

## THE LORD'S PRAYER V.

### "Forgive Us Our Debts."

By Rev. Professor Jordan, D.D.

And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. St. Luke XI., 4.

Pardon us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. St. Matthew VI. 12.

We are bringing to a close our meditations upon the Lord's prayer and are now able to note carefully the progress in its order of thought. The prayer comes downward, so as to speak, from God to man. The first thing is the recognition of the fatherhood of God, the acknowledgement of His majesty and holiness. This leads to reverent worship in a childlike spirit. Then there springs up the desire for God to reign, the cry for the coming of God's kingdom, a kingdom of obedience where the will of God rules in the personal experience and in the social life of men. The worshipping soul longs to bring the life of heaven down to this care-worn, sin-stricken earth. The prayer continues to go deeper into the individual needs of men. It teaches us to look up to the Father for daily bread, to ask for ourselves, and others, a constant supply to meet the ever-recurring needs of body and soul. We are then led to pray more particularly for the forgiveness of past sins, and for guidance and strength in the continual conflict with evil. The prayer beginning with the words "Our Father which art in heaven" ends with the petition, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors; bring us not into temptation but deliver us from evil (or the Evil One)". The doxology, "For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever amen," is perhaps an addition that was introduced in Apostolic times when the prayer was used in Christian worship.

While making these introductory remarks it may be appropriate to note that we have two versions of the prayer, one as it was spoken by our Lord in the sermon on the Mount; the other addressed specially to the disciples when they said: "Lord, teach us to pray." There are slight differences in these two forms of the prayer. If ever in the scriptures we might have expected an effort to preserve the exact words of a speech it is in this case where the greatest of all teachers tells us how we ought to approach God in prayer. When we find differences however small in such a prayer we cannot help calling to mind our Saviour's teaching that it is the spirit that quickeneth, and the letter of itself profiteth nothing. We are not prepared to denounce those who find forms of prayer helpful but for ourselves we would remember that even this sacred model of prayer bequeathed to us by our Lord must not be used as a magical charm as if virtue was to be found in a mechanical repetition of its words. Jesus Christ Himself would break it up and take it from us of we should so value it. He would have us learn that the power of the prayer is in the thought it stirs in the mind and the trust it calls from the heart. He meant his words to be an inspiration that we might attain to spirituality of thought and freedom of utterance in the presence of Our Father.

There are some to whom it has seemed a strange thing that in this prayer there is a recognition of sin but no mention of sacrifice. "The prayer is simply forgive us our debts as we have forgiven those who are indebted to us." What explanation is to be given of this or what lesson can be learned from it? It seems to me that the difficulty here is only an imaginary one. The men to whom the prayer was given were not unbelievers whose minds were destitute of religious belief or sentiment. They

were devout Jews whose spirits were saturated with the teaching of Moses and the prophets. They knew that God was approached through sacrifices, and they knew also that he delighted in "the sacrifice of a broken heart and contrite spirit." Besides their Master was constantly presenting himself to them as the way of approach to the Father, and he led them on gently yet ever deeper into the mystery of his intercession which after all is summed up in the words "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Those who look into the prayer for the theological forms of later ages may well fail to find them but instead of being disappointed they should be grateful, for here we have the truth in its divine simplicity, free from the subtleties of the schools. We have moreover another ground for rejoicing. The form of the Lord's prayer, bare as it seems to many, is a proof of its purity and genuineness, a guarantee that we have it as it came from the lips of our Blessed Lord. God does not strive to anticipate. He patiently waits the course of events, the movement of life. The Son of man could not speak the truths of salvation in forms which come naturally and easily to Paul and Peter a few years afterwards. The disciples must live through many strange experiences in the immediate future. The mystery of Christ's sacrifice must be brought near to them through the passion of Gethsemane, the pain of the cross, the darkness of the tomb and the glory of the resurrection. Then shall their thoughts of sacrifice be purified and enlarged. Now the Master is content to lead them as penitents to the throne of grace and to do this in simple forms which harmonize with all the rest of his beautiful teaching. It may be however that before we are done we may find in this brief petition more recognition of sacrifice than we thought. There is a cross in it, a cross for each one to bear, a cross which is meant to lead us to the cross of Christ. Let us then try to grasp the spiritual teaching of this particular petition. There are two things embraced in it, and they are two deep, important things, the need of forgiveness and the need of a forgiving spirit. We cannot hope now to explain these two points and their relationship to each other, but we may at least set you to think about them.

Mark well our Saviour's estimate of the importance of the forgiveness of sins. He places the petition for forgiveness next to the petition for daily bread and just before the petition for practical guidance. This shows clearly how he regarded the need of pardon. He was no commonplace religionist who exalted ritualism and neglected goodness. His whole life was a service to God. He never meant that men should rely upon a moment of repentance at the close of a careless or wicked life. He says nothing about dying. He leaves that in the hands of the Father. He treats religion as a matter of living and teaches that as we need bread day by day and as we need to be taken by the hand and led through life's mazes, so we need from God the forgiveness of our past transgressions. It is a need at the beginning of our spiritual experience and it is a need all through. Often the first word that Christ spoke to the men and women who sought his sympathy and help was "Thy sins are forgiven thee; enter into peace." We may have offered this prayer for years, but when our life is specially moved, when our conscience is roused by strong spiritual excitement, when great sorrows make us realize a fresh our great sins, it comes to us with deeper meaning and we present ourselves at the throne of grace saying, "O God,

forgive us our sins." This is a Universal Prayer. It was not given specially to the weeping penitent who flung herself at his feet or to the heart-broken publican or to the dying thief. It was spoken to the disciples who continued with him day by day, and to them as representatives of the ordinary needs and hopes of men. It is a prayer that the prince and the pauper, the learned and the ignorant, that mature man and the little child may offer when they kneel together in the House of God. We are sinners, debtors. We have broken the law of God. We have wandered from the way of life. All we like sheep, have gone astray, we have turned every one to our way, and a wicked, wilful way it has often been, a way of pride and way of pain. Let us not think that we can claim any exemption from this all-embracing law. If we let this slip we must let all the rest of the prayer go with its revelation of the Eternal Father's love, and the glorious hope of the coming of the kingdom. If the law does not grasp us and bite us, if it does not drag us down into distress of conscience and real sorrow for sin, our joys will be shallow and our consolations small. We must frankly acknowledge that this prayer for forgiveness applies to all of us and must not be slurred over.

While the prayer represents a broad, universal need, it is one that must become intensely personal if it is to have any real power. This prayer belongs to me and it belongs to me as really and completely as if I were the only sinner in God's great world. The entrance to the kingdom now and Heaven hereafter is one by one. Alone each soul must enter the Valley of humiliation and bow in lowliness before the Cross. In this problem of the personal life we cannot bear each other's burden. There is a loneliness of life which is only partly relieved by the sympathy of friends that are nearest to us. The child, the mother, the wife, the husband, must come alone and say, "Thou knowest, Lord, the weariness and sorrow,

Of the sad heart that comes to Thee for rest;

Cares of to-day and burdens for tomorrow,  
Blessings implored and sins to be confessed,

We come before thee at thy gracious word  
And lay them at thy feet; Thou knowest, Lord.

It is our privilege now through Christ to enter into the company of God's children, the forgiven ones who have hope of daily deliverance and of eternal rest. If we do not possess the joy which this thought brings it is simply because we do not take home to our hearts all those precious promises which are given to us so freely in the Word of God. Our torment of unrest springs from our lack of trust in God and partly from a sense of our unfaithfulness. We know we are unworthy of his great gifts, hence we think he is not willing to give them. Has not God inspired prophets to be leaders of souls, has He not given His own Son to prove to us his willingness and power to forgive? Is it not the very purpose of Christ's sacrifice to save us from the power of past selfishness and wickedness. At once we may come to God's throne and take the great gift of life and love which is without money and without price. Christ through the travail of His soul has broken every barrier down that this offer of salvation might come to us free and unconditioned. When we have definitely turned towards our Saviour it is still a relief to come to our Father day by day with a sense of our unworthiness, of our failure, of our want of faith. Feeling that our worship and service is still full of imperfection, that even in the more favorable condition of the Christian life we have not met our obligations, we turn to our Father day by day, saying "Forgive us our debts." If we do this sincerely our life will not be a fickle weakling one, but an experience of healthy growth.