

**“Be Merciful as Your Heavenly Father is Merciful”**  
**Sermon on the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant**  
**Matthew 18:23-35, Sunday, September 5, 2021**  
**By Archpriest Peter Olsen**

The Lord’s Prayer is found in Matthew 6: 9-13. In the original New Testament Greek, what corresponds to line 12 in chapter 6 of Matthew in the English language Bible is: “καὶ ἄφεξ ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφίεμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν.” The KJV of the Bible translates this as: “and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” This is the correct translation of the original Greek. In the RSV and most other English Bibles, this is translated as: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” This is an incorrect translation. Trespasses and debts are two different things, and more importantly, the word that the Lord actually said was “debts” and not “trespasses.”

In the parable that we heard today, the Lord also speaks about debts. A servant is indebted to his master for a large sum of money and faces debtor’s prison. The master forgives his servant the debt. That same servant is owed a much lesser sum from a fellow servant. However, instead of following the example of his master, he is very cruel and demands full repayment of what is owed him, or he will have the man indebted to him cast into prison. When the master hears about this, he becomes angry, because he showed mercy to his servant, but the servant did not do likewise and show mercy to his fellow servant. Therefore, the master rescinds his forgiveness, and behaves towards his servant the same as the servant behaves towards others, and now the unmerciful servant is cast into prison.

Aren’t we all indebted to God? Don’t we owe God much more than we will ever be able to pay back to Him? For you see, God sent His Only-begotten Son into the world to die on the Cross for the forgiveness of our sins and for our salvation. How can we ever pay Him back for that? And the debt, my brothers and sisters, is greater than you might think. For St. John Chrysostom says that each time we sin, it is the same as if we crucified the Lord again. Don’t we sin daily, and don’t we have to ask forgiveness from the Lord daily? Doesn’t that mean that we are debtors, that we owe our Master in Heaven much, and that He always forgives us our debts, and therefore, always forgives us much? It is the debt that keeps on growing and can never be repaid. And all the Lord asks from us in return is our love, and that we imitate Him in His mercy. How should we treat our neighbors who are indebted to us? Debts come in many forms. For example, debts, such as those mentioned in the parable, may be monetary, and perhaps we expect to be paid back with interest. Debts can also be in the form of good deeds that we have done for others, and perhaps we expect to be paid back by having our neighbor do something in return for us. In Luke 6:36 Jesus said: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” In Matthew 10:8 Jesus said “Freely you have received, freely give,” In Matthew 7:12 we have what we commonly call the “Golden Rule,” when Jesus said: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” In other words, behave towards others the way that you would like others to behave towards you. If you want your neighbor to love and to be kind to you, then you should show love and kindness to your neighbor. The question is rhetorical, for who doesn’t want to be loved? There is no guarantee that others will reciprocate our love and kindness, but what others do or do not do should not affect the fact that we should do the right thing. What should be most important to us is not how others behave, but how we behave and what we do. We cannot force others to have love and kindness, but anger and hatred can only be conquered by love and kindness. Repaying anger with anger and hatred with hatred is not the Christian way, nor does it solve anything. It only fans the flames and causes anger and hatred to grow even more. Furthermore, if we expect God to show love, kindness, mercy and forgiveness towards us, then God likewise expects us to show love, kindness, mercy and forgiveness towards others. The master expected this from the servant to whom he showed mercy, but the servant instead disappointed the master by being cruel and unmerciful to his fellow servant.

In the Beatitudes which Jesus gave us during His Sermon on the Mount, it says: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matt. 5:7) and “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:9). If peacemakers are blessed, what do you think about those who instead create division and calumny between family, between friends and between fellow church members? Concerning anger, Jesus says in His Sermon on the Mount: “Every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgement; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire” (Matt. 5:22). Jesus goes on to say, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24). St. Paul says that we should not let the sun go down on our anger (Eph. 4:26). In other words, if we are angry with someone, before the day is over we should try to be reconciled. It doesn’t matter who is most at fault. It is *our* Christian duty to first approach the other person and to ask forgiveness. Furthermore, being angry with our brother is an impediment to receiving Holy Communion. Before we “offer our gift at the altar,” in other words, before we dare to approach the Chalice to receive Holy Communion, we must first try to be reconciled with every one and we should harbor no hatred or anger in our hearts towards anyone. Until we fix this, we should not receive Holy Communion, because if we receive in such a state, then Communion will not be for our salvation but, instead, unto our condemnation. Let us not disappoint our Master Who is God in Heaven. Let us imitate Him in His mercy, love, kindness and forgiveness. Let us not only believe in Christ, but let us also act like Christ and follow His example in how we live our lives and how we treat others. Let us be Christians not only in word, but in deed — **let us live as Christians.** Amen.