

LORD'S DAY 51

126. Q. What is the fifth petition?

A. *And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*
That is:
For the sake of Christ's blood,
do not impute to us,
wretched sinners,
any of our transgressions,
nor the evil which still clings to us,¹
as we also find this evidence of Thy grace in us
that we are fully determined
wholeheartedly to forgive our neighbour.²

1. **Psalm 51:1-7** Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions.² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.³ For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.⁴ Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight; that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge.⁵ Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.⁶ Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Psalm 143:2 Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, For in Your sight no-one living is righteous.

Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

1 John 2:1-2 My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.² And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

2. **Matthew 6:14-15** For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Matthew 18:21-35 Then Peter came to Him and

said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.²³ Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.²⁴ And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.²⁵ But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made.²⁶ The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'²⁷ Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.²⁸ But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!'²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'³⁰ And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.³¹ So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done.³² Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.³³ Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?'³⁴ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.³⁵ So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."



Forgive us our debts ...

The Lord's Prayer is recorded twice in Scripture. It is recorded in Matthew 6:9-13 and again in Luke 11:2-4. There are differences in the prayer recorded by these two evangelists.

That there are variations does not disturb us, for there they were spoken by our Lord on two different occasions. The Lord first taught his disciples to pray in what is called "*The Sermon on the Mount*." Then later in His ministry His disciples asked Him again to teach them how to pray, even as John taught his disciples. For the greater part He repeated His earlier prayer, but there were some changes. Christ never intended this to be a *form prayer* which was to be prayed exactly as it was (though we may certainly use it as a prayer). It was a teaching model. Thus the changes do not disturb us. In fact, the differences in the prayer can highlight different ideas which can be beneficial.

In Matthew we read that Christ taught His disciples to pray: "*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*" But in Luke we read that Christ taught them to pray: "*Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.*"

One difference in this fifth petition is the tense of the verb (forgive). In Matthew we are taught to pray, "*as we also have forgiven,*" but in Luke we are taught to pray, "*as we ourselves also forgive.*" The one teaches us that forgiveness is not merely something that we should do sometime in the future, but that it is something which we must have done already. The second teaches us that forgiveness is not only something that we have done in the past, but that we continue to do in the present as well. We have forgiven and we continue to forgive.

A second difference is the word used in reference to our transgression. On one occasion Christ used the word "*debts*" ("*Forgive us our debts...*" Matthew 6:12) while on another occasion He used the word "*sins*" ("*Forgive us our sins...*"

Luke 11:4). There is a slight difference in meaning between these two words:

1. The word "*debts*" refers to what is still owing. It highlights the fact that we are unable to satisfy the demands of God. God demands perfection from us, but we are not able to render that perfection. He asks us to do many things but we fail to do them. Another word which we sometimes use *shortcomings*. We could also call these the *sins of omission* - failing to do what God has commanded.
2. The word "*sins*" refers to those deeds which we have done which God has expressly forbidden. We didn't merely fall short of doing what God wanted us to do. Rather, we have flagrantly done what God forbade us. We didn't only come short of the mark but we aimed at the wrong target. We could call these *sins of commission*.

In this petition we pray that God might not impute to us any of our sins of omission and any of our sins of commission. To *impute* means *to charge to someone's account, to hold someone responsible for something*. We pray that God might not charge us with any of our sins, nor hold us responsible for any of our transgressions.

The Catechism teaches us the extent of our sins when it describes us as *wretched sinners*. In using this term the Catechism does not deny the regeneration of man through the Spirit. Neither does it deny our ability to do good works. By calling us "*wretched sinners,*" the Catechism teaches us how much corruption still clings to us and defiles even our best works.

The Catechism speaks not only about our sins but also our *sinful nature*. It speaks about the "*evil which still clings to us.*" Those who are renewed through the Spirit are not completely set free from all corruption. Remnants of the old nature still cling to them. In this petition we also pray for the forgiveness of the sinful nature which we still possess. We ask God not to deal with us according to the uncleanness of our heart, or the ignorance of our mind, or the stubbornness of our will.

Included in this petition is a prayer for the removal of the evil which still clings to us. When we pray for the forgiveness of our sins we plead that God may not declare us guilty. We pray for **justification**. But at the same time we pray that God may remove the source of our sins, namely, the remnants of our evil nature. We pray for **sanctification**.

Why do we pray for the forgiveness of sins? Why do we seek to be justified? Earlier in the Catechism we learned that we seek the removal of our guilt lest we should be condemned (cf. Q&A 56). This condemnation means the exclusion from the presence of God (cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:9: "*These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power*"). God has poured His love into our hearts so that we have come to love God. We wish to live with Him in close fellowship. But we know that He is a holy God in whose presence no sinner may come. He is so pure that He cannot tolerate sin. Either our sin is removed from us so that we may stand before Him, or we will be cast out of His presence. Thus we pray for our **justification**.

Because we have come to love God we want to do what pleases him. Sin is offensive to God. Just as obedience is a symbol of our love for God (cf. John 15:14), so our disobedience is a symbol of our lack of love, or stronger, our hatred for God. We do not want to grieve God by our sins. We don't want to offend Him. Thus we pray for our **sanctification** - that the evil remnants that cling to us may be removed.

We must plead upon God's grace when we ask Him to forgive us our sins. We could never claim any merit for such forgiveness. It could happen that a man has a very good work record. He is never late. He doesn't miss a day unless he is really sick, which has been very seldom. He works hard and his work is done well. If one day there is shortcoming in his work, he could plead for forgiveness on the basis of his good record, and almost expect it. But that is not the case with us. "*Our conscience accuses us that we have grievously sinned against all*

God's commandments, have never kept any of them" (Q&A 59). We could never make up for our sins in the future, for *we are still inclined to evil*, and our debt only increases daily. We must plead upon the grace of God in Jesus Christ. For this reason our Catechism teaches us to base our petition on the atoning sacrifice of Christ. "*For the sake of Christ's blood, do not impute to us ...*"

It is only because of Christ's atonement that God is able to forgive us our sins. For God is a just God. He cannot allow sin to go unpunished. We learned that back in Lord's Day 4. "*God's justice requires that sin committed against the most high majesty of God also be punished with the most severe, that is, with everlasting punishment of body and soul.*" And in Lord's Day 5 we learned that "*we must make full payment either by ourselves or through another.*"

We have already learned that we could never make that payment in such a way that we could be released from it. For us the punishment was eternal. God has graciously sent His beloved Son, who has made full payment for us, if we go to Him in prayer.

We must pray for forgiveness. Our sins are not automatically taken away through Christ's sacrifice. Daily we are required to confess before God our sins and shortcomings. Daily we must plead for forgiveness.

Furthermore, the Lord requires more than just the utterance of words before He forgives us our sins. It is not enough to simply say with the mouth, "*Please forgive all my sins.*" God will only forgive the sins of those who have truly repented of them. We must grieve that we have offended God by our sin. We must hate our sin and turn away and flee from them.

We may be confident of the grace of God. For His grace and mercy outdistance the heavens. "*For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us*" (Psalm 103:11,12).

We may also be confident that the atoning sacrifice is sufficient to pay for all our sins and for the sins of a thousand worlds. There is no sin which is too wicked that cannot be forgiven. There is no debt so great that cannot be paid. For the value of Christ's atoning sacrifice is infinite. For He was the Son of God. His divinity makes the value of His sacrifice immeasurably great. There is forgiveness for the most heinous sins which we have committed, as long as there is genuine sorrow that we have offended God.

...as we also forgive our debtors

God demands that we, who have received grace, must show grace towards our neighbour. This is just one of the many ways in which we are to bear the image of God in daily life. And there is the strongest warning: "*But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*" (Matthew 6:15). The brother of our Lord said something similar: "*For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy*" (James 2:13).

Notice that the Catechism teaches us that we must be **fully determined** to **wholeheartedly** forgive our neighbour. That means that we don't want to cherish hatred or enmity. We don't want a breach to continue in our relationship with others. We don't want to hold someone's offence against them. We must be peacemakers.

Sometimes our neighbour commits a very serious sin against us. Must we also forgive those serious sins? We must! The Lord showed this clearly in a parable in Matthew 18:21-35. Our neighbour's sins against us might be very great (as portrayed by the hundred denarii in the parable—a very large sum). But our sins against God are infinitely greater (as portrayed by the ten-thousand talents in the parable—a tremendously great sum). If God has forgiven us such great sins, we in turn must forgive the much lesser sins which our neighbour commits against us.

Now we are not dealing with a command in this Lord's Day. We are dealing with a

petition, a prayer. But the phrase which we are studying now is not really a petition. We are not asking God to enable us to forgive our neighbour. This petition is not: "*Forgive us our debts, and help us to forgive our debtors.*" Forgiving our neighbour is not just something that we want to do; it is something that we have done and continue to do. "*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*"

What is the purpose of this phrase then? The word "*as*" ("**as** we forgive our debtors") might lead us to believe that we are asking God to do for us what we have done to others, as if our forgiveness merits God's forgiveness. This becomes even stronger in the fifth petition recorded in Luke: "*Forgive us our debts, **for** we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.*" But this is not the case. We do not ask God to forgive us because we forgive others. Our forgiveness of others does not make us worthy of God's forgiveness. Our mercy to others is not the basis for God's mercy towards us.

What does this phrase mean then? The Catechism teaches us that this phrase gives us the evidence of God's forgiveness. We may be assured that God has forgiven us our sins, for the proof is in the fact that we forgive.

To appreciate this we must realise that only those who have experienced God's grace can show grace. Only those who have been forgiven by God are able to forgive their neighbour. Only those who have experienced God's mercy can show mercy.

In Lord's Day 32 we learned that when Christ redeems us from our sins through His blood, He also renews us through the Spirit to bear God's image. As a result of our renewal, we begin to show mercy even as God does. Just as God is forgiving, so we begin to forgive. The fact that we are willing to forgive, means that Christ has forgiven our sins through His blood and renewed us through His Spirit. The fact that we are willing to show mercy is proof that we have already received mercy from God.

Questions:

1. How often is the Lord's Prayer recorded in Scripture? Are these accounts identical? Why not?
2. Did Christ intend the Lord's Prayer to be a *form prayer* to be prayed exactly as it was? What was Christ's intention?
3. In the two accounts of the Lord's Prayer, what difference is there in the tense of the verb "*forgive*"? What do these highlight about forgiveness?
4. What is the second difference in this petition regarding our transgressions? What do each of these words highlight?
5. What does "*impute*" mean? What are we asking God in this petition?
6. How does the Catechism teach us the extent of our sins? Does this deny our regeneration? Does this deny that we are unable to do good works? What does it teach us?
7. Besides speaking about our sins, what else does the Catechism speak about? What does that mean?
8. What do we mean by *justification*? Besides praying for *justification*, what else do we pray for?
9. Why do we want to be justified before God?
10. Why do we want to be sanctified?
11. On what basis must we plead for the forgiveness of sins? On what basis may we not plead?
12. Are our sins automatically taken away through Christ's sacrifice? What must we do?
13. Is it enough to simply say with the mouth, "*Please forgive all my sins*"? What else is required before our sins are forgiven?
14. Can we be confident of God's grace of forgiveness? On what basis?
15. What makes Christ's atoning sacrifice of such great value? What comfort does this give us?
16. What does God demand of us who have received mercy? Why?
17. What does the Catechism mean when it says that we must be fully determined to wholeheartedly forgive our neighbour?
18. Must we forgive our neighbour all the sins which he commits against us, or only the lesser sins? Which parable makes this clear to us? How does it make this clear?
19. When we add the phrase *as we forgive our debtors*, are we implying that the mercy we show to our neighbour merits God's mercy towards us? Explain what this phrase means, then.