Biographisch- bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*, ed. Friedrich W. Bautz, 8 vols. to date (Herzberg: Traugott Bautz, 1990—) 5:186-189.

²*Prayers We Have in Common*, ed. Ronald Jasper and Harold Winstone, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 1.

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Many interpretations of the Lord's Prayer assume a conditional relation between God's forgiveness and ours. A better alternative is to hear the prayer's reference to our forgiveness as "performance utterance" by which forgiveness is actually accomplished.

following Luke 11:4—and making the choice between “debts” and “trespasses” unnecessary in ecumenical settings (no winners or losers). Second, it renders the verb in the second clause as a present tense (“as we forgive”), rather than the perfect (“as we also have forgiven,” RSV/NRSV).³ In the latter case, however, there is precedent in the “traditional” version of the prayer.⁴

One of the puzzles concerning the petition is how to interpret the relationship between the two clauses. The first clause, taken by itself, is simple enough. The petitioner asks for forgiveness of sins (or debts). But then comes the word “as,” which sets up a syntactical comparison. The result is that one asks God for forgiveness “as” he or she forgives (or has forgiven) others. And that opens up a number of questions for exegesis, theology, and use of this prayer. The purpose of this essay is to explore the relationship between the two lines. We begin by reviewing some interpretations that have been proposed, but which are not finally satisfactory.

I. THREE POSSIBILITIES OF MEANING

A. *The Petitioner as Model*

The English word “as,” like the Greek word it represents in English translation (ὡς), can just as well be rendered “like” when making a comparison. Grammatically it is possible therefore that in praying this prayer the petitioner asks God to forgive *like* or *in the same manner as* he or she forgives others—or at least to the same extent. The petitioner is thus a model for God: God should forgive in the same way that the petitioner does or has done.

It hardly seems possible that the relationship between the two clauses would have such a meaning. Yet that meaning has been proposed in the commentary by Robert Gundry. He says that “forgiveness of others presents God with an example of the forgiveness sought from him.”⁵ It is most unlikely, however, that the evangelist, or the community from which he derived the prayer, would have understood the petition in that way. While divine forgiveness is sometimes a model in the New Testament for human forgiveness of others (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13), the reverse is never the case. To be sure, there are parables which portray divine forgiveness by means of human illustrations (Matt 18:23-35; Luke 15:11-32), but the conduct of the characters is untypical and outlandish,⁶ reflecting the distinctively

³The English perfect translates a first aorist (ἀφήκομεν) in the Greek text of Matt 6:12. Luke 11:4 and *Didache* 8.2 have forms of the present tense (ἀφίόμεν and ἀφίμεν, respectively). The present form in the *Didache* “is the classical and more ‘cultured’ form” of the verb, while that in Luke’s Gospel is “a popular neologism,” according to Ernst Lohmeyer, *Our Father: An Introduction to the Lord’s Prayer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 161.

⁴The Authorized Version of 1611 has the present (“as we forgive our debtors”) as does *The Book of Common Prayer* from the sixteenth century (“as we forgive them that trespass against us”).

⁵Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 108.

⁶Cf. Norman A. Huffman, “Atypical Features in the Parables of Jesus,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978) 207-220.

lavish character of God. That anyone could serve as a model for God – particularly in the act of praying *coram deo* itself – is most unlikely.

B. *The Petitioner as Claimant*

If one uses the past tense of the second verb (“as we also have forgiven”), there is a second interpretive possibility. That is that the petitioner asks God to forgive, as – in the sense of “since” – he or she has forgiven others. Divine forgiveness is laid claim to on the basis of one’s having forgiven others.

The main exegetical basis for such an interpretation would be that in the parallel text at Luke 11:4 the phrase used is not “as we forgive” but “for also we ourselves forgive” (καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ ἀφίομεν). It is conceivable that both “as” (Matthew) and “for” (Luke) are two possible translations of an Aramaic word,⁷ and that Luke has rendered it more faithfully to its intended meaning. Further, perhaps one should not be so strict in translating the text of Matthew at this point into the comparative “as” but make room for the causative “since” or “for.” The Greek term ὡς itself can have the meaning of “since” in certain instances.⁸

But there are reasons not to adopt such an interpretation. Recourse to a hypothetical Aramaic term as an explanation for both “as” and “for” is speculative. Then, too, to interpret the term ὡς as “since” is forced; the word hardly ever has such a meaning. The same term appears two verses earlier (6:10) and clearly means “as.” Moreover, such an interpretation is of course theologically repugnant.⁹

C. *Conditional Forgiveness*

A third possibility is that the petition sets forth a condition. That is, the petitioner asks for divine forgiveness on the condition that he or she is willing to forgive others. That would be in keeping with the statement immediately following: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (6:14-15). Support for this interpretation can be obtained from the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:23-30) and other passages in the Gospel of Matthew (e.g., 5:23-24; 7:1).

That the passage actually means that divine forgiveness is contingent upon the petitioner’s forgiving others is deeply rooted in the history of interpretation, even in surprising places. Martin Luther, for example, has adopted such a view when discussing this petition in his *Large Catechism*:

God has promised us assurance that everything is forgiven and pardoned, yet on the condition that we also forgive our neighbor....If you do not forgive, do not think that God forgives you. But if you forgive, you have the comfort and

⁷Cf. Raymond E. Brown, “The Pater Noster as an Eschatological Prayer,” *New Testament Essays* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1965) 247, note 112; and J. Massyngberde Ford, “The Forgiveness Clause in the Matthean Form of the Our Father,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 59 (1968) 128.

⁸Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961) 236.

⁹Cf. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 404.

assurance that you are forgiven in heaven. Not on account of your forgiving, for God does it altogether freely....But he has set up *this condition* for our strengthening and assurance as a sign along with the promise which is in agreement with this petition, Luke 6:37, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Therefore Christ repeats it immediately after the Lord's Prayer in Matt. 6:14, saying, "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you," etc.¹⁰

The same point is made in the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Our petition [in the Lord's Prayer] will not be heard unless we have first met a *strict requirement*....This outpouring of mercy cannot penetrate our hearts as long as we have not forgiven those who have trespassed against us....In refusing to forgive our brothers and sisters, our hearts are closed and their hardness makes them impervious to the Father's merciful love; but in confessing our sins, our hearts are opened to his grace.¹¹

In this regard, at least two recent commentaries also speak of conditional forgiveness in the petition. Georg Strecker writes: "The presupposition of the proper petitioners for forgiveness is that one has forgiven in turn," and "human forgiveness is made the very condition of God's forgiveness."¹² For W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison: "God's forgiveness, although it cannot be merited, must be received, and it cannot be received by those without the will to forgive others."¹³ Strecker maintains that here the theology of Matthew (and of the Lord's Prayer itself) stands in opposition to that of Paul, in which the deeds of the believer are a consequence, not a precondition, of God's redeeming and forgiving activity (Gal 5:25; Rom 6:1-23). The Lord's Prayer, he says:

stands in the tradition of Jewish thinking, according to which human readiness to forgive is demanded as the prerequisite of divine forgiveness of sins. Thus, Sir 28:2 reads, 'Forgive your neighbor of the wrong, and then (!) your sins will be forgiven when you ask it.'¹⁴

Several other parallels from ancient Jewish texts are cited in the commentary by Davies and Allison.¹⁵

One must grant that at the level of formal syntax this tradition of interpretation is plausible, and if one brings additional materials into the discussion (especially Matt 6:14-15), it could be regarded as correct.¹⁶ And yet the question lurks:

¹⁰Quoted from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 433 (emphasis added).

¹¹*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New Hope, KY: Urbi et Orbi, 1994) 681-682 (emphasis added).

¹²Georg Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) 121.

¹³W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-) 1:611.

¹⁴G. Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 121. The exclamation point is in Strecker's text.

¹⁵W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew*, 1:610.

¹⁶On the relationship of the second clause to the first, Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 384, says that "for Matthew it probably indicates a condition in the sense of 5:23f.; 6:14f.; 7:1." But he goes on to say, rightly: "This relationship obviously applies in parenthesis."

How is it possible for the one who prays to fulfill the precondition? Indeed, how far must one go to fulfill it? The problem with forgiving others is that no one can do it perfectly. Must we conclude that God's forgiving us is absolutely dependent upon our forgiving others? If so, who can ever be forgiven by God?

The issue is extremely important for exegesis, interpretation, and life. In pastoral work one is aware, for example, of broken relationships between siblings, spouses, and former spouses that continue in spite of attempts at forgiveness on the part of one or more persons in the broken situation. A person may forgive another and seek reconciliation, but all attempts are thwarted by the other. The one who forgives finds himself or herself back to square one, harboring new resentments. Going through life is like passing through a woods. We break certain twigs as we go along. And in spite of all we do, we cannot fully repair the broken twigs. We need to ask for forgiveness, and we need to forgive. But in the end, we need to rely on God's forgiveness for us and for the other to make things whole. Try as we might, we cannot always fix things—either in our relationships or in our inner selves where hurts and memories linger.

II. FROM SURFACE SYNTAX TO COMMUNAL RHETORIC

If we go beyond the syntactical level of the fifth petition, refrain from trying to squeeze from it a theological proposition, and seek to place it within the context of communal prayer ("we" and "our" appear four times in this petition alone), another possibility opens up.

It is quite clear that while the Lord's Prayer is a model prayer, i.e., a model *for* prayer, it is not simply that. To be sure, the instruction given in 6:9a ("Pray then *like this*") can be read as though the prayer is merely a model.¹⁷ But there are good grounds for concluding that the Lord's Prayer is actually a prayer to be recited. In Luke's Gospel it is introduced explicitly as a formulated prayer which Jesus taught his disciples to use: "When you pray, *say*: Father..." (11:2), and at *Didache* 8.3 the community is instructed to pray the prayer—as a set prayer—three times a day. Moreover, the Gospel of Matthew itself incorporates liturgical materials as normative and catechetical texts for the Matthean community, and the Lord's Prayer is one such text.¹⁸ In sum, the Lord's Prayer is a prayer to be learned and employed in corporate worship.

Those who pray ask for forgiveness, fully expecting that God will grant it. Then the petitioners go on to say that they likewise forgive. In the very act of praying, those who pray are reminded by the prescribed petition of their duty to forgive others and, at the same time, they exercise such forgiveness. The context of corporate worship is itself a "school" for Christian formation, in which each

¹⁷W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew*, 1:599: The wording of 6:9a "probably implies that what follows is more an example of how to pray instead of a formula to be mechanically repeated."

¹⁸This point is made in Arland J. Hultgren, "Liturgy and Literature: The Liturgical Factor in Matthew's Literary and Communicative Art," in *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts: Essays in Honor of Lars Hartman*, ed. Tord Fornberg and David Hellholm (Oslo: Scandinavian University, 1995) 659-673.

member is taught or reminded constantly of the need to forgive others. In this regard, the suggestion of Joachim Jeremias is helpful when he says that the clause should be understood (even translated) with the words: "as we also herewith forgive our debtors."¹⁹ His suggestion is based on a hypothetical retrotranslation of the words into Aramaic. But that is a risky procedure, and there is a different and better basis for it, namely, that the clause is a "performative utterance" spoken within the community,²⁰ by means of which forgiveness of others is actually accomplished by those who utter the words.²¹ It is a declaration of amnesty.

But how does such an approach cohere with the verses which follow the Lord's Prayer, according to which God will not forgive us if we do not forgive others (6:14-15)? And how does it fit conceptually with the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:23-35), which Matthew has inserted into a section of his gospel concerning forgiveness? There a servant, forgiven ten thousand talents by the king, will not forgive another servant who owes him a hundred denarii. The parable ends with the king's handing him over to be tortured, followed by the statement of Jesus: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart." In the first of these two passages our forgiveness of others is a prerequisite for God's forgiving us ("For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you," 6:14); in the parable it is a necessary consequence of our being forgiven by God. But in both cases divine forgiveness is conditional upon our own.

The problem is resolved when one begins to understand that the latter passages are rhetorical units that function as parenesis (exhortation). We do well to recall that the gospels come from an ancient middle eastern context. Encountering the texts is a cross-cultural experience. The formal rules of Greek grammar and syntax must give way to nuances that can be sensed only by an ear attuned to the world of the text, its cultural context. And in that context, in which orality is so important, the nuance is parenetic: "You want to be forgiven by God? Well, how can you possibly expect to be forgiven, when you are so unforgiving yourself? No way can you expect God to forgive you as you are! First you must forgive your brother and sister!" Such statements are hortatory, calling upon the hearer to action, rather than dogmatic statements about God. God cannot be bound, and therefore God cannot be dependent upon human forgiveness to forgive. At the

¹⁹Joachim Jeremias, *The Lord's Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 14.

²⁰The term "performative utterance," as well as "performative," is used by John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1962) 6. "The name is derived, of course, from 'perform'...: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action." The term "illocutionary acts" is used for the same type of statement by John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay on the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1969) 24, 30.

²¹That is no less the case when the second line is rendered in perfect tense ("as we have forgiven"), as in the RSV and NRSV. Nigel Turner cites Matt 6:12 as one of several passages in the Gospel of Matthew where the present tense would be more appropriate than the aorist. He renders the verse: "as we forgive (i. e., have reached a stage of habitually forgiving)." Cf. James H. Moulton and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908-76) 4:33.

same time, the person who will not forgive does not yet observe all that Jesus has taught his disciples (28:20), including unlimited forgiveness of others (18:21-22).

It is inappropriate therefore to interpret the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer in light of 6:14-15 and 18:23-35 as a dogmatic statement about God, as though God is somehow dependent upon the petitioner's acts of forgiveness in order to forgive him or her. Likewise, it is inappropriate to interpret it in connection with those same verses as a statement to the effect that forgiving others is a precondition for divine forgiveness. Instead, the petition, in the very act of praying it, sets those who pray in renewed relationships. To ask God to forgive one's "debts" – and to know it is being done – means that one is all the more indebted to God, as a creature before the Creator. And then to utter the words "as we forgive our debtors" not only reminds each person in the community of his or her duty, but it is also a "performative utterance" by which relationships are restored. John Chrysostom (d. A.D. 407), when commenting on this verse, wrote that God can forgive our offenses without our forgiving others, but God wills for us a great benefit, namely, "cementing" us to others who are fellow members of the body of Christ by means of love, casting out what is brutish in us, and quenching wrath.²² In the end, "our 'human forgiveness' can and must be understood simply as a reflection of the divine forgiveness."²³ ⊕

²²John Chrysostom, "Homily 19 on the Gospel of Matthew," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, 14 vols. (Buffalo: Christian Literature Company, 1886-90) 10:136.

²³E. Lohmeyer, *Our Father*, 182.