

The Lord's Prayer (6) - And forgive us our debts

In the Authorised, or King James version of the Bible, the petition of the Lord's Prayer before us reads, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Remarkably, even though the words don't actually appear in the Bible, the most commonly used version of the Lord's Prayer reads, "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us." But this is an unsatisfactory translation and the petition should read, as the Authorised Version has it, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors". It is the less familiar translation and yet it is the correct one.

Everything we have is from the Lord. Our life, abilities, talents, and possessions, everything. And we use these things on His behalf and in His service. But sometimes we withhold them from Him. We use them selfishly. Though we owe them to the Lord we do not give them to Him. What we fail to give back to the Lord becomes, as it were, debts which we incur. We owe the Lord our life. We owe Him the happiness we enjoy. We owe Him our obedience and we owe Him love and gratitude. But so often we withhold these things. We do and think things which are anything but an expression of love and gratitude. We sin and commit evil, selfishly misusing the life He has given us. Though we owe the Lord so much we fail to give it to Him. Thus the prayer, "Forgive us our debts", or those instances, as in sin, when we have taken the Lord's life and many gifts but haven't returned them in service to Him.

Swedenborg wrote "The Lord, forgives the sins of everyone". And this is so in all cases. He never ceases to forgive. People talk of punishment and fear reprisals from Him. But the Lord isn't like that. He does not reckon with the past and hold things against us, but 'continually excuses...and abundantly pardons'. Of His readiness to forgive, there can be no question. However, this has to be remembered. For our sins to be removed from us there is much we must do. The Lord forgives and will never withhold forgiveness from us. But that in itself, does not remove sins from us. Once we sin we absorb something into our character which is only removed over a period of time. Sin stamps upon our natures a quality which is only gradually shaken off. It is a slow and long-term process. We pray "Forgive us our debts" confident that in His mercy the Lord wants to forgive them, but aware of the fact that much remains to be done, by way of repentance, if they are to be removed from us.

And with regard to repentance much more is meant than being sorry for our sins. Effective repentance hinges on our successfully resisting the promptings and urgings which first led us to commit evil. It is very much an on going thing. It involves resisting the urge to do or say something that we know is evil. It may go on for years. That urge may take a long time to overcome. Yet in time it can and will be.

There is foolish talk that people can't help being what they are, and they may be short tempered, impatient, worldly minded and selfish. Sometimes we are led to wonder of ourselves, whether there can be any lasting change; whether in fact it is possible to overcome evils of which we have become aware. They seem to have such a strong grip on us. We pray "Forgive us our debts", but question whether in fact they will ever be effectively removed.

However, every evil can be removed. We may crave certain things, yet that craving can be overcome. Once we make up our minds and determine to resist it the Lord will work with us imparting the strength to effectively overcome an evil. Maybe we shall still succumb and be disappointed with ourselves. But the struggle can be won and the evil compelled to release its hold on us.

The Lord's Kingdom cannot begin to be established in a person's life apart from repentance and the resolve and determination to resist the old inclinations and promptings. People can talk about religion and know their Bibles. They can attend Church, listen to sermons and partake of the Sacrament. But if they do not engage in repentance these things will achieve nothing. It is the removal of our evils which really matters; and it is of this we should be thinking when we pray, "Forgive us our debts".

But the Lord, as we well know, didn't tell us to pray just, "Forgive us our debts". He told us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors". And this, we notice, is the one petition taken up by the Lord, and further expounded upon at the conclusion of the giving of the Prayer. "For if you forgive other people 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." (Matthew 6, verses 14 and 15)

When we think about it the point is a fairly obvious one. We receive into our lives from the Lord what we make room for. The giving out of love is what is made room for. His love to be received by us. To the extent that we are merciful, to the same extent we ourselves obtain mercy. In that we are forgiving, ready to pardon, and anxious to excuse, we make it possible for the Lord to be present, both forgiving and removing our evils from us. There is this direct relationship between the two things.

So long as, in our relationships with all others, we are striving to be merciful and forgiving, so it is possible for us to receive the Divine mercy and forgiveness. It is our attitude to those around us which opens the door for the Lord to come in to us. It is not wishful thinking that opens that door: It is a matter of determined effort in everyday affairs.

But, and as has been so rightly said, "when forgiveness is needed, we are slow to grant it; or (we) grant it in words, but not in spirit. It is our human tendency to nurse the wrongs we may have suffered until they grow out of all proportion; to conjure up imaginary motives and suspicions; until at last we come to live in a world of fanciful fears." (Hugo Odhner, "The Lord's Prayer", page 55). We unmercifully judge, criticise and talk about the offences of another. We tell them they are forgiven, and then broadcast their offence. People dwell on injuries which were done to them ages ago, and some will go for years without speaking to each other because one won't extend forgiveness.

The Lord commands it as a Christian duty to forgive; to find excuses, and to make allowances. He would have us put the best interpretation on the faults of others, and be merciful in our judgement of them. And the effort to do this must attract the corresponding qualities into our lives from the Lord. In the measure that we mete, so shall it be measured unto us. "Those who have no charity" wrote Swedenborg "think nothing but evil of their neighbour, and say nothing but evil... ..whereas those who have charity think nothing but good of their neighbour and speak only well of him, and this, not for their own sakes or the favour of another whom they flatter, but from the Lord thus working in charity." (*Arcana Caelestia* 1088)

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