**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MATTHEW-036. FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."*

*Matthew 6:12*

The sequence of the petitions in the second half of the Lord's Prayer suggests that every man who needs to pray for daily bread needs also to pray for daily forgiveness. The supplication for the supply of our bodily needs precedes the others, because it deals with a need which is fundamental indeed, but of less importance than those which prompt the subsequent petitions. God made us to need bread, we have made ourselves to need pardon. The answer to the later petition is as certain as that to the earlier. He who gives meat will not withhold forgiveness. Give and forgive refer to our deepest wants, but how many who feel the one are all unconscious of the other!

**I. The consciousness of sin, of which this petition is the expression.**

Debt and duty are one word. Owe and ought are one word. Duty is what is due. Ought is what we owe--to some one or other. We are under obligations all round, which conscience tells us that we have not fulfilled. The unfulfilled obligation or duty becomes a debt. We divide our obligations into duties to God, our neighbours, and ourselves; but the division is superficial, for whatever we owe to ourselves or to men, we owe also to God, and the non-fulfilment of our obligations to Him is sin. No man liveth to himself, ... we live unto God. Our consciences accuse us of undone duties to ourselves, the indulgence of evil tempers, a slack hand over ourselves, a careless husbandry which leaves furrows full of weeds, failure to bend the bow to the uttermost, to keep the mirror bright. It accuses us of undone duties to our neighbours, unkindness, neglect of opportunities of service, and many another ugly fault. Duties undone are debts not only to ourselves or to our fellows, but to God. The great Over-lord reckons offences against His vassals as crimes against Himself.

That graver aspect of our faults as being sins may seem a gloomy thought, but it is really one full of blessing, for it lodges the true power of remission of our burdensome debts in the hands of the one true creditor, whom the prayer has taught us to call Our Father.

That consciousness of sin should be as universal as the sense of bodily hunger; but, alas! it is too often dormant. It is especially needful to try to awake it in this generation, when the natural tendency of the heart to ignore it is strengthened by talk of heredity and environment, and by the disposition to think of sin with pity rather than reprobation. Men are apt to regard a consciousness of sin as morbid. They will acknowledge failure or imperfection, but there is little realisation of sin, and therefore little sense of the need for a deliverer. If men are ever to be brought to a saving grip of Jesus Christ, they must have learned a far more heart-piercing consciousness of their sin than this morally relaxed age possesses.

**II. The cry to which that consciousness gives voice.**

We often ask for forgiveness; have we any definite notion of what we are asking for? When we forgive one another, he who forgives puts away alienation of heart, every cloud of suspicion from his mind, and his feeling and his conduct are as if there had never been a jar or an offence, or are more tender and loving because of the offence that is now forgiven. He who is forgiven has, on his part, a deeper shame for the offence, which looks far darker now, when it is blotted out, than it did before forgiveness. Both are eager to show love, not in order to erase the past, but because the past is erased.

When a father forgives his child, does that merely or chiefly mean that he spares the rod; or does it not much rather mean that he lets his love flow out to the little culprit, undammed back by the child's fault? And when God forgives He does so, not so much as a judge but rather as the Father. It is the father's heart that the child craves when it cries for pardon. The remission of punishment is an element, but by no means the chief element, in man's forgiveness, and that is still more true as to God's. There are present, and for the most part outward, consequences of a forgiven man's sin which are not averted by forgiveness, and which it is for his good that he should not escape. But when the assurance of God's unhindered love rests on a pardoned soul, those consequences of its sins which it has to reap cease to be penal and become educative, cease to be the expressions only of God's hatred of evil, and become expressions of His love to the forgiven evil-doer. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men ... but My mercy shall not depart from him.

**III. The startling addition to the cry.**

As we forgive. Is, then, our poor forgiveness the measure or condition of God's? At first sight that addition seems to impose a limit on His pardon which might well plunge us into despair. But reflection on the words brings to light more comforting, though solemnly warning, thoughts.

We learn that our human forgiveness is the faint reflection of the light of His. We have a right to infer His gentleness, forbearance, and forgiveness from the existence of such gracious qualities in ourselves. God is all that is good in men. Whatsoever things are reverend, whatsoever things are honourable, whatsoever things are lovely--all these are in Him, and all as they are seen in men are from Him. He that formed the eye, shall not He see? We forgive, and will not He?

In a very real sense our forgiving is the condition of our being forgiven. We are accustomed to hear that faith and repentance are conditions of receiving the divine forgiveness. But the very same disposition which, when directed to God, produces faith and repentance, when directed to men, produces a forgiving temper. A deep sense of my own unworthiness, and of having no ground of right to stand on, will surely lead me to be lenient and placable to others. We cannot cut our lives into halves, and be inwardly filled with contrition, and outwardly full of assertion of our rights. We cannot plead with God to do for us what we will not do for others. Our prayer for forgiveness must, if it is real, influence our whole behaviour; and if it is not real, it will not be answered.

The possession of God's forgiveness will make us forgiving. Forgiving one another, even as also God in Christ hath forgiven you. Be ye therefore imitators of God, as beloved children.

Our continuous possession and conscious enjoyment of God's forgiveness will be contingent on our forgivingness. He who took his fellow-servant by the throat and half choked him in his determination to exact the last farthing of his debt was, by the act, cancelling his own discharge and piling up a mountain of debt, against himself. Our consciousness of forgiveness will be most clear and satisfying when we are forgiving those who trespass against us. We shall pardon most spontaneously and fully when our hearts are warm with the beams of God's pardon.