

THE PROBLEM OF FORGIVENESS
IN THE LORD'S PRAYER

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No. I
THE PROBLEM OF FORGIVENESS
IN THE LORD'S PRAYER

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THE PROBLEM OF FORGIVENESS IN THE LORD'S PRAYER

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.”—MATT. vi. 12.

THE Lord's Prayer is less a prayer than a scheme of prayer, a sketch. It is an outline, the notes of prayer, that we may learn the duty and power of praying with thought, intent, and cohesion, instead of uttering mere ejaculations.

It is not a prayer by Christ with His disciples, but one given to them. Luke says it was when He had ceased praying that He gave them this form. It was a prayer born in prayer. Its terse brevity represents the concentration in which true prayer leaves the mind and soul. Christ never led His disciples in prayer. He never says “Our Father” in a sense to include Him and them alike. His prayers were for them, not with them, and not even in their hearing, except to a small and accidental extent in the Garden. Public prayer is seldom purely extempore. Absolutely extempore prayer can only be between the soul and God. Prayer in public should be the

fruit of careful preparation both in devotion and thought, as this most public of all prayers was.

The Lord's Prayer is liturgical in so far as this, that it prescribes the course which the prayer of a community should take in its main lines. Just as if I should take into the pulpit brief written memoranda of the course that our public prayer should follow—a thing I have always claimed the right to do, without anything surreptitious—though they are not always used. It seems absurd to prepare aids to thought in addressing men, while we are willing to be careless and slipshod, rambling and vapid, in speaking to God.

The Lord's Prayer is not a simple prayer in one sense. It has at least two huge difficulties in it. It is possible to overdo the demand for simplicity both in prayer and preaching, till all effort on the part of spiritual intelligence ceases, and only certain easy sympathies have play, and religion becomes a spiritual luxury and sedative.

The two difficulties are :—

1. *Lead us not into temptation.*
2. *Forgive us as we forgive.*

Of these the most important is the latter. For Christ returns to it at the end of the prayer in verses 14 and 15. Or if these words were not used by Christ on this occasion (and Luke omits them), they were on another. They are in another context in Mark. And their addition to the Lord's Prayer by Matthew

shows where its chief strain upon faith and life was felt to be by one part of the first Church at least.

This petition was never meant to encourage a side glance of satisfaction with our Christian facility in forgiving. I fear that that would be the result of making God's forgiveness depend on ours either as ground or as measure. But in the story of the Pharisee and the Publican, Christ has given its death-blow to that frame of mind, however subtle its form.

What is the exact difficulty ?

Luke's version suggests it. There is a difference between Matthew and Luke. Matthew says *as* we forgive ; Luke says *for*.

The meaning suggested is different. Which word did Christ use, and which meaning did He intend ?

Possibly something has happened to the word in Luke. He seems to think that our forgiveness is the *ground* of God's. Forgive *for we*. forgive—forgive *because* we forgive.

Now Matthew's suggestion is not that. Using *as*, he rather seems to suggest that our forgiveness is to be the *measure* of God's and not its ground.

But both these interpretations are wrong. They are not consistent, that is, with the central principles of Christ's work and teaching.

I.

Christ could not mean that our forgiveness is the *ground* or reason of God's.

God does not forgive us *because* we forgive our enemies. The whole of Christianity comes to the ground if God's forgiveness did not come first, if it is not the type, if our forgiveness of others do not rise out of His forgiveness of us.

So the difficulty is this. We can only forgive in the moral strength of being forgiven; while here we seem to ask forgiveness because we have already merited it by forgiving. We seem told to earn it by doing what we cannot do till we have it.

Now that is impossible. Love and mercy to our neighbour is not the reason why God is gracious to us. But the grace of God is the main thing which enables man to love his neighbour.

Christ said of the sinful woman, "Much has been forgiven her, for she loved much." And what loose, sentimental, mawkish morality has been based on a perversion of the words. Christ went on to say that to whom little was forgiven the same loveth little. Surely His meaning was clear enough. "*For*" does not explain the forgiveness, but the way He knew it. "For she hath loved much" was the ground for concluding she had been forgiven much. It was the outward and visible sign of forgiveness; it was not the reason why she was forgiven. It might,

and should, soften our human judgment, but it could not be her absolution before the holiness of God. Those who say that forgiveness is easily given to erring love forget that the sin is against love, and is therefore more due to defect of love than to excess of it. It is against God's holy love, against love in its true divineness. If that had been felt, the sin would not have been done. Were forgiveness bestowed on love, how should we ever be forgiven by God, whom it is our great sin not to have loved? And if God forgive men because they love each other unwisely, some of the sins most deadly to society must be the lightest before God. Some sins most fatal to the soul would be most venial to its Saviour, which is both a moral and a religious absurdity.

We can never win the mercy of God by mercy of ours. If forgiveness be God's, not man's, it is just because it is undeserved, because it is grace toward the graceless, not love toward the amiable. Our real motive to forgive, and our power, lie in our forgiveness first by God. I speak of real forgiveness, what Christ calls *forgiveness from the heart*. And I mean forgiveness of a real wrong, of what we bitterly feel as a wrong, what it is past human nature to forgive. I do not speak of little offences and trifling insults, real or fancied, but of a great wrong embittering the soul at the centre, and the soul too of the strong, to forgive which we should at once confess was beyond our power. I speak of the forgiveness which is the greatest tax on our moral resource, and shows its

weakness most. I mean the one triumph above all others for which the Grace of God is needed, and where it shows itself as really grace. To forgive in this way is a superhuman power. "You cannot," you say, and you go regretfully away. Of course *you* cannot. It can only be done by the forgiving God within you. It takes much forgiveness of you to raise you to that. It is no light matter, no case of good nature, or short memory, or generous contempt. It is a case of a new heart and a new will.

"I cannot forgive," you say, and you comfort yourself by the conclusion that there are things you are not called upon to forgive. But Christ will not allow that. You must part either with your rancour or your Redeemer. "I cannot forgive," you say and feel. Then your prayer, if you continue to pray, must be "Forgive me that I cannot forgive." This shows at least that you acknowledge the duty. It is glorifying the spirit of forgiveness which you confess you have not acquired. "Forgive me till I can forgive," you must pray. "Make me daily so to feel the thousand pounds that Thou hast forgiven, that I may freely remit the hundred pence that are due to me. Make me realise where I should have been if Thou hadst claimed Thy rights, so that I may be ashamed to stand greedily for mine."

Paul has seized the true Christian principle, "forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

II.

But it would be wrong in another way to think that our forgiveness is the *measure* of God's.

This is an error that may find footing even on Matthew's *as*. You might admit that God was willing to forgive on other grounds than our forgiving, on the ground of His own; but you might also hold that He only gave out as much mercy as corresponded to ours. We do not earn it, it is of grace ; but we only receive as much grace as we have shown.

“As much grace!” The words make a contradiction in terms. God loves us all or not at all. Grace would not be grace if it were not full, free, complete. Grace ceases to be grace if it is doled out as priests do. It throws open the Kingdom of Heaven. It does not palter at the gate. It does not haggle about terms, fitness, receptivity. If our forgiveness is to be like God's, it must not be the Pharisaic thrice, or Peter's seven times, but till seventy times seven.

“Give all thou canst; high Heaven rejects the love
Of nicely calculated less or more.”

It is quite true that we cannot take God's grace in unless from the heart we forgive. That is psychologically, ethically true. But is not true theologically. It is another thing to say that God's grace does not go out to us except as we forgive. It is only because His grace goes out to us that we can treat in any gracious way

those who have wronged us. We ask grace, not because we have reached the power of forgiving, but because we feel the chief work of grace is to supply that power. We must pursue it as a spiritual ideal. So long as we are incapable of it there is sin in us to be forgiven. We ask, trusting in a fore-gone forgiveness, and moved by it. We are afraid lest we make it of no effect, or bar its access to us. We ask, believing that God has broken sin in principle once for all. In grace He has forgiven the world. We ask that this may be carried home to us. We are in earnest about asking, because our moral effort is set on doing the like to men. How can we preach a gospel of forgiveness we do not practice? But our practice is not the measure of the gift we seek; it is a fruit of having it, and a sign of our earnestness in seeking more.

It is a great thing to realise that the forgiving grace of God is the deepest, mightiest, most permanent and persistent power in the moral world. Not that we may make it so, but that it *is* so. It *is* so. There is a universe of moral forces and soul powers about us, shaping us more really than our physical world does, and all its forces. All things work up into this moral order, this realm of the conscience, this passion which quells passion and teaches peace. And in this awful, certain realm, the mightiest power is grace, is Christ. I beg you to realise it, to arrest yourself, to compel yourself to stand still long enough in the hurry of interests, the press of pursuits, and

the buzz of things, to take the fact and its meaning in. The greatest, subtlest, final power in the world, which will grow on you as life deepens and matures, is the grace of God. It has the promise and reversion of all things, and it will let nothing go. You have to do chiefly and lastly with a world in which this is the central principle, and everything which disowns this principle is destined to be broken.

Consider the rite of the Lord's Supper. It stands there simple but venerable. Almost the oldest institution in Europe is before your eyes. Through ages and ages of confusion, peril, perversion, and strife, the thing itself has endured, and is among us to this day, less likely than ever to be swept away by change, chill, or war. So, but much more so, the grace of God persists and works among all the inferior powers and preoccupations of the soul's world.

This is not a mere illustration. The rite lasts because it signifies the thing which lasts. It is among us because the grace of God is among us. It stands visibly for that grace. It is no creation of ours. It is not a mnemonic device of ours. It was not invented by man to keep the memory of a certain thing alive in a more or less artificial way. It is a historic gift to man. It is there by God's providence as God's witness and Christ's presence. In the Lord's Supper God's forgiveness is not simply remembered by us, but offered us, carried home to us anew. The rite is the property of the whole Christian

Church, and is its witness, its acted proclamation, of the gospel of forgiveness. God in the course of history offers Christ, the fount of history, anew. There is a long continuity in this historic act. Man repeats it, but it is a continuous act with God. And it stands, not as an artificial symbol or imported suggestion of God's persistent grace, but as that grace's own creation and expression. We did not place it on God's grace, as we might tie a knot to make us remember; but God's grace grew it, in the Church which His grace created. As this rite stands in the tumult of history, simple, peaceable, neglected, or abused, so the forgiveness of God stands amid the unseen powers that do most to shape us for weal or woe. But it is not simply one of them, it is the focus of them and their goal. It is the condition of our fellowship with the Eternal Life. We lay hold of that fellowship according as we lay hold of forgiveness, and show it forth. We enter the family of the eternal grace by becoming *blood relations of Jesus Christ*.

No. II.
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“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.”—MATT. vi. 12.

THE key to the true interpretation of this petition is found by remembering that the prayer was given for use by men who had been forgiven. They were in the Messiah's Kingdom. And the initial gift which made the Kingdom the Kingdom, had been this of forgiveness.

I wish that many who urge the Kingdom on us in the Press and elsewhere, would remember that it is not founded on social righteousness, but on the forgiveness of sins; on which all social justice is founded. Social righteousness is the goal of the Kingdom—that is, of forgiveness. It is the *form* of the Kingdom. It is the order into which forgiven men fall as they realise and live up to what their forgiveness means. But it is not the soul of the Kingdom, nor its life; it is not the enthusiasm which moves the Kingdom, or moves men to it.

It is beginning at the wrong end to start with it—that is, if it is the Christian Kingdom of God that is invoked and pressed. Of course mere Socialism does not profess to start from this root. It does not claim to be Christian; and if it be preached or criticised it must be in another way. But Christ's Kingdom of God does so start, and it is not fair to press the Kingdom of God by aid of the New Testament, while this first condition of sin and forgiveness is practically ignored, and its believers treated with condescension as very useful people socially, if they be not scared, and if they be treated with allowance and patience.

The disciples had been forgiven. That was the gift that made them members of the Kingdom. It was forgiven men, therefore, that were instructed to use this prayer, "Forgive us as we forgive." It was a prayer for daily renewed forgiveness, then, not forgiveness in the sense of the great justification which changed the whole relation of God and man. That was foregone. It was that great universal sense of forgiveness or justification that chiefly exercised Paul—the one universal, eternal act of grace, done once for all in Christ's person, and finished in His death. All daily forgiveness, all mutual forgiveness, is the detail of that, the working out of it. But it was not that great justification that Christ had in His mind here. He was speaking to a kingdom, already set up by that act latent in Himself. What He had in view, was the daily

draft on this foregone and exhaustless grace, the periodic irrigation by the water of life once for all set free. "Give us this day our daily bread, *and* forgive us." Observe how the two things are coupled and made parallel. The Lord's Prayer moves in these couplets or parallels, like a Hebrew poem or psalm. Thus :—

{ Our Father, which art in Heaven,
 { I Hallowed be Thy name;
 { Thy Kingdom come,
 { Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven;
 { Give us this day our daily bread,
 { And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors;
 { Lead us not into temptation,
 { But deliver us from evil.

You observe that this prayer for forgiveness belongs to the couplet about daily provision, and expounds it to what is the true nature of heavenly food. It was for the daily bread of forgiveness that they were to pray; the daily sense of it, the habit and spirit of reconciliation ; as with God, so with men; the realisation of it, not its creation at the first. "He that is bathed needeth not save to wash his feet." The forgiven man is still soiled with daily dust, which must be daily removed. The sense is : "Renew Thy forgiveness, as we use Thy forgiveness to forgive." It is not repeat, but renew. Forgive us, as, forgiven, we forgive.

Now this *sense* of God's forgiveness does depend upon the use we make of it towards our neighbour.

If we feel that we are forgiven and at peace with God, and if, at the same time, we do not let that change our bearing to those whom we find trying, the sense of divine forgiveness fades — we feel unforgiven. We cannot keep up the peace of forgiveness by God along with a critical, exacting spirit towards our neighbours. Our forgiveness of them is not the measure of God's forgiveness, but it does affect the extent to which we can take His forgiveness in.

There are three things we may distinguish :—

1. *The state of forgiveness.*

The whole race is in that state before God through Jesus Christ.

2. *The sense of forgiveness—when a soul realises that fact and is at peace with God.*

3. *The spirit of forgiveness—when the sense of it becomes the heart's habit, and works outward towards men.*

It becomes a changed temper and settled frame of the soul, which cares far less for its rights than for its duties and sympathies. The form of the unforgiving spirit that mostly troubles us, is seldom implacable resentment; it is oftener the exacting spirit, or the critical spirit, when it gets the upper hand.

What this petition teaches us is, that if the *sense* of forgiveness do not continually pass into the *spirit* of forgiveness, that sense dies. We are as if we were not forgiven; we are hard and foreign masses in a

forgiven world. We must pray for forgiveness, and chiefly for forgiveness for unforgiveness. We do not *have* forgiveness without forgiving, or at least we cannot keep it. Forgiveness is the condition for appropriating forgiveness, but not for moving God to forgive. Our forgiveness is really our practical thanksgiving for God's forgiveness. That is the force of St Matthew's "as."

You remember Zaccheus. Christ came to him, visited with him, treated him as a forgiven man. And you remember the result on Zaccheus. It roused the spirit of gratitude, of amends, of forgiveness. The spirit of praise for being visited and forgiven by God took this shape. Zaccheus was so moved that out of his fulness of heart he vowed what he did. This was not the *cause* of Christ's visit. It had not been Zaccheus's habit. It was the result of the visit. And it was an act of praise in the true sense, returning God's mercy *in the same kind*. It is much to feel "God has forgiven me, therefore I sing heartily and subscribe of my means." That is all of grace. But it is a still greater sign of grace to feel "God has forgiven me, therefore my heart is tender. I go out in pity, patience, and blessing to my brethren, black or white, seen or never seen, friend or foe."

Now read this petition in that way. "Forgive us our debts," you pray. Then there is a pause, as the forgiveness comes (never mind how long the pause is). It comes. We rejoice. We feel we must

thank God somehow. We must offer a grateful sacrifice, and our true sacrifice of final thanks is returning our mercies in kind, and forgiving our debtors. We *pray*, we PRAISE, we promise.

It would be quite contrary, both to the spirit of this petition and to the whole Gospel, if we were to put off praying for forgiveness till we felt able to forgive all men. If we felt able for that we should not need much forgiveness. It is only the forgiveness we pray for that makes possible the forgiveness we show.

So the use of the Lord's Prayer in sincerity and earnestness is an ethical exercise—as prayer always should be.

It is the great school of the highest, finest morality. "Forgive as we forgive." That links theology and humanity in one ethical bond. Prayer is the school of humanity. What else is to teach it us? Does it come natural? Some of the common forms do, partly because they have been inbred in us by Christian tradition, partly because the divine has never quite left human nature. But when we come to the finer, rarer forms of it, what is to teach us humanity? Culture? Culture is more monastic in its tendencies than humane. And culture will not teach the highest, rarest, hardest accomplishment of humanity—to forgive. It stands on its refined dignity and its self-sufficient resource.

What is to keep up the glow of social enthusiasm? The love of man in some forms has already caught

us. How is it to hold us? What is to make it more than a sentiment, a passing fashion of the heart, a tender fit, to be followed by a cruel, as so often happens? What is to make it an ingrained moral quality and spiritual habit? What is to create hearts large enough to bear with all men and restore them? What can make us love our enemies? If you can love your enemies you can love all men. That is love's last, greatest victory, the goal of love's culture. It is what makes love grace. But we can only love our enemies by one means—by prayer. It is not in human nature. It is a supernatural gift. It is only to be acquired by supernatural means—by prayer, by association with the greatest case of the kind ever known or possible—with God who loved us, and forgave us, and redeemed. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us," "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." These are not texts, but truths.

Prayer, and prayer for forgiveness, is the condition, therefore, of the growth and permanence of social enthusiasm. It is the true, deep school of humanity. The evangelical foundation is the only social foundation, if what I have said be true. And it is true if the Lord's Prayer be true. You say, perhaps, that things are simpler than all that, and that we need not go so deep into theology for a practical sociology. But you have always said also that the ideal of simple religion was the Lord's Prayer. And yet here is the problem which stares you in the face from the centre

of it. Besides, we have not been going into abstract theology, but practical, experimental theology, the theology which men should live in their souls and consciences, and which men try to evade by cant against theology and about simplicity. Your impatience of this theology is not, therefore, because it is obscure or abstract, but (forgive me) because it is hard, because it makes on you a moral demand which you resent. It is personal theology, but not individualist. It is a social theology. And you cannot really have any other kind of theology. A Christian theology must be social, because it is based on a social Godhead and the Kingdom of God. A Christian sociology must be theological, because the Kingdom of God rests entirely on forgiveness in Jesus Christ. When people tell you that the Gospel means a form of Christian Socialism, ask them what they mean. And if they seem practically indifferent to sin and its forgiveness as the foundation of socialism, follow them very critically and distrust them in the main. The foundations of the New Jerusalem are on Calvary. And the City of God is the Society of the Saved, and not merely of the just, nor even of the kind. The redeemed walk there. All social freedom rests at last on free grace. If society is to be remodelled, it must be on the principles of the Gospel, on the ethics of forgiveness; not on human heroism or sympathy, but on human helplessness and divine help. It stands at last on the faith that *there* is the bond of human

brotherhood ; there is the secret of social unity; there is the power which melts men to be members of each other; there is the power that keeps civilisation from slipping back to barbarism and disintegration through a selfishness, first refined, then gross. You demur to this elaborate idea of forgiveness, perhaps. You say love is enough. The Kingdom of God comes when men love each other. Yes; but, in the first place, the only love strong enough to overcome the breaking strain of human selfishness is our love of God. And, in the second place, that love is not mere affection ; it is not our love answering His love in simple reciprocity, but it is the love that answers His grace. It is the grateful love, the worshipping love, the self-distrustful love of the forgiven. Mere affection does not forgive—at least beyond a certain limit. The affectionate are not always the forgiving. But grace is love with infinite power of forgiving. It is love prepared for the bitterness of human wrong, and more than equal to it. It is love which gets over not only lapses from love, but the neglect and contempt of a settled lovelessness and selfishness. We need all that grace for *the* effective bond of humanity, among the kind of men, women, and sin we have to deal with. We need the kind of love whose nature and property it is to forgive on a universal scale, love proof against all possible and future wrong, love that not only forgives man his wrong but assures God His holiness, love with infinite resources of forgiveness latent in it. The

love of God forgave sin before *we* sinned, and slew the Lamb before the world was. We need for the Kingdom of God in humanity a love capable of doing the like—a love which forgives men before they wrong us, a heart so altered and disposed towards men that wrong falling on it awakes forgiveness before resentment has time to grow. For surely that was the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And His love is the only school of it. It is love, truly, which does not spare to inflict judgment. It has nothing fond, nothing foolish. Chastisement is our peace. Let none think forgiveness means mere amnesty, no judgment, no punishment. It carries in one hand peace, in the other a sword. But either hand is the hand of love, love holy, just, and wise.

This is divine love rising to a consecrated passion, to calm, solemn, inexhaustible, inflexible passion.

Some whom these words reach are young. You feel the stirring of early passion. Its eaglets are trying their wings in your soul's nest. For some time you will be much urged by passion, and much influenced by what comes in the form of passion either ignoble or noble, either for knowledge, or for power, or for each other. Let me bespeak your interest for the mightiest passion of all. The poets will teach you it is love. And your New Testament will speak in much the same words. But they will not mean the same thing. The love of human creatures for each other is, indeed, a great and divine thing. It is a great and godly thing, the dear, pure passion of one for another. It

is great and godlike, too, that passion of pure, pitiful beneficence for men as brothers in their ignorance, care, pain, and grief, and of laying down life patiently and quietly for their comfort, healing, and elevation. But the greatest, godliest passion of all is connected neither with ties of affection nor works of well-doing (and we are blest in both). It is connected with sin and forgiveness, with guilt and grace. The greatest, last, humanest, passion is the passion to be forgiven. Do not withdraw your interest because I say so. It is not theological pre-occupation that says it. It is human and historic experience. The soul's history says it. It may not be so in every man, but it is so for the human soul, that soul whose face is all history. You will know one day, perhaps, when all other passions have been disappointed by loss, burnt out by time, or debased by abuse. This passion to be forgiven is the longest lived and most indestructible of all. For the present age it is in abeyance. It is more commonly known as the sense of sin. And the sense of sin seems in many religious quarters to be extinct. But it is not dead, it sleepeth. And one day, in the failure, perhaps, of many of the pungent schemes and interests whose taste now numbs the moral nerve, one day this passion will revive with a disillusioned and bitter cry. There is much to satisfy the hunger of the heart to-day, much at least that promises to do so; and the hunger of the conscience for righteousness, public or private, is

urging many steps for a better state of things. But there are still, I suppose, as many hungry hearts as ever, and still a righteousness which social readjustments cannot meet, nor social elevation satisfy. There is another hunger than the heart's hunger for love and sympathy, and another than the conscience of wrongs crying out for redress. There is the hunger of the conscience for forgiveness, sin crying for mercy, for peace with God, for moral harmony within, and reconciliation with that Eternal Conscience with which we have for ever to do. That is the passion which out-lives all, and is greater than all passions beside—*except only one*.

For the greatest passion in Heaven or earth, time or eternity, is the passion of God to forgive, the passion in the passion and death of Christ to redeem.

That is the ruling passion in the moral and spiritual universe. Thus God's great passion meets ours.

When your hunger to be forgiven has found its bread of life in Christ as the forgiveness of God, there is one last height to climb in the strength of that food. You are invited to rise and share in the passion which makes God God, the passion to forgive, the movement of the Holy Ghost, the last moral victory of mankind over itself, where we are more than conquerors because we conquer ourselves, but do it in another, and do it because we are redeemed. Thus the last enemy is destroyed.

But if this step be not taken, if the great refusal

is made, then the forgiveness that came to you turns to a new condemnation; and your unforgiving becomes the one thing that has to be forgiven. For it is at the root of all your sin and failure beside.