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Our Debtors
 February 8, 2015 A.M.

***The Lord's Agenda:
 (5) Forgive Us Our Debts As We Forgive***

Matthew 6:12, 14-15

***Intro: Nightmares
 The Super-Sized Nightmare of Guilt
 The Sweet Dream of the Father's Forgiveness
 Help for the Nightmare of Forgiving Others***

Introduction: Nightmares

Do you have a nightmare that occurs to you on a regular basis? I do, or I should say, I did throughout my 20's to mid-30's. So it goes like this. I'm in college and a teachers aid from the Drama Department comes to my door and knocks frantically. I open the door and he says, "Come on. Hurry up! You are expected on stage in one hour. I hope you have all your lines memorized. We're counting on you." Then the dream jumps to another frame and I'm pacing the floor backstage, a script in hand trying to memorize 30 lines of dialogue. A group of drama students stand to the side and a girl glares at me contemptuously, "You idiot". Then the dream jumps to another scene: a crowded theater. I'm on stage, under the spotlight but I don't know what to say. I look at the stage manager and his hands are on his hips, "Come on"! But I can't remember any lines. I've failed on stage.

I've had that nightmare about 8-10 times in my life, although not in the last five years. I guess even my subconscious knows it can't trick me into believing I'm a slim 21 year old anymore. But specialists in psychology say that my nightmare is a variation of a very common nightmare. According to Listverse.Com, the eighth most common nightmare is the nightmare of missing or being unprepared for an important event, like a college exam, or your wedding. Psychologists say that this nightmare is linked to a

daytime anxiety over failing or not being able to perform up expectations. It seems deep down in many of us we have this perception of failed duty, of owing debt we haven't paid. Now the Bible says this perception can be traced back to a real fact. We really owed a debt to God. See the funny thing about my dream is I never tried out for a play in college. My perception of owing a debt to the Dordt College Drama department was completely false. But I really do owe a huge debt to God, and so do you. We have cause to be uneasy. This spiritual nightmare is super-sized and it's rooted in a real fact.

And it's a fact Jesus wants us to own and acknowledge. Each day Jesus teaches us to pray to the Father, "Forgive us our debts."

The Super-Sized Nightmare of Our Guilt

Now a debt is a failure. It is a failure to give our Father something we owe him. God made us and redeemed us. We owe him our very lives. Each day we rack up new debts and fail to give Him the love and service He deserves.

The Father will gladly forgive these new debts, but He desires we own up to them. As I child I grew up in a loving home, I knew that I could mess up in some big ways and my Dad would never kick me out of the family. Even so, when I did mess up, it helped my relationship with my Dad if I owned up to my failure. If I made excuses or shifted blame onto a sibling or tried to minimize what I had done then that caused friction in the relationship. But a full apology signaled to my Father that I understood his heart and felt really for what I did. The same is true for our heavenly father about the pile of fresh sins we accumulate week by week. Now at this point some people object, "I know I mess up sometimes. But I don't think it's a super-sized pile of sin. What proof do you have that these failures are piled that high?"

I think there are two pieces of proof.

First, **since Jesus teaches a higher righteousness it naturally leads to a higher failure rate.** Remember Jesus righteousness went deep into the heart, far beyond the righteousness of the Pharisees. Jesus said to his followers, “You owe your Father more than simply not murdering, stealing or bed-hopping. If you are cold to someone, or bear a grudge towards them or call them a name that demeans them then that’s a debt, a failure to give what you owe my Father.

Second, Jesus reveals that our Heavenly Father has a perfect awareness of what is really going on in our hearts. Jesus teaches this over and over in Matthew 6. He says, “The Father sees what is done in secret. The Father knows your thoughts before you think them, your words before you say them, your prayers before you pray them.” The Father is no fool, three steps behind the conversation. If we harbor anger in our heart towards a brother or sister, then no amount of spiritual talk or pious posturing will fool him. He knows it is there.

More than that, the Father also knows the poison that is possible, the sin we are capable of given the right circumstances. In a recent sermon, Tim Keller talks about a new BBC detective series called BroadChurch. This series features two detectives exploring a murder in a small town. One detective named Ellie comes from the town and she says, “I know these people. They are good, decent people. No one here is capable of murder.” The other detective, Alec Hardy, is a hard-bitten veteran detective from the city. Alec says to Ellie, “Anybody is capable of murder given the right circumstances.” That’s what the Bible teaches too. You and I don’t know our capacity for ugly sins, but the Heavenly Father knows that capacity to fail. So that’s some proof

that our failures pile higher than we might think. They actually pile high to a super size, a nightmare level.

The Sweet Dream of the Father's Forgiveness

But here is the good news. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness. The Father is willing to let go our debt, so there is no more guilt, obligation, or punishment. We are free and clear.

Please don't say, "The Father will never forgive me for that." That's untrue. Our Father is full of forgiveness. Have you lied? Cheated? Betrayed someone? The Father will forgive. Have you looked at something, drank something, smoked something that you feel ashamed about. The Father will forgive. Have you gloated? Boasted? Bullied? Took advantage of someone? Confess. Your Father will forgive.

The Bible beautifully pictures the blessings of the Father's forgiveness. Forgiveness is a canceled debt and a second chance. It's a clean slate and sins buried in the depths of the sea. It's a father running to hug his prodigal son. It's a place at the table with your name on it. And in a nightmare world like ours forgiveness is the ticket to the new world Jesus prepares for us. One way, we see that new creation for the first time and exclaim, "Is this all for real? Is it just a sweet dream?" And some angel will say, "It is for real. The best dream come true. Welcome to the king's table. Your debt was paid for by the blood of Jesus, the Son. "

Now friends, part of me wishes I could end the message right here. But we haven't finished with the forgiveness petition. It goes, "Forgive us our debts **as** we have forgiven our debtors." C.S. Lewis' good friend Charles Williams wrote an essay on Forgiveness and he said, "No word in English carries a greater possibility of terror

than the little word as in that clause.” Forgiveness is not a one way street. God gladly and freely gave forgiveness to us and expects us to pass it onto others.

New Perspective On the Nightmare of Forgiving Others

And if that seems a terrifying duty, well, it is. There have been four or five occasions in my life when I had to forgive someone I really did not want to forgive. It was wrenching. It felt like dying to self, losing my life, and cross bearing all at once.

Forgiving others can be a nightmare. It can feel like the biggest thing in the world. But friends, it's not. Our forgiving of those who've sinned against us is still a small thing compared to the Father's forgiveness of us. A few moments ago I spoke of the Father's forgiveness from an earthly perspective---it was all blessing. But what if we looked at the Father's forgiveness from His perspective? If we did that, we'd find cost, so much cost. Forgiveness is a debt paid by blood of an innocent man. It is a lamb who was slain. It is mocking and spitting and nakedness and shame. Forty whip marks on Jesus back, nails through his hands, a crown of thorns upon his head, and the sins of all the world on his shoulders. It is the Father pouring His anger on sin into the heart of his Son. The Son cried, “My God, my God, why...why have you forsaken me?” Forgiveness---that's why? I'm forgiven, because He was forsaken. We get a place at His heavenly table because He took our place at that hellish cross.

Jesus stands before all of us and teaches us to pray this daily prayer, “Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors.” This petition itself supplies us with a new perspective on this terrible duty. The measure we use to forgive others is the measure God uses to forgive us. The great preacher Charles Spurgeon said, “Unless you have forgiven others, you read your death warrant when you repeat the Lord's Prayer.” And

you see why, don't you?" Jesus puts on your lips, "Please forgive me only to the degree I forgive others." If we are stingy with forgiving others, we are asking the Father to be stingy towards us. If I have forgiven others with a teaspoon or thimble of forgiveness, I'm asking God to forgive me with a teaspoon or thimble of forgiveness.

Do you want that? I don't. I'd like His forgiveness towards me to be like Pacific Ocean sized. Some people hear this petition and get snagged. They say, "It seems like we have earned God's forgiveness by forgiving others." Not true. We can't even pray the Lord's Prayer, unless God's massive forgiveness comes first. But in heaven we will find that all those who truly received God's massive forgiveness showed evidence of their reception, by extending forgiveness to others. This is why Anne Lamott says, "I used to say, 'I wasn't one of those Christians who were into forgiveness. I was one of the other kind. But now I know that not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.'"

The Father forgives because He is a fountain of life. When we forgive, life flows to us and through us. Do you know this? If you get his perspective, it can help you face the nightmarish task of forgiving your debtors. Back in May of 1998, I took a mid-flight from Reno Nevada to Grand Rapids Michigan. My seatmate was a Hispanic immigrant named Michael. As we flew over Wyoming, Michael said, "I remember my first job in Wyoming. In the early 90's he worked in oil drilling but in order to do so, he had to spend his first few months living out of his old beaten up car. He received permission to park his car/house on the property of his employer. One night some police officers knocked loudly on his windows, told him to move along. Michael tried to tell them he had permission but they didn't understand. Michael didn't know where to

go so he stayed put. A few hours later the cops returned saw his car, dragged him out of it, beat him up, much like the police officers with Rodney King. Then they threw him in jail. Talk about a nightmare. The next morning the wife of Michael's employer bailed him out and explained to the cops that he did have permission to sleep there.

So they let him go. It turns out the wife of Michael's employer was a sister in law of the very cop who beat him up. Michael said, "On Christmas day, they invite me and the cop and his family for a huge Christmas meal, a big ham sitting on the table. After we eat the cop comes up to me and says, "What I did a few months ago was wrong...I thought you were a trouble maker...but you are a good guy... I'm saying sorry."

There was a long pause, I could tell Michael was remembering, he was back there at that Christmas table. But I had to know what happened. "So Michael, did you forgive him?" He laughed. He laughed like it was the most obvious thing in the world to forgive. He laughed because he thought a pastor like me should know this basic fact. He laughed with such

Blessed are the merciful, for they obtain mercy. And shall obtain it because they live open handed, able to receive mercy. The Father gives mercy to all, but only the merciful receive.

This table teaches us that we live because the Father forgives. Taste it, savor it, draw life and power from it to forgive others. As you do this most difficult thing, remember the table behind you, the eternal world ahead of you, and the Spirit of Christ empowering you. Those who forgive, will live. Amen.